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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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Abstrakt

Studie je zaměřena na staroseverské „ságy o současnosti“ (tzn. texty zapsané s malým časovým odstupem od událostí dvanáctého a třináctého století, které jsou v nich zaznamenány) a vybrané ságy o biskupech jakožto obrazy islandské identity a vztahu Islandců k jiným zemím, především k Norsku, ve třináctém a čtrnáctém století. Soustředí se na rozbor rolí a významů různých nositelů identity zobrazených v těchto pramenech – islandských lokálních aristokratů, královských zmocněnců, církevních hodnostářů a svatých biskupů. Přístup k pramenům se zakládá na analýze procesů přetváření nedávných dějinných událostí v narativní diskurs, v němž jsou tyto události propojeny se vzdálenější minulostí, která utvářela kulturní paměť středověkých Islandců. V rámci diskursu se události samotné stávají součástí kulturní paměti dané společnosti a získávají nové vrstvy významu, které nejsou v historických faktech inherentně obsaženy, nýbrž vycházejí z jejich kontextualizace. Studie ukazuje, jak narativizace nedávných událostí a jejich začlenění do kulturní paměti vytvářejí smysluplný vztah mezi minulostí a přítomností.

Cílem studie je ukázat, jak narativní prameny odrážejí vnímání nedávné minulosti na Islandu třináctého a čtrnáctého století a jak hodnotí různé prvky kontinuity a vývoje v oblasti politického systému a vztahů k jiným zemím. V první řadě nám prameny poskytují vhled do postoje středověké islandské společnosti k vývoji vnitřních vztahů, který zahrnoval postupnou centralizaci moci a poměrně výrazné změny v politické struktuře společnosti. Dále texty zobrazují pozvolné změny rozsahu a podoby kontaktu mezi středověkým Islandem a Norskem. Na politické úrovni došlo k propojení mocenských struktur obou zemí prostřednictvím společenství a spolupráce; toto propojení nakonec vyústilo ve formální přijetí norské královské vlády v roce 1262. Na společenské úrovni tento vývoj postupně rozšiřoval horizont, v jehož rámci středověcí Islandci utvářeli svou identitu, protože na jejich vnímání vlastní identity měl vzrůstající vliv jejich vztah k evropskému společenskému prostoru. Žádná z těchto změn však nebyla náhlá ani okamžitá – jednalo se o dlouhodobé, pozvolné procesy. Studie klade důraz na rovnováhu mezi vývojem a kontinuitou v islandské společnosti v době ustanovení unie mezi Islandem a Norskem a v předcházejících i následujících desetiletích.

Klíčová slova

staroseverská literatura, staroseverské ságy, ságy o současnosti, ságy o biskupech, *Sága o Sturlunzích*, narativita, horizont očekávání, kulturní dějiny, kulturní paměť, identita

Abstract

The study is focused on the Old Norse “contemporary sagas” (texts composed with a short time distance from the events of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that are recorded in them) and some of the bishops’ sagas as images of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelanders’ identity and their relationship to other lands, especially Norway. It aims at analysing the roles and meanings of various identity bearers portrayed in these sources – chieftains, royal representatives, ecclesiastical dignitaries, and saintly bishops. The approach to the sources is based on an analysis of how recent historical events were transformed into a narrative discourse, in which they were connected to the more distant past that formed the medieval Icelandic society’s cultural memory. That way, these events themselves became a part of this society’s cultural memory, and the given historical knowledge was endowed with specific meanings, which were not inherently present in the knowledge itself, but were based on its contextualization. The study shows how the narrativization of the recent events and their integration into the cultural memory creates a meaningful relationship between the past and the present.

The objective of the study is to show how the narrative sources reflect the society’s perception of its recent past and of the various elements of continuity and change in the political system and in the relationships to other lands. Firstly, the sources provide insight into how the society evaluated its internal development, which included gradual concentration of power and some considerable changes in the political structure of the society. Secondly, the texts depict the gradually changing extent and form of contact between medieval Iceland and Norway. On the political level, the power structures of both lands became interconnected through alliances and cooperation, which finally led to the formal acceptance of Norwegian royal rule in 1262. On the social level, this development gradually broadened the horizon within which the medieval Icelanders constructed their identity, as their perception of their own identity was increasingly formed by their relationship to the European social space. Neither of these changes was abrupt or immediate, however – they were long-term, gradual processes. The study emphasizes the balance between new developments and continuity in the Icelandic society around the time of the establishment of Iceland’s union with Norway and in the preceding and following decades.

Keywords

Old Norse literature, Old Norse sagas, contemporary sagas, bishops’ sagas, *Sturlunga saga*, narrativity, horizon of expectations, cultural history, cultural memory, identity

Contents

Introduction	10
1. Historical context: Internal and external power relations	13
1. 1. Conflict and power in medieval Europe and Iceland	13
1. 2. Power, change, and continuity in the medieval Icelandic society	14
1. 3. Iceland and the Norwegian kingdom	16
1. 4. Iceland as a part of the Norwegian kingdom	18
1. 4. 1. The integration of Iceland into the Norwegian kingdom	18
1. 4. 2. The <i>staðamál</i>	19
1. 4. 3. The political development before Norway's union with Sweden in 1319	20
1. 4. 4. Personal union with Sweden	22
1. 5. Similarity and specificity	23
1. 6. The texts	23
2. Methodological concerns:	
Medieval literature and modern theories of narrative and memory	31
2. 1. Narrative discourse as a medium	31
2. 2. Sagas and cultural memory	33
2. 3. The horizon of expectations and the narrative types of sagas	36
2. 4. The history of research	40
2. 4. 1. Icelanders and the concept of independence	40
2. 4. 2. Medieval notions of identity and nationality	41
2. 4. 3. Medieval Icelandic identity and the "cultural myths"	44
2. 4. 4. The narratives of Icelandic social development as an object of study	48
3. The Sturlung Age: Interpretations and ideas	53
3. 1. The Sturlungs and the power game	53
3. 2. Icelanders as a force in the Norwegian power struggle	56
4. Narrative types and Icelandic identity in the depictions of internal relations	67
4. 1. The mediator	67
4. 1. 1. The narrative type of the conflict story and the importance of reconciliation	67
4. 1. 2. <i>Þorgils saga ok Hafliða</i> : Troublemakers and peacemakers	70
4. 1. 3. <i>Guðmundar saga dýra</i> : An influential leader as a mediator	73
4. 1. 4. <i>Svínfellinga saga</i> : Troublemakers and peacemakers once more	74
4. 2. The peaceful chieftain	78

4. 2. 1. The narrative type of the peaceful chieftain's story	78
4. 2. 2. <i>Sturlu saga</i> : The moral and political superiority of the peaceful chieftain	79
4. 2. 3. <i>Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar</i> : The typical narrative of the peaceful chieftain...81	
4. 2. 4. <i>Íslendinga saga</i> : Þórðr Sturluson as the perfect peaceful chieftain	84
4. 2. 5. <i>Íslendinga saga</i> : Sturla Sighvatsson and Gizurr Þorvaldsson as fighters	87
4. 3. Conclusion: Mediators and peaceful chieftains, cultural memory, and Icelandic identity	92
5. Narrative types and Icelandic identity in the depictions of contact between Iceland and Norway	97
5. 1. Ari Þorgeirsson: The jarl's sword and shield	98
5. 1. 1. The narrative type of the royal retainer's story	98
5. 1. 2. Þorvarðr and Ari Þorgeirsson as ideal royal retainers	99
5. 1. 3. The royal retainer's story, cultural memory, and Icelandic identity	100
5. 2. Ingimundr Þorgeirsson: The traveller	101
5. 2. 1. The narrative type of the traveller's story	101
5. 2. 2. Ingimundr Þorgeirsson's travel story	102
5. 2. 3. The traveller's story, cultural memory, and Icelandic identity	103
5. 3. Aron Hjörleifsson: The outlaw	104
5. 3. 1. The narrative type of the outlaw's story	104
5. 3. 2. Aron Hjörleifsson's escape and journey	104
5. 3. 3. The outlaw's story, cultural memory, and Icelandic identity	108
5. 4. Snorri Sturluson: The court poet	109
5. 4. 1. The narrative type of the court poet's story	109
5. 4. 2. Snorri Sturluson's journey to Norway and the narrative type of the court poet's story	112
5. 4. 3. Snorri Sturluson's alliance with Skúli Bárðarson and the narrative type of the jarl's story	117
5. 4. 4. The court poet's story, cultural memory, and Icelandic identity	119
5. 5. Þórðr kakali Sighvatsson: The fighter	120
5. 5. 1. The conflict story and the character types of the fighter and the mediator	120
5. 5. 2. The conflict story and Þórðr Sighvatsson's fight for power	121
5. 5. 3. The king as a mediator	122
5. 5. 4. The fighter's story, cultural memory, and Icelandic identity	128
5. 6. Þorgils skarði Böðvarsson: The royal retainer	129

5. 6. 1. The royal retainer's story and Þorgils at the royal court	130
5. 6. 2. The peaceful chieftain's story and Þorgils as a royal representative in Iceland ...	134
5. 6. 3. The royal retainer's story and the peaceful chieftain's story, cultural memory, and Icelandic identity	142
5. 7. Gizurr Þorvaldsson: The jarl	143
5. 7. 1. The jarl's story and the ideal of <i>rex iustus</i>	143
5. 7. 2. The end of the Sturlung Age and the character type of <i>rex iustus</i>	145
5. 7. 3. The union with Norway and the character type of the jarl	150
5. 7. 4. The jarl's story, cultural memory, and Icelandic identity	156
5. 8. Sturla Þórðarson: The last skald	157
5. 8. 1. Sturla Þórðarson: a national hero, a traitor, or a typical Icelandic chieftain?	157
5. 8. 2. The royal official Sturla Þórðarson and the cultural myth of the court poet	161
5. 8. 3. The story of "the last skald", cultural memory, and Icelandic identity	163
5. 9. Árne Þorláksson: The politician	163
5. 9. 1. <i>Árna saga biskups</i> as a conflict story and the king's role as a mediator	164
5. 9. 2. The meaning of <i>Árna saga</i> in cultural memory	169
5. 10. Lárentíus Kálfsson: The loyal cleric	170
5. 10. 1. <i>Lárentíus saga</i> as a travel story	170
5. 10. 2. The meaning of <i>Lárentíus saga</i> in cultural memory	172
5. 11. Conclusion: Narrative types and Icelandic identity	173
6. Icelandic saints and identity	178
6. 1. The bishops as identity bearers	178
6. 1. 1. Early Icelandic bishops as spiritual and social leaders	178
6. 1. 2. Identity and politics in the sagas of Iceland's first saintly bishops	181
6. 1. 3. Saint Þorlákr in <i>Árna saga</i> and the cultural myth of the "national saint"	188
6. 1. 4. Icelandic saints in <i>Lárentíus saga</i>	191
6. 1. 5. Icelandic saints in <i>Guðmundar sögur biskups</i>	193
6. 2. Language and the perception of identity in Iceland	196
6. 3. Conclusion: Individuality and integration	199
7. Conclusion	201
7. 1. Change and continuity	201
7. 2. The contemporary sagas and cultural memory	203
7. 3. The narrative types and identity	207
Bibliography	210

List of abbreviations

DI = *Diplomatarium Islandicum*

HS = *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*

ÍS = *Íslendinga saga*

JS = *Jóns saga helga*

NGL = *Norges gamle love*

ÞS = *Þorláks saga helga*

INTRODUCTION

The medieval Icelandic society differed from most other medieval European societies in two respects: it had a historically documented beginning, and it was not ruled by a monarch. These aspects undeniably contributed to some degree of political and cultural specificity, but they have often been overestimated in modern research or associated with misleading ideas of Iceland as a strikingly different political unit aiming at independence even at the cost of isolation. The objective of the present study is to re-evaluate the social and political development in twelfth- to fourteenth-century Iceland, as documented in contemporary narrative sources, which reflect the medieval Icelanders' own memory of the important events and their causes, consequences, and meanings.

The political and social relations in Iceland did not remain unchanged from the settlement to the fourteenth century, and this transformation has been the subject of ongoing scholarly debate, which has mainly focused on change and paid little attention to the substantial elements of continuity. The predominant opinion has been that the changes that the Icelandic society underwent in the thirteenth century were caused by external interventions, which disrupted the existing social system and abruptly replaced it with a markedly different system. Power concentration was, however, a natural aspect of the political development of all medieval European societies, and the changes that took place in Iceland were neither abrupt nor caused by insensitive external interventions. Instead, the transformation was a gradual process that stemmed from the nature of the internal power system and involved the local structures, the secular leaders, as well as the ecclesiastical institutions. This development finally led to the acceptance of Norwegian royal rule in 1262, which provided the Icelandic political system with some important elements that it had previously lacked – centralized executive power and a unifying central authority. This was a significant change in the political and social structure in Iceland, but many elements of the old system were retained, or they were reformed only slowly and gradually. The establishment of the union between Iceland and Norway should therefore be perceived as a step in a process of development, rather than as a breakdown of the existing system and its abrupt replacement by a different system. It is also anachronistic to assess the union in terms of the modern concepts of national identity, with their focus on political independence, as such concepts are not documented in the sources.

The most significant sources available for the research of medieval Icelandic social development are the contemporary sagas (*samtíðarsögur*), both the secular ones and the bishops' sagas. They are texts dealing with Icelandic history from the twelfth to the fourteenth century and written relatively shortly after the events depicted in them took place. The sagas not only record the events, but also reflect how the society perceived, or wished to perceive, its past and present. A detailed analysis of the contemporary sagas can therefore show how complex and multifaceted the relationship between Iceland and Norway was at the time around the establishment of the union, and it can reveal a nuanced image of the Icelanders' attitude to royal power. Úlfar Bragason is certainly right when he states that the contemporary sagas deal with the legitimization, use, and misuse of power (Úlfar Bragason 2010, 241), but the present study is intended to show that they also deal with broader and more abstract themes associated with identity and with the medieval Icelanders' relationship to the rest of the world. It will be

shown here that Icelandic identity always developed in relation to Norway, and that it included elements of both individuation and integration.

There is no doubt that the factors that influenced the forming of Icelandic identity changed from the twelfth century, when the first extant written records of Icelandic history were created, to the second half of the fourteenth century, when the latest relevant narrative sources were produced. The turmoil 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 a part of Scandinavian and European structures. In such a situation, the Icelanders' perception of their identity was increasingly formed by their relationship to the European social and cultural 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 group special and unique in comparison with the other groups 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 group's identity. These are also the central questions of the present study.

The study is preceded by a necessary historical introduction and an outline of the origin and manuscript tradition of the sources. The aim of the historical overview is not to give a full account of Icelandic and Norwegian medieval history, but rather to outline the themes that are most relevant for the present study: the gradual process of power centralization in Iceland, the similarities between Icelandic and Norwegian politics, and the preconditions of the establishment of the union between Iceland and Norway.

This is followed by a presentation of the theoretical background of the study, which is based first and foremost on Hayden White's theory of narrative discourse as a medium that endows the depicted events with new layers of meaning, and on Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory as *knowledge about the past that is related to a concept of identity*. A new methodological contribution by the author of the present study is the theory of *narrative types*, which is intended to help to overcome the limitations posed by the generic division of saga literature, and which is based on the approach to saga literature as cultural memory.

The final section of the introduction presents a more detailed discussion of selected themes of Icelandic and Norwegian history, based mainly on the primary sources. The central idea is that Icelandic and Norwegian politics were very closely intertwined already from around 1220, that the process of power concentration took place simultaneously in both lands, and that the political situation in both lands was determined by rivalry among several contestants for power. The main focus is the Icelanders' active and voluntary role in the development of the connection between Iceland and Norway.

The first chapter of the study focuses on the depiction of internal Icelandic relations in the contemporary sagas. The central concept is the ideal of the peaceful chieftain, which is a significant element of the medieval Icelanders' cultural memory because it highlights moderation as one of the central values that enable a society with weak central power to maintain or renew its balance. The narrative type of the peaceful chieftain's story shows that in

the cultural memory of medieval Icelanders, even the complicated and bloody thirteenth century was not regarded as a time of downfall and disintegration, and that it was believed that the Icelandic society never lost the central values that it could be proud of.

The second chapter deals with narrative depictions of contacts between Iceland and Norway around the time of the establishment of the union. It shows the various roles that Icelanders could assume in their relationship with the royal court, and it illustrates the similarities and differences in the portrayal of each given type in sagas about the distant past and in the contemporary sagas. The central idea is that Icelanders actively formed and negotiated their position in the Norwegian-Icelandic social space, and that they were open to royal power, but refused to be passively subjected to the monarch.

The subject of the third chapter is the literary portrayal of the medieval Icelandic bishops and saints. The bishops' sagas are treated not only as sources of ecclesiastical history, but also as depictions of the social concerns that were current at the time, and as reflections of the Icelanders' identity and relationship to the rest of the world. Far from simply being other contributions to the vast corpus of Old Norse hagiographic literature, the sagas of the native bishops are regarded here as complex commentaries on Iceland's position within the world.

Throughout the study, the aim is to appreciate the uniqueness of the medieval Icelandic narrative sources, but not to overestimate the exceptionality of the medieval Icelandic society, and to pay equal attention to its similarity to other contemporary societies as to its specificity, and to its interaction with a broader social and political circle as to its individuality. Continuity is regarded here as an equally significant element of medieval Icelandic social development as change, but this continuity did not stand in the way of contact with other societies, forms of government, and cultural impulses.

1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL POWER RELATIONS

1. 1. CONFLICT AND POWER IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE AND ICELAND

Although some medieval European societies were characterized by little developed centralized power, there was no part of Europe without some public authority, however weak, which could be called on for judgement when necessary. In these societies, an essential concern was the regulation of violence in internal disputes by mechanisms operated by local social structures. The public institutions often actually defined themselves as wielding power through the direction of dispute settlement (Davies and Fouracre 1986, 229).

Legal means of conflict resolution were often successful because the general acceptance of strict rules of procedure allowed the court to govern the way in which cases ran. The law court also produced a framework within which the disputing parties could approach each other as open adversaries in a legal battle witnessed and validated step by step. The key advantage of legal procedure was the width of support that was potentially available – going to court meant making a dispute public, and that increased the possibility of gaining support from neighbours, dependants, and lords, which was available mainly in the public arena (Davies and Fouracre 1986, 218–19, 234–35).

Violence was nevertheless an inevitable aspect of conflicts, but far from being unrestricted, it followed certain rules set by the local communities, as well as by public power. Legitimation of violence was a frequent concern of early medieval rulers; whereas some kings attempted to completely ban violent acts of vengeance, others aimed only at restricting the span of violence, so that the revenge cycle would not continue endlessly. Royal officials had the power to decide when vengeance was legitimate, and fines had to be paid through them. The royal officials' right to legitimize or forbid violence or to arbitrate was one of the means of increasing royal control on the local level (Halsall 1999, 15–20). Violence was scarcely the sole means of dealing with a dispute, it was rather one of the many aspects that every participant of a conflict had to take into consideration.

The primary purpose of dispute settlement in a society with weak central power was not justice in an absolute sense, but restoration of peace. Peaceful coexistence was an ideal, but disputes constituted a part of normal social interaction (Davies and Fouracre 1986, 233). Furthermore, conflicts should not be regarded as an entirely negative factor in a society with weak central power. Disputes contributed to processes that promoted social stability, because the ever-present possibility of violent clashes gave every individual an interest in the maintenance of social cohesion. Although people were not always involved in conflicts, the possibility of conflict was always imminent and had to be taken into consideration. Everybody therefore needed a group of allies and a powerful local leader who could be relied on when necessary, and the local leaders derived their power from such a need of protection even during peaceful times (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2007, 175–76; Byock 1982, 25).

Medieval Icelandic society before the last third of the thirteenth century was not subjected to royal power, so public authority was represented by the law and by a system of local social hierarchy. These two entities served the purpose of maintaining peace in the absence of executive power. The social hierarchy was, however, flexible and changeable due to its

personal, rather than institutional character. The power of the local leaders (*goðar*) was inherently unstable, because each individual chieftain's power depended on his relations with his assembly men and supporters, which again depended on the chieftain's personal qualities. Incompetent chieftains failed, while popular chieftains gained ever more power; this means that popularity was almost synonymous with power, as it had a self-reinforcing effect (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 87–93, 149–50).

The duties of chieftains toward their assembly men included protection from violence and, most importantly, conflict resolution. In conflicts, it generally mattered more to have strong supporters than to have a strong case, and a chieftain's failure to resolve conflicts would lead to a loss of prestige and power (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 120–23). Non-violent resolution of conflicts could either take the form of lawsuits, or of less formalized arbitration. All law-learned men could conduct cases, but chieftains could use them for strengthening their position and demonstrating their power. In negotiation, chieftains usually took the position of arbitrators; it was important for the arbitrator's prestige to have his demands accepted and to reach a lasting settlement, so he had to come up with a solution that satisfied both parties. Arbitrators could promise further support to those who accepted their decisions, so new alliances could be formed in this manner. In these kinds of conflict resolution, the chieftains could gain, strengthen, demonstrate, but also lose their power (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 150–82). Almost every conflict could therefore be perceived as having two functions: as a compensation for an offence, and as a turning point in the dynamics of power.

1. 2. POWER, CHANGE, AND CONTINUITY IN THE MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC SOCIETY

Apart from the chieftaincies (*goðorð*), which were not strictly geographically delimited because they were formed by the personal allegiance of farmers to a given chieftain, there were also geographically marked local units (*hreppar*). Each *hreppr* was formally led by five *hreppstjórar* elected for one year, who could make decisions in local matters. One of the main functions of *hreppar* was taking care of the poor, which consisted in control of a quarter of the tithe and the moving of paupers (*ómagar*) from farm to farm within the *hreppr*. The other main function was communal support of farmers in case of cattle loss or fire. *Hreppar* probably also controlled the use of natural resources, with the purpose of preventing local disputes (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2015, 17–18). *Hreppar* were important for the gradual development of centralized power because they could serve as geographically marked power bases of the local influential families, whose power was not territorial yet but was beginning to develop in that direction (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 13–14, 64–70).

The secular regional organization was therefore a significant factor in the power concentration, but the influence of the Church on the development of power relations was also important. The ecclesiastical and secular sphere were closely interconnected until the late twelfth century, as many chieftains were also ordained as priests, so the Christian institutions affected the development of social structures and power strategies by providing new models of authority (Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 3–5; Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 19–30, 78–79). The most significant element of change was that ecclesiastical authority was territorial, as its main units

were geographically demarcated bishoprics and parishes. This was different from the traditional authority of chieftains, which was based on personal adherence (Sverrir Jakobsson 2012, 112).

Early church building in Iceland was an initiative of individual chieftains, who donated parts of their property to their churches, but the control of the church property remained in the owner's and his descendants' hands. *Staðir* were churches that owned a half or more of the land on the farm they belonged to; those that owned less were *bændakirkjur* (Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 295). *Staðir* were founded mainly in the second half of the twelfth century, and those who donated their homesteads to *staðir* were usually rich chieftains who owned several other estates. The endowments served to consolidate the family's power in the area by tying the family's authority to a particular important place, which meant that power relations were gradually transformed from the level of personal adherence to the level of territorial power (Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 112–15, 238–40). The wealthiest *staðir* were gradually taken over by the most powerful families and became important power centres (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 102–15). This means that the initial interconnection between secular and ecclesiastical power contributed to power concentration and to the forming of preconditions of territorial power. Their subsequent separation in the late twelfth century, when combining a chieftainly and clerical career was no longer possible, further intensified power concentration. When some potential candidates to a chieftainly career chose a clerical career instead and voluntarily gave up their *goðorð*, other chieftains could easily receive or inherit more than one *goðorð* (Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 145–46).

The process of power concentration was gradual and slow; the development of Icelandic society consisted in evolution, rather than in abrupt transformations, and the political and judicial structures were variable, rather than permanent (Byock 1985; Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 7). The concentration of power started soon after the settlement and continued throughout the Free State period. It can be divided into three phases: the creation of the structure of chieftaincies (*goðorð*) until 1050, the development of territorial power in the form of domains (*riki*, *héraðsriki*) from 1050 to 1220, and the conflict over the domains from 1220 (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 82–83). There was a different degree of social complexity in different regions of Iceland, and the development was faster in the regions where the chieftaincies were already in the hands of powerful, dominant families – the Haukdælir and the Oddaverjar in the Southern Quarter, the Ásbirnings in the Skagafjörðr region, the Svínfellings and the Austfirðings in the Eastern Quarter. The development was slowest in the regions of Borgarfjörðr and the Westfjords, which were characterized by small, scattered settlements, a lack of centres, and the equality of several chieftain families in both property and qualities until around 1200 (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 67–68; Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 240–45). In the 1220s and 1230s, the development of the domains was completed, which is marked in *Sturlunga saga* by frequent references to the supporters of a chieftain by the name of the region they inhabited (Sverrir Jakobsson 2012, 115).

In this process, a new social class of magnates (*stórhöfðingjar*) who wielded territorial power was formed from among the chieftains (*goðar*), while their position in local power structures was taken over by powerful farmers, *stórbændr*. Nevertheless, the transition was gradual, and the magnates failed to transform the basic social structures, as they were not able to establish effective hierarchical administration or executive power. Moreover, despite the increased violence of the Sturlung Age, the disturbances were not so destructive as to force

farmers to abandon their indefensible farmsteads and resettle in larger, more secure communities, as there is no evidence of any major alteration in Icelandic settlement patterns. The society, in a centuries-old pattern, still consisted of several thousand individual households, although the dispersed farmsteads would have been easy aims to any major organized violence (Byock 1986, 28–36).

Instead of perceiving the changes of the Icelandic society in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as a disintegration of an established order, we should regard them as a process of establishing more permanent structures of government, which became increasingly more complex and effective. The acceptance of royal rule was one of the stages in the process, rather than the collapse of a system (Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 8). Due to the internal processes of power concentration, a new foundation for royal rule was formed. Before the time of regional power, the king could only wield power over individual Icelandic chieftains who submitted to him. When the domains (*héraðsríki*) had been formed, however, the leaders could submit to the king on behalf of their entire regions (Sverrir Jakobsson 2012, 116).

We can see a balance between change and continuity in the social development of medieval Iceland. On the one hand, there was a high degree of continuity in the society from the settlement throughout the Free State period, as the development was always based on competition for power among chieftains. On the other hand, there was a gradual process of change that consisted in a development toward centralized power, which marked the first steps toward the acceptance of royal rule. This development stemmed from the internal power structures, and it was not primarily a result of external intervention (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 205–09). That is not to say, however, that the Icelandic society was entirely isolated from any external influences and relations. Despite its geographical position on an island on the outskirts of Europe, Iceland was a part of a network of social, political, economic, and cultural relations with other European countries, especially Norway.

1. 3. ICELAND AND THE NORWEGIAN KINGDOM

There were direct historical and cultural connections between Iceland and mainland Scandinavia, especially Norway, from the very beginning of the existence of Icelandic society, because the settlement of Iceland in the second half of the ninth century was a part of the Scandinavians' expansion to new territories. From the eighth century, the inhabitants of Scandinavia began to build ocean-going vessels and communicate with the world: the British Isles, France, or Russia. In 793, the Norsemen performed the first documented Viking raid, and this event traditionally marks the beginning of the Viking Age. After more and less successful attempts at conquest of inhabited lands, the Norsemen started colonizing newly discovered and largely uninhabited lands, such as Iceland. According to *Landnámabók*, most of the settlers came from the western coast of Norway, either directly or via Viking settlements in the British Isles (Gunnar Karlsson 2000, 10–15).

Although Iceland was formally politically independent of Norway from its settlement to the acceptance of Norwegian royal rule in 1262, there was a constant political, economic, and cultural contact and mutual influence between the two lands; the same was also true of the other Norse communities outside of mainland Scandinavia: the Faroe Islands, Shetland, Orkney, and

Greenland. As Randi Bjørshol Wærdahl has rightly pointed out, it is therefore best to analyse political development and state formation in this region across modern national boundaries (Wærdahl 2011, 1–8).

Apart from direct contact, there were also considerable similarities between the Icelandic Free State and the medieval Norwegian kingdom in terms of internal power relations. Even in Norway, royal rule before the reign of Magnús Hákonarson (1263–1280) was not as strong in practice as it is presented in some of the kings' sagas (Wærdahl 2011, 14–15, 64–67). These sagas are shaped by the new royal ideology, introduced in Norway in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, which implies that the ruler is omnipresent in the whole kingdom in the form of law and justice administered in a consistent manner. It presents royal power based on predictability and internalized obedience independent of the king's personal presence (Orning 2008, 2, 46). As Hans Jacob Orning has pointed out, however, the practical exercise of power in twelfth- and thirteenth- century Norway was in fact dependent on the king's physical presence and on his personal contact with the local leaders, with whom he often maintained relationships based on conflict and compromise. The king was stronger than the magnates, but not strong enough to be independent of their support (Orning 2008, 2, 102–05, 189–92). The transition from local leaders to royal officials in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries was never complete – a magnate could gain a position as the king's representative without losing his local authority, which was formed by his patron-client relationships with the peasants. The kings were primarily the most powerful patrons in a society where patron-client relationships were still the strongest social ties (Orning 2008, 334–36).

Contacts between powerful Icelanders and the Norwegian crown became intensified after 1220, when Icelandic chieftains started to form alliances with the king in order to strengthen their position in their mutual power struggles. According to Orning, Iceland's peripheral geographical location did not make any decisive difference in this process of establishing direct political connections, because the king's relationship to magnates was usually characterized by a considerable physical distance even within Norway (Orning 2008, 44, 227). When some of the Icelandic chieftains became his vassals, the king treated his Icelandic and Norwegian vassals almost the same because his priority was maintaining and extending his alliances with as many magnates as possible (Orning 2008, 254–55). If disagreements occurred between the Norwegian king and the Icelandic chieftains, it cannot be regarded as a unique antagonism, caused by the Icelanders' unusually strong desire for independence and freedom. This kind of tension was just as characteristic of the Norwegian magnates' relationship to the king, and it can be explained by the dual role of the magnates as local leaders and as royal representatives (Orning 2008, 229).

When the king had established personal alliances with some of the most powerful Icelanders, the next step was the establishment of direct royal rule in Iceland, which took place on two levels. Firstly, the king started to acquire control over the Icelandic chieftaincies through confiscation and transfers. Secondly, the king's representatives worked on securing the Icelanders' formal acceptance of Norwegian royal rule and tax (Wærdahl 2011, 89). By 1250, King Hákon Hákonarson had secured effective control over most of the chieftaincies, mainly through direct contacts with the chieftains. The king's strategy of using local players was, however, less effective for achieving the formal acceptance of direct royal rule, because the mutually dissenting Icelandic chieftains were too busy competing among themselves to fully

concentrate on furthering the king's case. From 1254, the king therefore employed Norwegian emissaries who had no private ambitions for political power in Iceland. Their task was to persuade Icelanders to swear allegiance to the king, but they were not put in charge of the territories that the king controlled, because they lacked a local power base in Iceland. A local power base was essential for the king's representatives, because without it, they could not receive the necessary support of other chieftains and of the people. The Norwegian monarchy had also once been established by winning over local magnates for the crown, and the establishment of royal lordship in Iceland followed the same principles (Wærdahl 2011, 95–103). This complex and gradual process was formally completed in 1262, when the leading Icelandic chieftains, together with representatives of the farmers, swore allegiance to the Norwegian kings. In reality, however, the process of integration was not completed yet, as it still lacked the essential steps: the unification of royal administration and the establishment of a common law for the whole realm (Wærdahl 2011, 18–19).

1. 4. ICELAND AS A PART OF THE NORWEGIAN KINGDOM

1. 4. 1. The integration of Iceland into the Norwegian kingdom

The most significant element of change in the late-thirteenth-century Icelandic society, and the most important step toward an actual, rather than just formal, integration of Iceland into the Norwegian kingdom, was the introduction of an innovated code of law for the whole realm by King Magnús Hákonarson (1263–1280). The new lawbook for Iceland, *Járnsíða*, was introduced in 1271–1274, and then replaced by an improved version, *Jónsbók*, in 1280–1281. The major innovations contained in these lawbooks were connected to the formalized presence of the crown in Iceland. Legislative authority became the domain of the king, and the Alþingi was turned into a judicial institution, although it retained some legislative functions in local matters. The law-speaker (*lögsögumaðr/lögmaðr*) became a royal official, whose main task was to pronounce judgement on legal cases, either alone or in cooperation with a jury (Wærdahl 2011, 123–31; Beck 2011, 67–68). The most radically new element was that prosecution and punishment were no longer a private matter, as the royal officials possessed the right of public prosecution and executive authority (Wærdahl 2011, 154–58). In practice, the existence of executive power significantly reduced violence in conflicts and almost removed long-time feuds. Some cases of private violence and vengeance still occurred (Helgi Þorláksson 1997; 2015; Orning 2013), but feuds between kin groups were no longer the society's defining feature.

The chieftains gradually turned into royal officials, but the government of Iceland stayed almost completely in the hands of the original Icelandic elite, who still used the power base that they had built up as chieftains; this is a significant element of continuity (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1995, 156; Wærdahl 2011, 283–88). What changed, on the other hand, was that the contact between the king and the Icelandic secular leaders became intensified and formalized. Travels to the royal court ceased to be a rite of passage for young men looking for advancement, and they became a routine for the royal officials. An official basically had to have a second home in Norway, where he would spend long periods of time. This was new in Iceland, but the process

had most probably been similar in other Scandinavian lands during the formation of each monarchy (Sverrir Jakobsson 2010, 68–80).

1. 4. 2. The *staðamál*

Icelandic politics in the last third of the thirteenth century were considerably affected by an extensive conflict between secular and ecclesiastical power, but it was not a specifically Icelandic problem, and it must be studied in context of the tendencies in Europe and Norway. The Church in Europe aimed at independence from secular authorities since the acceptance of the Gregorian doctrine at the Lateran council of 1139, and this trend was gradually adopted by the Norwegian archbishops after the archdiocese of Niðarós was established in 1152. The major demand was freedom from secular intervention in matters of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, law, and elections (Jón Jóhannesson 1956, 212–13). The Norwegian Church acquired an extremely strong position under the rule of Magnús Erlingsson (1161–1184), who gave Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson (1161–1188) great privileges in return for his support in the political struggles with his opponent Sverrir Sigurðarson (Bagge 1996, 83–85; 2010, 59–60). The most significant of these privileges was *ius patronatus*, issued in *Canones Nidarosiensis* from 1163/4 (Bagge 2010, 296). The aim of this doctrine was to make the householder responsible for renewing the church property in case of damage, with the purpose of ensuring more stable pastoral care (Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 115–19). In Iceland, *ius patronatus* was with all probability propagated by Bishop Þorlákr Þórhallsson of Skálholt (1178–1193). The results of *ius patronatus* are attested in the legislation on rebuilding of churches and squandering of church property in the *Old Christian Law* from 1199–1217 (Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 119–21).

A more decisive struggle for complete independence of ecclesiastical property in Iceland started only almost a hundred years after Bishop Þorlákr. Árni Þorláksson became Bishop of Skálholt in 1269, and according to *Árna saga biskups* (ch. 9), he introduced the archbishop's new programme for ecclesiastical politics. The main issue was that all churches must be given under the bishops' control (*gefast í biskups vald*, *Biskupa sögur III*, 16). Árni was not successful in enforcing this claim at first; the owners of the wealthiest *staðir* were royal officials from the old chieftain families, and they were reluctant to give up their hereditary control of the *staðir* (Magnús Stefánsson 1978, 123–25; Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 128–30). The dispute could not be solved without external intervention, so Bishop Árni and his secular opponents travelled to Norway to meet King Magnús Hákonarson and Archbishop Jón in 1272. The archbishop decided that the control of churches must be given to Bishop Árni (Magnús Stefánsson 1978, 138–41). King Magnús acknowledged the archbishop's decision, which means that he showed much benevolence toward the ecclesiastical power (Magnús Stefánsson 1978, 145–46). Bishop Árni then took churches from their secular owners and gave them as a fief (*lén*) to priests. His position was secured by the king's support.

King Magnús, however, died on May 9, 1280; his son Eiríkr was then only twelve years old, so the royal council took over the reign. Whereas King Magnús had supported the Church and extended its power, the counsellors renewed the power struggle, which in turn reached Iceland. During the 1280s, the Church temporarily lost almost all the rights that it had gained in the preceding decades (Magnús Stefánsson 1978, 174–79). In 1282, the archbishop was outlawed together with two Norwegian bishops; he fled to Sweden and died there the same

year. A formal settlement with the Church was then reached in 1283, but the conditions were set by the counsellors alone (Magnús Stefánsson 1978, 180–81). A letter from 1282/3, issued by the royal council, ordered church property in Iceland back into the hands of the previous secular owners. The letter distinguished sharply between loyalty to the king and to the bishops, as if these two could not exist simultaneously. After a long discussion, Bishop Árni agreed to tolerate the letter for the sake of peace until the consecration of the new archbishop (Magnús Stefánsson 1978, 187–97).

A new archbishop, Jörundr of Hamar, was elected by the Pope and consecrated in 1288. He aimed at defining the legal position of the Church in Norway and Iceland, and he acknowledged his predecessor's decision from 1273 that all churches should be controlled by the bishops (Magnús Stefánsson 1978, 198). King Eiríkr Magnússon had now grown up and his own active participation in the government increased. He was willing to compromise, but not to accept older decisions automatically (Magnús Stefánsson 1978, 210–19). It then took several more years before the matter was finally solved by the Treaty of Ögvaldsnes (DI II, 34–35) on September 13, 1297, in which King Eiríkr, Archbishop Jörundr, and Bishop Árni agreed to give the Church absolute control of all churches that owned more than half of the homestead (*staðir*), while those that owned less (*bændakirkjur*) remained private property. In the Skálholt diocese there were about 80 *staðir* out of about 220 churches in all. Bishop Árni died soon after, on April 17, 1298 (Magnús Stefánsson 1978, 223–25; Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 128–32).

While ensuring the continuation of private ownership of some churches, the Treaty of Ögvaldsnes marked the end of the power structure that had developed with the forming of *staðir*. The chieftains had used the wealthiest *staðir* as power centres, but the *staðamál* changed this, so the aristocracy had to find new power centres – large, wealthy farms known as manors (*höfuðból*). *Jónsbók* introduces the term *höfuðból* into Icelandic inheritance laws; the manors had to be inherited by sons, while outlying farms (*útjarðir*) and other property could be inherited by daughters. 30 farms are marked as manors in the Late Middle Ages; of these, 24 were *bændakirkjur*. There was thus a certain continuity in the close relationship between secular power and religious institutions (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1995, 163).

1. 4. 3. The political development before Norway's union with Sweden in 1319

The royal offices in Iceland were relatively stable during the first decades of the union. Although it might have been the crown's intention that royal officials should not control areas where they had property of their own, the Icelandic officials still mostly had their administrative districts in the regions that they had controlled as chieftains before the union. After the death of the most significant royal officials Hrafn Oddsson (in 1289) and Þorvarðr Þórarinnsson (in 1296), however, the new officials based their power more directly on their service to the king (Wærdahl 2011, 177–83; Beck 2011, 109–11). Gradually, the established families were partly replaced by new ones, which nevertheless mostly derived from the old chieftain clans. According to *Hirðskrá*, a set of rules for the royal court, officials had to be recruited from “good families”, and in Iceland it was almost a matter of course to define anyone descended from chieftains in the second, third, or fourth generation as “good families”. The king also demanded that the retainers should have good economy, which from 1308 had to be certified by a decree from the *sýslumaðr* (Beck 2011, 191–92). Access to the king's service was thus mostly socially

hereditary, although there was some chance for new wealthy men (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1995, 157–58). Many sons of influential farmers who held an office also received the same office, but it was not a case of hereditary office, rather of political and economic advantage (Beck 2011, 114–17, 153–54).

When Icelanders swore allegiance to King Hákon Magnússon in 1302, they made a formal request that only Icelanders from the families who had given up their chieftaincies to the crown should receive high royal offices (Wærdahl 2011, 133–41). The prevailing view has been that this demand was made because the king had sent four Norwegian officials to Iceland in 1301 (Jón Jóhannesson 1958, 232–55). There is, however, no evidence of opposition directed against Norwegians; the demand was rather intended to ensure that the descendants of chieftains, rather than other wealthy Icelanders of less noble lineage, would receive the prestigious offices (Wærdahl 2011, 198–201; Gunnar Karlsson 1987, 134). The request was thus intended to define the Icelandic aristocracy. It appears to have been accepted, as the officials known from this period were descended from chieftains (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1995, 160). This constant role of the local aristocracy in the government is the most important aspect of continuity between the old and new political system (Wærdahl 2011, 202–05).

The Icelandic officials were a part of the Norwegian government, and they cannot be separated from it. Their effort to protect their privileged position may have strengthened the Icelandic aristocracy's collective identity, but it was class identity, rather than national identity (Beck 2011, 94–97, 142–43). It is thus not true that “the nation lost its freedom, and the dissatisfaction with that event was not yet completely gone” (*þjóðin missti frelsi sitt og hafa sárindin af þeim atburði ekki verið með öllu horfin*, Jón Jóhannesson 1958, 226). Other classes had other claims, which were not supported by the aristocracy. Nevertheless, although different classes had different interests and ideologies, conservatism seems to have been shared by almost all Icelanders. The Icelandic aristocracy therefore often supported the farmers against innovations introduced by the crown, but this should not be regarded as disloyalty to the king. It was rather a conservative defence against social changes (Sverrir Jakobsson 2005, 349–52).

Comparably, protests against Norwegian ecclesiastical leaders were not primarily a matter of nationality. Some of the bishops were unpopular because of personal conflicts with secular leaders, and in the late thirteenth century, the Icelanders' conservative attitudes were obvious in the *staðamál*: the bishops were of Icelandic origin, but they were opposed by the magnates, because their reforms were not in accordance with old traditions. When Icelanders disliked the innovations and increased financial claims introduced by the Norwegian-born Bishop Auðunn Þorbergsson (1313–1322), they requested an Icelandic bishop who would keep “*fornum vana landsins*”. This connection between a conservative approach and a focus on origin was typical for the early fourteenth century, when the royal power had the strongest impact on the position of individual social classes. When the king's interventions later became less direct, Icelanders felt less need to use the question of origin in their argumentation (Sverrir Jakobsson 2005, 350–51).

1. 4. 4. Personal union with Sweden

Norwegian historians have mostly claimed that the Norwegian medieval state dissolved after the personal union with Sweden in 1319. Wærdahl has demonstrated, however, that the changes in the government of Norway within the union were a continuation of processes that had started already during the reign of Hákon Magnússon in 1299–1319 (Wærdahl 2011, 207).

The most significant change in the government of Iceland in this period was the establishment of the office of governor (*hirðstjóri*) around 1320, but a similar position without the title had in fact been held before by Hrafn Oddsson, Þorvarðr Þórarinnsson, Erlendr Ólafsson, and Álfr of Krókr (Wærdahl 2011, 212–14). That means that the change was a formal institutionalization of the position, rather than a dramatic transformation of the power structure. The *hirðstjóri* was the king's top official in regional administration. He had the authority to prosecute royal officials who had abused the people, and he also assisted the people in their conflicts with ecclesiastical power and presented such problems to the king for judgement. In the fourteenth century there were few emissaries from the royal court, because the *hirðstjóri* took over their duties (Wærdahl 2011, 214–18; Beck 2011, 82–87).

Until about 1350, Icelandic royal officials felt that it was in their own interest to be loyal, because the office gave them status. Then a crisis in the relationship between Icelanders and the king occurred in 1354–1364, when one to four men held all or part of Iceland as a fief on lease at the same time as they were governors. The governors were constantly replaced, which caused instability. The population was dissatisfied, and the conflict became so fierce that a Norwegian fief-holder was killed in it (Beck 2011, 62, 90–92; Wærdahl 2011, 250–53; Rohrbach 2013, 202–03). Even during this period of instability, however, most of the royal offices in Iceland remained in the hands of the local elite (Wærdahl 2011, 265–66). Furthermore, the existing written sources from this period show – indirectly, as they are of a non-narrative character – that although the Icelandic public opposed the governors, the dominant view of royal power and monarchy remained positive. As Lena Rohrbach has pointed out, this is reflected for example in the 1363 legal manuscript *Skarðsbók*, which, with its distinctive focus on royal authority and with its interest in displaying the Icelandic law as a part of the legislation of the Norwegian king, which in turn is a part of the history of salvation, expresses support of royal rule (Rohrbach 2013, 192–93, 204–05).

The disruption was not permanent, and the situation soon became stabilized again. After 1370, the fief system was revoked, and one *hirðstjóri* for all Iceland was appointed by the king for three years at a time (Beck 2011, 92). The rule of the land was in practice still in the hands of the local elite, and the Icelandic officials at the end of the fourteenth century still had a personal power base in addition to their office (Wærdahl 2011, 268–69).

All in all, there is little reason to believe that any serious dissatisfaction with the royal rule existed in Iceland until the end of the fourteenth century. Occasional conflicts occurred throughout the first century of the union, but they were of a practical, rather than ideological character, and they were mostly solved by compromise. The original Icelandic social networks were largely retained, although the administrative structure changed. The social elites that produced historical narratives during these hundred years felt no need to hide the individual problems that had marked the recent developments, but they had no reason to base the texts on any inherent opposition to the monarchy.

1. 5. SIMILARITY AND SPECIFICITY

It can be concluded that the medieval Icelandic society was, like other medieval European societies with weak central power, based on local power structures that had arisen from the need of support in conflicts and of maintaining peace. The public power was represented by the law that regulated various aspects of the inhabitants' lives. There was no royal power in Iceland, but the local leaders gradually strengthened their relationship with the royal court of Norway, so Iceland eventually became integrated into the kingdom. The concentration of power in Iceland had its roots in internal conflicts within the Icelandic society, caused by an inherent instability of the system.

Internal conflicts were a phenomenon shared by all medieval European societies, but what makes Iceland unique in this respect is that no other society has produced equally broad, varied, and detailed narrative accounts of disputes on the local level. Medieval European historiographic narratives tend to focus on the great deeds of rulers or saints, and while episodes depicting local conflicts can occur in them, they usually remain marginal. Medieval Icelanders also produced narratives of Norwegian kings and European saints, but they also created two subgenres – the sagas of Icelanders and the contemporary sagas – that deal solely with the internal developments of the Icelandic society. The dominant narrative structures of these texts are directly based on the principles of conflict and its resolution, so the composition of the texts, as well as their content, reflect the forces that formed the society depicted in them. Iceland is the only European medieval culture that allows such a deep insight into its social mechanisms, and the sagas can therefore be regarded as unique sources.

1. 6. THE TEXTS

The Old Norse sagas can be divided into subgroups distinguished by their narrative structure, style, and subject matter. The focus of the present study is a group of narrative accounts dealing with twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelandic history and written down relatively soon after the events took place, which is why these texts are known as the contemporary sagas (*samtíðarsögur*). Apart from the contemporary sagas, there are two other groups of texts that are significant for the study of this period of Icelandic history. Firstly, there are the bishops' sagas, biographical sagas of eleventh- to fourteenth-century Icelandic bishops. Secondly, there are two kings' sagas, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* and a fragment of *Magnúss saga Hákonarsonar*, which deal with thirteenth-century Norwegian history and mention important details of the contacts between Norwegian kings and Icelanders. These kings' sagas are not a primary object of analysis in the present study, but they are used for comparison or extension where they offer additional information about the Icelanders' political relationship to Norway.

The bishops' sagas have mainly been studied in the context of continental and translated hagiographic literature, as documents reflecting the saints' cults. This approach has undeniably been fruitful, especially in case of the sagas of the saints Þorlákr and Guðmundr (Hunt 1985; Cormack 1994; Whaley 1994; Ciklamini 2004; McCreesh 2007; DuBois 2008; Wolf 2008; Skórzewska 2011). At the same time, however, it has 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. That concerns first and foremost the latest of these texts, *Árna saga biskups* and *Lárentíus saga biskups*, which have been neglected in literary research throughout the long tradition of saga studies, although *Árna saga* has been successfully used as a historical source (Haug 2015; Boulhosa 2017). The likely reason for the predominant approach to *Árna saga* and *Lárentíus saga* as purely factual sources is that their focus is political, rather than hagiographic, so they have not fitted the traditional approach to the bishops' sagas as ecclesiastical literature. Furthermore, their style has been deemed too annalistic and dry due to the frequent quotations from administrative documents (Vésteinn Ólason and Sverrir Tómasson 2006, 80). They are, however, the only narrative sources dealing with events that took place in Iceland after the establishment of the union with Norway, so they also deserve attention as reflections of how these events were remembered and evaluated by the society. This approach calls for a focus on the similarities, rather than on the differences, between the bishops' sagas and the secular contemporary sagas. In the present study, both subgroups are treated as equally relevant sources of Icelandic cultural history.

Most of the contemporary sagas with secular subject matter have not been preserved individually, but only as a part of the compilation known as *Sturlunga saga*. One text, *Arons saga Hjörleifssonar*, has been preserved separately from *Sturlunga saga*, in which it was not included. Another text, *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, is extant both individually and in a shortened version incorporated in *Sturlunga saga*; some of the other component texts are preserved individually in fragments. The bishops' sagas have a richer manuscript history, and most of them are extant in several different versions. Like other medieval texts, the contemporary sagas must be treated as products of a flexible and changeable manuscript tradition, rather than as works of individual authors. This applies to all the texts discussed in the present study, but even more so to *Sturlunga saga*, which is a compilation. In case of the other texts, different extant versions are taken into consideration where relevant.

Sturlunga saga

Sturlunga saga is an extensive compilation of originally separate sagas dealing with twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelandic history. It has a time span of almost two centuries, depicting the history of Iceland from 1117 to 1264 – except for the introductory *Geirmundar þáttur heljarskinns*, which takes place in the settlement period around 900. The central theme of *Sturlunga saga* is the gradual concentration of power in the hands of a few influential families and the subsequent rivalry and conflicts between these families, which led to the bloody fights of the so-called Sturlung Age in 1220–1264. The compilation consists of nine longer textual units, known as *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, *Sturlu saga*, *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*, *Guðmundar saga dýra*, *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, *Íslendinga saga*, *Þórðar saga kakala*, *Svínfellinga saga*, and *Þorgils saga skarða*. Apart from these texts, the compilation contains shorter introductory, connective, and closing texts, some of which are probably the compiler's original works (Jón Jóhannesson 1946, xvi–xlix).

Sturlunga saga was probably compiled around 1300 or somewhat later (Helgi Þorláksson 2012, 53–66). It is preserved in two incomplete medieval vellum manuscripts – AM 122a fol. from the 1360s, known as *Króksfjarðarbók*, and AM 122b fol. from the last quarter of the fourteenth century, known as *Reykjarfjarðarbók* – and in about forty paper copies, dating from

the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, some of which also contain parts that are now lost in the vellums (Úlfar Bragason 2005, 428–31). It has been argued that the meaning of the compilation was significantly changed in *Reykjarfjarðarbók* by adding *Þorgils saga skarða*, *Sturlu þátr*, and *Árna saga biskups* (Úlfar Bragason 2010, 243, 267; Helgi Þorláksson 2012, 82–84). In the present study, however, it will be attempted to show that both versions of the compilation express the same general attitudes, which are only supported by the additions in *Reykjarfjarðarbók*.

The authorship and exact dating of most of the component sagas are not known with any certainty, the exception being *Íslendinga saga*, which is believed to have been written by Sturla Þórðarson the younger (1214–1284), probably in the last decade of his life. Some earlier scholars ascribed most of *Sturlunga saga* to Sturla, but this assumption has been disproved by later research (Úlfar Bragason 1986a, 16–17). It is, however, likely that Sturla wrote *Íslendinga saga* as a supplement to other contemporary sagas that had been written before, with the intention of creating a large compilation, which he was not able to finish before his death (Úlfar Bragason 1986a, 20).

It is not certain who the compiler of *Sturlunga saga* was, and it has been the subject of an ongoing scholarly debate, in which no decisive conclusion has been reached. Some possible suggestions include *lögmaðr* Þórðr Narfason of Skarð (d. 1308) or Þorsteinn Snorrason, canon and later abbot of the Helgafell monastery (d. 1353), in which case a somewhat later dating of the compilation would be likely (for details of this debate, see Helgi Þorláksson 2012, 53–66). In any case, the compiler most probably worked on behalf of some representatives of the ruling class, possibly rather a group than an individual. The compilation is therefore likely to reflect attitudes that were dominant in the society, rather than the opinions of a specific individual.

The originally separate sagas, most of which are not preserved individually, were written with a lesser time distance from the depicted events than the compilation, so they expressed a more immediate interpretation of these events. In the creation of *Sturlunga saga*, which took place several decades after the establishment of the union between Iceland and Norway, some themes could be emphasized more than others; research has shown that the compiler made considerable changes to his material, consciously shaping the structure and meaning of the text (Úlfar Bragason 1986a, 124–81; 2010, 187–227, 264–65). Nevertheless, the overall meaning of the original texts could hardly be completely changed. *Sturlunga saga* is therefore treated here as a narrative that partly reflects the immediate opinions expressed in the original sagas, and partly evaluates the events from the perspective of a society that already knew how the union worked in practice and could interpret the recent past from this position.

Arons saga Hjörleifssonar

Arons saga Hjörleifssonar tells the story of Aron Hjörleifsson (ca. 1200–1255), who from his early youth supports Bishop Guðmundr Arason of Hólar (in office 1203–1237) in his disputes with the secular leaders, of whom the Sturlungs play a dominant role in this part of the conflict. After the battle of Grímsey in 1222, in which the bishop's men are heavily outnumbered by the Sturlungs, the wounded Aron must flee and hide from Sturla Sighvatsson, who has had him outlawed. Aron then manages to escape to Norway, where he enjoys respect and honour as a royal retainer.

No complete medieval manuscript of *Arons saga* is extant; in the existing editions the text is reconstructed from an early-fifteenth-century vellum fragment (AM 55 Id 5 4to), from seventeenth-century paper copies (AM 212 fol. and AM 426 fol.), and from *Elzta saga Guðmundar biskups* in *Codex Resenianus* (AM 399 4to) (Porter 2017, 21). Scholars have disagreed about the dating of the saga's composition: its first editor Guðbrandur Vigfússon (1858, lxvii) has dated it as early as 1270, Jón Jóhannesson (1946, 1) as late as 1350. Recent research has shown that *Arons saga* cannot be younger than 1320–1330 (Úlfar Bragason 2013, 128) because *Elzta saga Guðmundar*, which was probably written around that time, builds on *Arons saga* (Stefán Karlsson 1983: clxvii–clxviii). It is probably not much older either, because it is likely to have been connected to the translation of Guðmundr Arason's relics in 1315 (Porter 1971, 143–44). This implies that *Arons saga* must have been composed around 1320. Since Aron Hjörleifsson lived in the first half of the thirteenth century, the text cannot be based on reports by eyewitnesses, but rather on orally preserved memory or written sources – the latter were possibly non-narrative, such as genealogies (Úlfar Bragason 2013, 133–36).

Þorláks saga helga

The hagiography of the first and most prominent Icelandic saint is extant in three medieval redactions, marked by scholars as A, B, and C. The A-redaction was probably originally composed before Bishop Páll Jónsson's death in 1211; its primary manuscript is Stock. Perg. fol. no. 5 from around 1360; earlier textual evidence of this text is the fragment AM 383 4to I from around 1250. In terms of content and structure, A is a typical hagiography of a confessor: it opens with an account of the protagonist's life, in particular his ecclesiastical career, followed by an account of his death, burial, the translation of his relics, and the miracles. The accounts do not dwell on details and present the protagonist more as a type than as an individual, mostly avoiding his political life (Ármann Jakobsson and Ásdís Egilsdóttir 1999, 92–93; Wolf 2008, 249–50).

The B-redaction was probably composed on the occasion of the second translation of Þorlákr's relics in 1292, and it is extant in the manuscript AM 382 4to from around 1350. In the prologue, the redactor points out that the original saga neglects Bishop Þorlákr's struggles with his opponents, so there is a need to add interpolations with a focus on this aspect of the bishop's life. The main interpolation is the so-called *Oddaverja þáttr*, an account of various disputes between Bishop Þorlákr and the secular chieftains, presented with a strong bias and a significant hagiographic undertone. *Oddaverja þáttr* is more likely to be an ideologically motivated narrative than a reliable record of historical reality (Ármann Jakobsson and Ásdís Egilsdóttir 1999, 92–99; Wolf 2008, 249–50).

The C-redaction was composed after 1325, and its oldest extant manuscript is AM 219 fol. from the late fourteenth century, but the text is preserved in its entirety only in seventeenth-century copies. It also contains *Oddaverja þáttr*, but it is placed differently from the B-redaction. All three redactions end with accounts of miracles, which differ considerably in order, extent, and wording (Wolf 2008, 249–50).

Jóns saga helga

The first version of *Jóns saga helga* was written shortly after 1200; the saga was then re-written in several different redactions in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and there are three main extant redactions. Many identical formulations in all three redactions point to a common written source, while the differences are likely to be deliberate alterations motivated by the writers' wish to emphasize specific ideas. The style of all the redactions of *Jóns saga* closely follows the tradition of foreign or translated hagiographies of bishops and confessors, and it is likely that some of the episodes stem rather from this tradition than from Jón Ögmundarson's real life, as the saga was written quite long after the bishop's death and could scarcely rely on trustworthy sources. In hagiography, it was more important to create an ideal image than an accurate personal portrayal, and borrowings were frequent and were as a rule not perceived as a flaw.

The first redaction, known as S (Skálholt), was probably composed in the first half of the thirteenth century. Its oldest extant fragment is AM 221 fol., dated to around 1300; the oldest extant manuscript of the full text is AM 234 fol. from around 1340. The second redaction is known as H (Hólar), and it is likely to have originated between 1230 and 1260. Its main manuscripts are both post-medieval: Stock. papp. 4to no. 4 from around 1630, and AM 392 4to from around 1640. The youngest redaction is known as L (Latin), as its style is more ornate and more clearly influenced by Latin hagiographies. This version was probably composed in the first quarter of the fourteenth century. Its main medieval manuscript is the incomplete Stock. Perg. fol. no. 5, dated to around 1360. The complete text is extant only in post-medieval paper copies (Foote 2003, ccxiii–ccxxxvii).

Gísls þáttur Illugasonar, which is of special importance to the present study, is in some form present in all the extant redactions of *Jóns saga*, and it is also preserved independently of *Jóns saga*, as a part of the compilation of kings' sagas known as *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna*,¹ which was probably composed around 1280. The extant form of *Gísls þáttur* is not likely to be much older than that, but another version of the tale probably existed in written form at the time when the original *Jóns saga* was composed. The S-redaction of *Jóns saga* contains a very abridged retelling of *Gísls þáttur*, but the similarity of formulations implies that this text shared a written source with the version that is now preserved in *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna*. The H-version of *Gísls þáttur* largely follows the S-version. The L-redaction of *Jóns saga* contains a much longer version of *Gísls þáttur* that is clearly based on a written source related to the version in *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna*, but the episode in which Jón miraculously saves Gísl from the gallows is not found in the independent *Gísls þáttur*, and it was probably added by the redactor of the L-redaction² (Foote 2003, cclviii–cclxvii).

¹ This compilation is now preserved in two sister manuscripts – *Hulda*, AM 66 fol., from the fourteenth century, and *Hrokkinskinna*, GkS 1010 fol., from the fifteenth century. They are both copies of an original that is not extant.

² There is no complete scholarly agreement on the origin of this episode and on the relative dating of the versions of *Gísls þáttur*; for an overview of some other opinions see Fjalldal 1986, 153–55.

Guðmundar sögur

The different redactions of *Guðmundar saga biskups* deal with the conflicts between Icelandic ecclesiastical and secular power in the first half of the thirteenth century, focusing on the life and deeds of Bishop Guðmundr Arason of Hólar (in office 1203–1237) and his disputes with the foremost Icelandic chieftains. These disputes concerned the struggle of the Church for independence from secular power in matters of jurisdiction and control of property, and they did not take place in isolation, but were based on general European tendencies and connected especially to Norwegian ecclesiastical and royal politics. Guðmundr was regarded as a saint by the people of Iceland, and although he was never canonized by the Pope, a broad array of written and folkloric narratives implies that he enjoyed great popularity as a saint in Iceland in both medieval and post-medieval times.

Guðmundar saga biskups is extant in four different redactions, labelled A–D in modern research. All of them are partly based on the so-called *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*, which was the earliest narrative account of Guðmundr's life. It was written shortly after Guðmundr's death in 1237 by one of the clerics who followed Guðmundr in his last years as a priest, probably Lambkárr Þorgilsson (d. 1249) (Úlfar Bragason 2003, 483–84). *Prestssaga* is unfinished, ending abruptly with Guðmundr's consecration journey to Norway in 1202, and it is preserved only as a part of the later *Guðmunda sögur* and *Sturlunga saga*. It focuses on Guðmundr's piety, asceticism, and humility in his early years, and on miracles that he was believed to perform already during his life. The major early narrative account of Guðmundr's action in office is a part of *Íslendinga saga*, which, understandably, focuses mainly on political events. Its hagiographic counterpart is a book of Guðmundr's miracles from the early fourteenth century.

The redactions A, B, and C are based on these and other sources, including *Arons saga Hjörleifssonar* and *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*. They were probably composed around 1320–1330 in connection with the first translation of Guðmundr's relics in 1315, followed by the first efforts to have him officially canonized (Stefán Karlsson 2000, 156–58; Úlfar Bragason 2003, 483). The main manuscript of the A-redaction is *Codex Resenianus* (AM 399 4to, ca. 1330–1350). The exact dating of the redactions is not known, and the alphabetical order does not mark the order in which they originated, but rather the extent to which each text differs from the original sources. That means that the A-redaction, also known as *Elzta Guðmundar saga*, follows the sources rather closely; the B-redaction incorporates more hagiographical elements, but its structure and style do not fully accord with hagiographic generic conventions; the C-redaction is closest to Latin hagiographies in terms of style (Stefán Karlsson 2000, 160–65).

The D-redaction was composed by Arngrímr Brandsson, Abbot of Þingeyrar (in office 1350–1361), in connection with the second translation of Guðmundr's relics in 1344, followed by renewed attempts at canonization. Its major source was the C-redaction, but the material was substantially revised, details from Guðmundr's youth were omitted, and additional miracles and parallels with foreign saints were incorporated. Apart from that, stories of clearly folkloric origin were added into the narrative. The D-redaction is obviously primarily intended for non-Icelandic audiences, although there is no extant Latin version of the text (Stefán Karlsson 2000, 166–69). The oldest extant manuscript of the D-redaction is Stock. Perg. fol. no. 5 from ca. 1350–1360.

Árna saga biskups

Árna saga describes the life of Bishop Árni Þorláksson of Skálholt (in office 1269–1298) and his struggle for increased ecclesiastical power, known as the *staðamál*. While the narrative employs a learned style inspired by hagiographic literature and is rich in biblical allusions, its subject matter is mainly political. The text was a part of the *Sturlunga* manuscript *Reykjarfjarðarbók*, but the section containing *Árna saga* is only extant in seventeenth-century copies. In the manuscript, *Árna saga* followed after *Sturlunga saga* and was intended to serve as a continuation of it (Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1998, v–vi). Since the events of the late thirteenth century are not recorded in *Sturlunga saga*, *Árna saga* is the only long narrative source depicting the events of this time. The extant part of the saga ends abruptly in 1290–1291, and the end of the text is lost.

The oldest extant fragment is from ca. 1340. The saga was originally written after the end of the *staðamál* in 1297; it is likely to have been written during the time when Árni Helgason, Árni Þorláksson's friend and kinsman, was bishop (1304–1320), or possibly in the bishopless years 1298–1304 as propaganda for Árni Helgason's election. The saga or most of it was probably written before the fire at Skálholt in 1309, when most of its written sources burnt down (Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1998, xxiii–xxvii). It has even been suggested that Árni Helgason wrote the saga himself. According to Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (1998, xxxvii–viii), it is indeed likely that Árni Helgason took initiative in creating the saga, but the text does not seem to be the work of one author.

Lárentíus saga biskups

This saga depicts the life of Lárentíus Kálfsson, bishop of Hólar (in office 1324–1331). Before his years as bishop, Lárentíus spent much time in Norway; he often stayed with the archbishop of Niðarós, and he also worked as his emissary in Iceland. He became involved in serious conflicts within the ecclesiastical elite, which largely replaced the disputes between ecclesiastical and secular power from the previous decades.

The original composition of the saga is in the text itself ascribed to a friend and servant of Bishop Lárentíus, who used both the bishop's own words and documents from the Hólar bishopric's archive in shaping the narrative. That is probably the reason why the style of the saga combines the biographical structure known from other bishops' sagas not only with elements of the factual annalistic approach that is typical for historiography based on official documents, but also with unexpectedly humorous anecdotes from the bishop's everyday life, which are not typical for the genre. The author is not named in the text, but it is likely that the saga was composed by the priest Einarr Hafliðason (1307–1393), who was also the author of the so-called *Lögmannsannáll* (AM 420 b 4to), which records many of the events also depicted in *Lárentíus saga*, often using the same wording. The saga also describes Einarr's tasks in the bishop's service in detail. Internal references in the saga suggest that it was composed after 1346 (Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1998, lxiv–lxvii).

The saga is preserved in two late vellum manuscripts (AM 406 a I 4to, ca. 1530; AM 180 b fol., ca. 1500), each of which contains a different redaction of the text (labelled A and B in modern research), and in a paper copy (AM 404 4to, ca. 1640), which combines both versions;

other paper copies are mostly based on AM 404. The ending is missing in all the extant versions. It is possible that the B-redaction was created by Lárentíus's son, the monk Árni (Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1998, lviii–lx).

Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar and Magnúss saga Hákonarsonar

Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar deals with the life of Hákon Hákonarson, king of Norway (1217–1263), and it combines the style and themes of the classical kings' sagas with elements of continental royal biography. It was written by Sturla Þórðarson the younger (1214–1284), who later also wrote *Íslendinga saga*, during his first stay in Norway in 1263–1265 (Ármann Jakobsson 2015, 5–9). The saga is preserved in three redactions, of which the main respective manuscripts are *Eirspennill* (AM 47 fol., ca. 1325), *Codex Frisianus* (AM 45 fol., ca. 1330), and *Flateyjarbók* (GkS 1005 fol., ca. 1390). The 2013 edition, which is used for the present study, is primarily based on the *Flateyjarbók* redaction, as the versions extant in the older manuscripts contain abridged versions of the text.

Sturla Þórðarson was also the author of *Magnúss saga Hákonarsonar*, which depicts the life and reign of King Magnús Hákonarson (1263–1280), Hákon Hákonarson's son and successor. Most of the saga was probably written during Sturla's second stay in Norway in 1266–1271, and the rest was possibly finished after his return from his third visit to Norway in 1278. The saga is preserved only in two short fragments (AM 325 X 4to, ca. 1400). As far as we can tell from the fragments, its style and structure seem to have been similar to *Hákonar saga*.

2. METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS: MEDIEVAL LITERATURE AND MODERN THEORIES OF NARRATIVE AND MEMORY

2. 1. NARRATIVE DISCOURSE AS A MEDIUM

Before we turn to analysing a text as a narrative discourse, we need to make sure that the text fulfils two basic criteria – that it has a structure that is not arbitrary, and that it interprets, evaluates, explains, or contextualizes events, instead of simply recording them. Concerning structure, modern readers may feel that medieval narratives are characterized by a lack of structure. The reason is that our notions are formed by neoclassical theories that originated in the Renaissance and were intended for pointing up the failings of medieval narratives (Ryding 1971, 5). These theories owe their sense of the centrality of a unified plot to Aristotle, who writes in *Poetics* that “the ordered arrangement of the incidents is what I mean by plot. [...] It should deal with an action complete in itself, have a beginning, middle, and end, and be of appropriate length to be grasped as a unity” (Davenport 2004, 16). In our modern perception of literature, we take these ideas for granted, and we expect that texts follow the principle of unity of action. We must keep in mind, however, that when Aristotle formulated his poetics, he simply codified what had become standard practice in the literature of his time, but when they were re-introduced, the standard literary practice had become strikingly different. The dominant medieval literary forms often interweave several actions involving more than one central character, a process that leads to stories consisting of several interdependent narrative lines (Ryding 1971, 9–16). This is what we need to take into consideration when trying to understand the narrative structure of medieval texts, because many aspects of the text that would usually be defined as *flaws* or *conventions* can serve as important indicators of the intended meaning of the text (White 1987, 211–12).

With this in mind, we can turn to the other central aspect of narrative, which is much more complex – the question of the processes of meaning construction. The contemporary sagas create a convincing image of history; they depict the most significant events of the time, a broad array of central and less central characters, as well as interesting details from everyday life. They are based on real historical events, which were still relatively fresh in people’s memories at the time of writing – some were remembered by the writers themselves and others were told to them by eyewitnesses or their direct descendants. At the same time, however, the contemporary sagas also present an interpretation of history, although they contain very little direct narratorial commentary. Indirect evaluation and interpretation of the depicted events is expressed through various narrative devices, such as dialogues, stanzas, shifting narrative focus, parallels and contrasts, or the use of specific structural patterns and allusions to cultural myths. In analysing these sources, it is therefore always necessary to define the relationship between their narrativity and historicity.

As Hayden White has pointed out, narrative discourse cannot be regarded as a neutral medium of historical representation, because it endows events with an illusory coherence (White 1987, ix): it creates the idea that a chain of events has a beginning and an end, and that it leads to a specific result. Meanings are constructed, rather than originally present in the events: meaning is constituted rather than found, whereas reality is found rather than constituted

(White 1987, 36–37). Therefore, rather than being a representation of reality, narrative is a mode of reflection – according to different theorists either ideological, allegorical, or symbolic. Roland Barthes speaks of an ideological function of the narrative mode because it does not overtly indicate the constituted nature of its contents (Barthes 1981). The performance model of discourse, presented by anglophone analytical philosophy, is based on the idea that every discourse with the same “facts” produces a different meaning. That is to say that historical narrative endows real events with meaning by allegory to literary models, so it is an allegorical, figurative discourse (White 1987, 41–47). Hermeneutically oriented philosophers, such as Paul Ricoeur, believe that narrative enables the understanding of a set of events as a meaningful whole by grasping together various explanations by means of *configuration through plot* (Ricoeur 1978a, 153–61; Ricoeur 1980, 178–79). That way, the status of a chain of events as history can only be indicated, not represented directly, which makes narrative a symbolic discourse (Ricoeur 1978b, 233). Regardless of which of these theories we prefer, they all agree that narrative constitutes, rather than represents, meaning. In the words of Hayden White, “narrative, far from being merely a form of discourse that can be filled with different contents, real or imaginary as the case may be, already possesses a content prior to any given actualization of it in speech or writing” (White 1987, xi). This is true of any narrative, modern or medieval, which means that a literary analysis is always necessary for understanding how meaning is created in the discourse.

Not every written account of events, however, is a discourse. In this sense, Hayden White distinguishes between three categories of medieval historical representation: annals, chronicle, and historical narrative, of which only the last is a fully developed discourse. Annals are not a discourse in the sense defined by White because they only record individual events in a chronological order without connecting them to each other (White 1987, 5–11). Similarly, White argues that a chronicle is narrative in nature because it formulates relations between cause and effect or conflict and resolution, but it is not a fully developed discourse because it lacks a conclusion – it ends without summing up the meaning of the chain of events (White 1987, 20). White defines historical narrative by the presence of a principle for assigning significance to events with regard to a social system. He argues that a discourse contains “the plot of a narrative that imposes a meaning on the events that make up its story level by revealing at the end a structure that was immanent in the events all along” – such as a moral message, an evaluation, or a notion of development. It is the plot that decides which events should be recorded or left out, and the end of the narrative is marked by a turn in the order, such as the establishment of a new system or a renewal of the system after a disruption. That is the only way to conclude a historical narrative, because history always goes on in time (White 1987, 20–23).

Medieval texts, in our case the sagas, can thus be regarded as historical narratives as far as they make a deeper sense of the events they depict, rather than merely recording events or describing simple causal relations. Scholars have traditionally ascribed this quality to the sagas of Icelanders and to the kings’ sagas, but not to the contemporary sagas, which they regarded as dry chronological records of events without beginnings, endings, and plots (f. ex. Finnur Jónsson 1901, 726–27). In the present study it will be argued, on the other hand, that the contemporary sagas fulfil this criterion, because they reflect the relationship between the events and the society. The historical events are formed by social conditions, but particular events can

also influence the social structures. It is these social structures and the tendencies that influence them that form the central meaning of the saga narratives. The contemporary sagas and other types of sagas that qualify as historical narratives can therefore be regarded as truthful reflections of their time's values, norms, beliefs, and mentality, regardless of the historical accuracy of individual details, such as dialogues. In the words of Jesse Byock, "the realism in these sagas is not tied to factual accuracy but to the societal normative code" (Byock 1982, 10).

2. 2. SAGAS AND CULTURAL MEMORY

In transforming historical subject matter into a narrative discourse, the contemporary sagas' creators employed the narrative conventions of saga literature, which already existed both in oral tradition and in writing. Through the process of narrativization, accounts of historical events were shaped by specific structural patterns and real historical persons were transformed into literary characters and gained some stereotypical features, comparable to the literary types known from the sagas of Icelanders and the kings' sagas. That means that the contemporary sagas are an inseparable part of the saga tradition, and they were doubtlessly perceived as such also at the time of their origin. It would therefore be limiting and misleading to analyse individual contemporary sagas outside of their context within the saga tradition, because the communication between the storyteller and the audience of medieval narratives was based first and foremost on the expectations created by the given type of narrative. The fact that certain structural patterns supported certain ways of interpreting the events was based on the audience's knowledge of many similar narratives of the same kind, which were perceived as mutually connected, although their story lines were independent of each other. In literature, recent events could thus be associated with the distant past not only through direct causal links, but also due to typological similarity. A necessary precondition of such contextualization of recent events was a memory of the past, created by means of oral tradition, writing, material objects, or a combination of all these elements.

In this context we are not speaking about individual memory, but rather about what Jan Assmann and others have defined as *cultural memory*. In Assmann's theory, "cultural memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity" (Assmann 1995, 130). This close connection to identity is what marks the difference between cultural memory and general historical knowledge. In Assmann's words:

in the context of cultural memory, the distinction between myth and history vanishes. Not the past as such, as it is investigated and reconstructed by archaeologists and historians, counts for the cultural memory, but only the past as it is remembered. [...] Cultural memory reaches back into the past only so far as the past can be reclaimed as *ours*. This is why we refer to this form of historical consciousness as *memory* and not just as knowledge about the past. Knowledge about the past acquires the properties and functions of memory if it is related to a concept of identity. (Assmann 2008, 113)

Such a definition of cultural memory also implies that, unlike historical knowledge, cultural memory is highly contextual. As Assmann has pointed out, "cultural memory works by reconstructing, that is, it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation" (Assmann 1995, 130). That means that any given historical fact can receive new meanings in a

group's cultural memory, and that these meanings depend on the group's need of specific ways of defining its identity at any given time.

This is connected to Assmann's definition of "myth" in the sense of a memory or narrative of history that creates meaningful links between the past and the present. In his words, "myth is a predominantly narrative reference to the past that sheds light on the present and the future".³ Assmann further defines two central functions of myth: a founding (*fundierend*) and a contra-present (*kontra-präsentisch*) function. The founding function "sets the present in light of a past that makes it appear meaningful, divinely planned, necessary, and unalterable".⁴ The contra-present function, on the other hand, "emphasizes the missing, the disappeared, the lost, and the suppressed, and it creates awareness of the rupture between 'then' and 'now'".⁵ This awareness of the differences between 'then' and 'now' is necessary for the conceptualization of the past as the past, which then enables interpretation of the present in light of the past – as well as interpretation of the past in light of the present.

Other scholars who have further developed the theory of cultural memory have defined it as "an ongoing process of remembrance and forgetting in which individuals and groups continue to refigure their relationship to the past" (Erll and Rigney 2009, 2). They have stated that cultural memory is "as much a matter of acting out a relationship to the past from a particular point in the present as it is a matter of preserving and retrieving earlier stories" (Erll and Rigney 2009, 2). We thus return to the concept of narrativity that has been outlined here – every narrative endows the given historical knowledge with specific meanings, which are based on its contextualization that is formed by the situation at the time when the narrative is created. Recent events are transformed into a narrative discourse when they are connected to the past that forms the given society's cultural memory. That way, these events themselves become a part of this society's cultural memory.

Old Norse literature has been discussed from the perspective of memory studies and cultural memory in recent research. One of the major benefits of this approach has been that it has liberated saga studies from the dichotomy of history and fiction. This dichotomy is limiting because the medieval texts developed before the occurrence of these modern notions, and they antedate the widespread interest in classifying texts according to such criteria. Instead, memory studies can reveal the capacity of certain narratives to construct a significant relationship between the present and the past (Hermann 2010, 69–70). In Pernille Hermann's words, "aspects of cultural memory studies [...] may provide a theoretical background for understanding the sagas, not as a literature that documents facts, nor as pure inventions, but as founding narratives, a special type of myth, that among their many other qualities have the capacity to offer orientation by invoking a sense of continuity and cultural stability" (Hermann 2010, 82–83). Furthermore, memory studies can also nuance other concept pairs that have appeared in saga studies, such as representation versus reality, text versus extra-textual context, and orality versus literacy (Hermann 2013, 333). To use Hermann's formulation again, "when

³ *Mythos ist der vorzugsweise narrative Bezug auf die Vergangenheit, der von dort Licht auf die Gegenwart und Zukunft fallen lässt* (Assmann 2005, 78).

⁴ *[...] stellt Gegenwärtiges in das Licht einer Geschichte, die es sinnvoll, gottgewollt, notwendig und unabänderlich erscheinen lässt* (Assmann 2005, 79).

⁵ *[...] hebt das Fehlende, Verschwundene, Verlorene, an den Rand Gedrängte hervor und macht den Bruch bewusst zwischen 'einst' und 'jetzt'* (Assmann 2005, 79).

the formative power of saga literature to shape cultural realities, that is, to construct memories, is recognized, the distinction between text and reality is blurred, and their cultural significance is equalized, something that eventually increases the sagas' value as sources for medieval culture" (Hermann 2013, 351).

Understandably, Old Norse memory studies have focused primarily on the dominant "founding narratives" of the Icelandic society – on the texts dealing with the settlement of Iceland and with the Saga Age, such as the sagas of Icelanders, *Íslendingabók*, and *Landnámabók* (Glauser 2000; Hermann 2010; Gísli Sigurðsson 2014; Long 2017). In connection with this type of texts, Jürg Glauser has highlighted the important relationship between landscape and memory, pointing out that while the past is presented as qualitatively different from the present, traces of the superseded culture are inscribed in the landscape through its placenames, because places are named after past events or persons (Glauser 2000, 208–09). In his view, "in saga literature it is first and foremost the landscape and the events localized in it which play the decisive role as guarantors of memory. Narratives [...] are inseparably bound to Icelandic topography and undertake a wide-ranging literary mapping of the country, a semioticization of space" (Glauser 2007, 20). The term "semioticization of space" defines the process by which "the landscape, previously empty and undescribed, and therefore meaningless and without sense", is turned into a social space. Through this process, "a transformation of nature into culture occurs, in that nature – in the concrete form of the Icelandic landscape surrounding the community – is 'described' by the sagas, i.e. endowed with signs and so filled with significance" (Glauser 2000, 209). Glauser has also emphasized the role of genealogies in linking the present to the past and creating a continuity between them, stating that "genealogies are among the most characteristic and original forms of cultural memory techniques; in such accounts there is frequently a direct leap from mythological beginnings to the present" (Glauser 2000, 210).

While genealogies and the "semioticization of space" underline the aspect of continuity between the past and the present, which is dominant in the conceptualization of historical development in the sagas of Icelanders and related texts, these narratives do not ignore the differences between the past and the present either. Pernille Hermann has shown that the sagas of Icelanders have both the founding function and the contra-present function defined by Assmann. They have the founding function because they underline continuity by stating that some remarkable objects from the past are still seen "now", or that the place where something happened is "now" named after that event or person. At the same time, they also have the contra-present function because they point out change and contrast, stating that the landscape looked different "then" than it does "now", or that some social customs that were common "then" are no longer common "now". What must be kept in mind is that the co-existence of these two functional aspects and their subtle interplay in the texts are not elements of textual inconsistencies, but rather inevitable aspects of a meaningful relationship between the past and the present (Hermann 2010, 76–79).

Apart from the obvious choice of the sagas of Icelanders, *Íslendingabók*, and *Landnámabók* as the main subjects of Old Norse memory studies, the perspective of memory has also proved fruitful in studying other texts of a broadly historiographic character, such as the kings' sagas, chronicles, hagiographic sagas, church historiography, or legal texts, as well as genres dealing directly or indirectly with mythology and the ancient past, such as Eddic

poetry, skaldic poetry, *Snorra Edda*, and the legendary sagas (Hermann 2009; Hermann et al. 2014; Glauser et al. 2018). Memory-oriented research in Norse mythology shows that the medieval Icelanders' cultural memory reached even further than to the settlement period – all the way to the Norse people's legendary origin from the Æsir. The written accounts such as *Snorra Edda*, created in Christian times, do not only conserve the pagan mythology to keep it from being forgotten, but also integrate Nordic pagan religion into a Christian concept of world history, creating a Nordic past that could be considered meaningful in the thirteenth century (Hermann 2009, 294–99). That is the main difference between cultural memory and memory as a mere storage of knowledge – but these concepts are not mutually exclusive, and they often co-exist within the same text. The concept of memory as stored knowledge corresponds with the modern concepts of factuality, accuracy, and historicity, while the concept of cultural memory corresponds with the modern concept of fictionality, in the sense of producing meaning in a creative manner. The mixing of these two forms of memory thus again indicates that sharp distinctions between factuality and invention – or between history and fiction – were not typical for Old Norse literature; instead, every text was created and understood as a combination of both (Hermann 2009, 299–300).

These and other similar findings have brought very significant new perspectives into the research of various groups of Old Norse texts. One group of texts that has, on the other hand, received little attention in context of Old Norse memory studies, includes the contemporary sagas and the non-hagiographic sagas of Icelandic bishops. These texts are not primarily regarded 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 the 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.

As has been mentioned here, an important element of the narrativization of the recent past, which is essential for its integration into cultural memory, is fitting the events into specific structural patterns that support certain ways of interpretation or create certain expectations. It is therefore useful to outline the theory of the horizon of expectations in the following and to suggest a method of applying this theory to the study of saga literature while avoiding the constrictions imposed by the traditional but largely limiting category of saga genres.

2. 3. THE HORIZON OF EXPECTATIONS AND THE NARRATIVE TYPES OF SAGAS

The concept of the horizon of expectations was formulated by Hans Robert Jauss as an element of his reception theory. This theory is based on the idea that a literary text should not be regarded as having a universal, unchangeable, and timeless meaning, but that the meaning of every literary text is formed in its recipient's mind in context of the recipient's previous experience with other literary texts. According to Jauss,

the analysis of the literary experience of the reader avoids the threatening pitfalls of psychology if it describes the response and the impact of a work within the definable frame of reference of the reader's expectations: this frame of reference for each work develops in the historical moment of its appearance from a previous understanding of

the genre, from the form and themes of already familiar works, and from the contrast between poetic and practical language. [...] A literary work, even if it seems new, does not appear as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its readers to a very definite type of reception by textual strategies, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of the familiar, stirs particular emotions in the reader and with its beginning arouses expectations for the middle and end, which can then be continued intact, changed, re-oriented or even ironically fulfilled in the course of reading according to certain rules of the genre or type of text. (Jauss 1970, 11–12)

This is what Jauss calls the “horizon of expectations” (Jauss 1970, 12). Jauss further works with the concept of “aesthetic distance”, that is “the distance between the given horizon of expectations and the appearance of a new work, whose reception results in a *horizon change* because it negates familiar experience or articulates an experience for the first time” (Jauss 1970, 14). He uses this concept to determine the artistic nature of a work, arguing that the greater this distance is, the higher the aesthetic value of the work is (Jauss 1970, 14–15). That is true of literary fiction, because its value is determined by its aesthetic quality. The value of a historical narrative, on the other hand, is not primarily based on its aesthetic quality, but rather on the fact that the discourse endows the depicted events with new layers of meaning. That can be achieved in a historical narrative either by fulfilling the horizon of expectations created by a particular type of text, or by deliberately distorting the given horizon of expectations and creating a distance from it. Both processes can produce equally valuable historical narratives.

The concept of the horizon of expectations can be applied to the Old Norse sagas; the typical saga of a conflict between two kin groups can be mentioned as an example. It usually has a stereotypical structure, the beginning of which implies how the action will continue. Two protagonists are presented at the beginning, and the primary cause of their conflict is described; the conflict then escalates, and other characters become involved. Armed clashes take place, and one of the central characters is killed, which is followed by a revenge; at the end of the saga the conflict is terminated by a reconciliation. The structure of the saga creates a certain horizon of expectations. The recipient, whether an original medieval listener or a modern reader of the editions or translations, who is already familiar with some similar sagas, recognizes its typical beginning and figures out what types of events are likely to follow. The originality of each saga is formed by how each type of event is carried out – how the individual protagonists are portrayed, which of the characters is killed in the decisive fight, who takes revenge, and under what circumstances the two parties agree on reconciliation.

Other sagas have different structures; some deal with a series of the protagonist’s various adventures, which are unrelated to each other and are connected only by the focus on the protagonist. Others describe the protagonist’s turbulent relationship with a woman and his rivalry with her other suitors or with her rightful husband. Each of these saga types follows a specific structural pattern and creates a specific horizon of expectations. Each type is also usually, but not exclusively, connected to a specific saga subgenre. The *conflict story* described above is most frequent in the sagas of Icelanders, which depict the first century after the settlement of Iceland. The *quest story* is often found in the legendary sagas, which deal with the legendary ancient past of Scandinavia. The *love story* is typical for the skald sagas, which follow the protagonist from his troublesome life in Iceland to his stay at the Norwegian royal court and then back to his unfulfilled love in Iceland. It would, however, be a simplification to assume that the saga subgenres are the same thing as the *story types* or *narrative types* of sagas.

The concept of genre is problematic in context of saga studies. As has been pointed out by Pernille Hermann among others, any individual saga is intertextually connected to other sagas and to other Old Norse genres, as well as to non-Norse texts. Each subgenre of the sagas employs some genre-specific characteristics, but still, each genre merges with the others on various levels. When a saga employs motifs, structures, or themes that are typical for other genres, it participates in a process that repeats and actualizes other texts. Such intertextual relations, which embrace elements from oral as well as written texts, challenge the generic categories developed by modern scholarship (Hermann 2013, 335–37).

The problem of intertextual relations across the genres can be solved by focusing on the *narrative types* of sagas instead of the saga genres. The definition of individual narrative types is based on the interconnection between structure and meaning: stories that follow the same 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 genres than for others, but the boundaries of the genres are not the same as the boundaries of the narrative types. 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. Each of these types creates a particular horizon of expectations, whether it is a part of a saga or *þáttir* of Icelanders, of a contemporary saga, or of a king's saga. This enables us to analyse the meanings of the narrative types across the boundaries of the traditionally defined saga genres.

It is essential to define the horizon of expectations of any given narrative before analysing its meaning, especially when dealing with medieval literature, because in Jauss' words:

[...] the reconstruction of the horizon of expectations, on the basis of which a work in the past was created and received, enables us to find the questions to which the text originally answered and thereby to discover how the reader of that day viewed and understood the work. [...] The method of the history of reception is essential for the understanding of literary works which lie in the distant past. Whenever the writer of a work is unknown, his intent not recorded, or his relationship to sources and models only indirectly accessible, the philological question of how the text is *properly* to be understood, that is according to its intention and its time, can best be answered if the text is considered in contrast to the background of the works which the author could expect his contemporary public to know either explicitly or implicitly. (Jauss 1970, 18–19)

In context of the present study, it can be assumed that the writers and compilers of the contemporary sagas could expect their audience to know some sagas of Icelanders – and since these sagas followed certain narrative types, it did not matter which individual sagas each member of the audience knew. It was rather the knowledge of the narrative types as such that formed the audience's understanding of the contemporary sagas and other texts of the time. This is connected to the inherent intertextuality of medieval literature, which has also been discussed by Jauss. Whereas the modern perception of a literary text as a *work* – that is, as a *unique product of its creator*, presupposes a “distinction between purposefulness and purposelessness, didactic and fictional, traditional and individual, imitative and creative” (Jauss 1979, 188), the inherent intertextuality of medieval literature “is constitutive, in the sense that the reader must negate the character of the individual text as a work in order to enjoy the charm of an already ongoing game with known rules and still unknown surprises” (Jauss 1979, 189).

This is, according to Jauss, “an essential aspect of the alterity of [medieval] literature” (Jauss 1979, 189).

This intertextuality and fluidity of medieval texts may pose a problem when it comes to the question of authorial intent. Any text that qualifies as a historical narrative represents a set of choices, such as the choice of narrative type or of particular historical events to be included or left out. The question of intentionality must therefore be taken into consideration in any discussion of the evaluation of events in the narrative. Literary criticism has witnessed various approaches to this matter, from the idea that a correct interpretation of a text reflects the real author’s intention (Hirsch 1967) to the “death of the author” proposed by some of the structuralist theorists who believed that the text speaks for itself (Barthes 1977). The currently widely accepted solution to this contradiction is based on the concept of implied author (Booth 1961), which is a picture of authorial presence that is not explicitly presented in the work, but rather constructed by the reader as he reacts to the implied author’s involvement, however hidden it is (Booth 1961, 70–73). The image of the implied author represents the set of values reflected in the work, and it cannot be identified with the text’s narrator or with its theme, as both the narrator and the multiple themes are only some of the elements created by the implied author (Booth 1961, 73–74). The distinction between the real author and the implied author solves the contradiction between the fact that no literary work can be entirely objective – in the sense of indifference toward any values – and the fact that the work should not be regarded as a direct expression of the real author’s personal biases and desires (Booth 1961, 75).

Although the theory of implied author is based primarily on the study of modern literature, which can be regarded as authorial work in a narrow sense, the concept also solves the issue of the authorial intent in medieval texts. The name and social background of a medieval text’s author are often unknown, but even if they are known, the text cannot be regarded as one individual’s work in the modern sense, because the oral tradition that preceded the writing, as well as the variability of the manuscript tradition, must be taken into consideration. The concept of implied author may involve all the persons who participated in shaping the work in the oral and manuscript tradition, including the fact that the text probably does not reflect their highly individual opinions, but rather a set of values that was dominant in the given society (for the use of the concept of implied author in analysing sagas, see f. ex. Ármann Jakobsson 2014, 328–31).

Any reference to evaluation of the historical events in the following discussion should therefore be understood in the sense of implied author. The present study focuses on the means of expressing such evaluation, as the voice of the implied author is typically indirect in saga literature. Values can be inherent in the narrative type itself – for example, as the conflict story typically ends with a reconciliation, it reflects the idea that social harmony is more important than fights and revenge between individuals. Other narrative characteristics of the sagas, such as stanzas, parallel scenes, characterization of protagonists, or shifting narrative focus, can also serve as means of evaluation; an analysis of these elements is therefore essential to a deeper understanding of the processes of meaning production that are employed in the texts.

Due to the inherent intertextuality of medieval literature, such an understanding can be achieved only if the narrative principles of each individual saga are analysed in a broader context of saga literature, because that is how the texts were understood and appreciated by their original audiences. Such an approach does not, however, require a detailed comparison of

motifs, plots, and structural patterns in all extant sagas. It is rather based on the idea that specific narrative types, of which there is a limited number, create certain horizons of expectations, which form the recipients' understanding of each new text that they encounter. To the original medieval recipients of literature, the knowledge of these types was culturally specific – every group, defined by language, geographic location, social status and function, and other factors, received, knew, and produced different narrative types. That is why the study of medieval literature in context of its original reception is closely connected to the concept of cultural memory.

Before turning to the discussion of the connections between individual sagas, narrative types, and cultural memory, it is necessary to outline the history of research of the contemporary sagas and of the themes that are central to them – the concepts of identity and independence, and the cultural myths that reflect the relationship between medieval Iceland and Norway.

2. 4. THE HISTORY OF RESEARCH

2. 4. 1. Icelanders and the concept of independence

Iceland's union with Norway was traditionally perceived as a tragic event because it was regarded as a loss of national independence due to foreign oppression. The temporary instability that was an inevitable part of the social transformation in Iceland was regarded as an overall moral downfall and social disintegration (f. ex. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1940, 1–5). Such interpretations were based on a lack of comparison with the processes of power centralization in other medieval European states, and they were formed by the political and cultural climate at the time of their origin. As several scholars have pointed out, the idea of medieval Icelandic opposition against the monarchy was largely constructed by modern Icelandic historians, whose conception of their national history was formed by Iceland's struggle for political independence in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Gunnar Karlsson 1980; Byock 1992; Halink 2018). Icelanders aimed at regaining independence from Denmark, under whose rule they had come together with Norwegians in the course of history. In the 1830s, Icelandic intellectuals in Copenhagen raised the claim of re-establishing the *Alþingi* as a national parliament, which was fulfilled in the early 1840s. This started the Icelandic political movement led by Jón Sigurðsson, who argued that after the end of absolutism in 1848, power over Iceland could not be given to the Danish people, but only to the Icelandic people. Jón Sigurðsson's suggestion of Iceland's practical autonomy was at first rejected by the Danish government, but Icelanders continued in their effort; all the Icelandic political forces of this time agreed that increased autonomy was a priority. These efforts eventually brought success: *Alþingi* was granted legislative function in 1874, in 1904 Iceland received home rule with a local minister, and in 1918 a separate Icelandic state in personal union with Denmark was established. In the 1940s, the Second World War reopened a debate that brought about the establishment of the Republic of Iceland in 1944 (see Byock 1992, 50–56).

Simon Halink has rightly observed that “Icelandic nationalism was not born in Iceland”. The ideas that originally came from the German romanticist philosophers were, somewhat paradoxically, mediated to the nineteenth-century Icelandic cultural elite through the Danish

educated circles, in which Iceland was appreciated as a treasure chest of Old Norse written sources. In context of Iceland's independence movement, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Icelandic historians idealized the first centuries after the settlement of Iceland as a golden age, focusing on the idea of freedom and on the value of the cultural heritage, especially medieval Icelandic literature (Halink 2018, 806–07). They also constructed a negative image of King Hákon Hákonarson, the founder of the medieval Norwegian-Icelandic union, claiming that the king deliberately increased the strife among the Icelandic chieftains and deceived them with false promises and meaningless titles with the purpose of gaining their chieftaincies and power over Iceland (Aðils 1903, 101–02; Nordal 1942, 340–41; Jón Jóhannesson 1956, 291). Another chief misdeed against Icelanders that has traditionally been ascribed to King Hákon Hákonarson is his treatment of Snorri Sturluson (Jón Helgason 1925, 132–33; Magnús Stefánsson 1975, 137–39), which has often been evaluated without paying sufficient attention to the complicated circumstances of Snorri's dealings with the Norwegian rulers and with other influential Icelanders. The negative perception of the monarchy was connected to the idea that King Hákon was a stranger and a foreigner, with whom Icelanders had nothing in common (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1940, 23).

These interpretations ignore all the historical, economic, cultural, and linguistic connections between the two lands, as well as the fact that most of the prominent Icelanders of the time visited the royal court, many of them repeatedly, so they knew the king personally and turned to him for support in their mutual power struggles on their own initiative. Such a perception of history was formed by the modern political circumstances and by a modern concept of national identity and freedom, which was automatically applied also to the Middle Ages. Consequently, Iceland's medieval union with Norway was presented as a result of the Norwegian king's unilateral expansive politics, which were passively tolerated by the Icelandic chieftains. This interpretation of the relationship between medieval Iceland and Norway stems from the assumption that every society that forms a political entity is a national state, defined by its claim to political independence. The medieval concepts of identity, nation, and freedom could, however, substantially differ from the modern ones.

2. 4. 2. Medieval notions of identity and nationality

Medieval states have often been automatically regarded as nation states in the modern sense. In the case of Iceland, which was not a kingdom, the perception of a nation state was based on the existence of one law and assembly for all Icelanders (Aðils 1906, 29; Melsteð 1910, 3; 1914, 16–33; Nordal 1942, 150–52). Even after the end of the strongly nationalistic tendencies in Icelandic historiography, historians continued to emphasize that Iceland was unique in having one law and one legal assembly for the whole land (Jakob Benediktsson 1974, 170).

Nevertheless, although a shared law was important for the forming of identity, it would be misleading to automatically perceive this identity as national in the modern sense. The fact that Iceland, unlike Norway, had a common law and assembly for the whole land before the thirteenth century, is not decisive. The Norwegian provinces were similarly defined by their individual laws and assemblies, although they parallelly also belonged to a kingdom. Various legal and literary sources imply that the provinces were important identity markers in Norway as well, as for example the individual provinces swore allegiance to kings separately. As Iceland

was not a kingdom, it makes sense to compare it rather to the provinces than to the Scandinavian kingdoms; Icelanders were “a people” in the same way as the inhabitants of the Scandinavian provinces – regions defined by shared law (see Hastrup 1984, 241; Gunnar Karlsson 1987, 129; Sverrir Jakobsson 1999b, 122–26; Sverrir Jakobsson 2005, 336–41; Wærdahl 2011, 17; Ármann Jakobsson 2014, 279).

In the legal sense, Iceland could be perceived as a single region, but even within Iceland, the sources show signs of regional and local identity. Every individual related their identity to Iceland as a whole, but also to their quarter (*ffórðungr*), region (*hérað*), and district (*hreppr*) (Sverrir Jakobsson 2005, 279–93). On the other hand, when the Norsemen travelled outside of the Nordic area, all Norsemen could be defined as one “nation”, probably due to their shared language. In religious contexts, all Christians were regarded as one “people”, as Christian identity was more important than geographically or politically defined “nationality”. Overall, medieval Icelandic identity was multi-layered, as every individual belonged within “a people” on several levels: Christian, Norse, legal – within a province, or local – within a quarter, region, district, or parish. The relative significance of these categories varied in every situation, depending on the width of the geographical or political environment that the individual was interacting with (Sverrir Jakobsson 1999b, 115–22, 134–35; 2005, 43–44).

The next question is whether any of these levels of identity can be regarded as “national”, and whether such a question even makes sense in the study of medieval societies. Some theories imply that the concept of national identity is a modern phenomenon that was formed only around the time of the French Revolution, while others claim that it existed in the Middle Ages. The modernist theorists of nationality, such as Eugen Weber (1976), Benedict Anderson (1983), or Ernest Gellner (1983), argue that the concept of nationality was created only in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, in connection with the French Revolution, industrialization, and urbanization. This approach has, however, been criticized by other significant theorists of nationality. Anthony D. Smith (1991) believes that it neglects the roots of modern nationality in cultural heritage and shared history; Adrian Hastings (1997) argues that national identity existed, at least in England, from the Late Middle Ages in a form comparable to the modern one.

Even those who believe that the concept of nation was formed in the North before the era of industrialization do not completely agree on when it happened. The editors of *Dansk identitetshistorie* (1991–1992) believe that the concept of national identity was not relevant in the North before 1536, but other Scandinavian historians oppose this idea and claim that national identity mattered in this area at the latest from the Late Middle Ages (Brønserud Larsen 1998; Lunden 1995). In Icelandic historiography, the perception of this problem has been strongly influenced by Sigurður Líndal, who has argued that the idea of an independent national state did not exist in the thirteenth century, when identity was formed by Christianity and by personal loyalty to political leaders or allies, and that it was formed only from the fourteenth century on (Líndal 1964). Else Mundal, on the other hand, has suggested that Icelandic national identity was formed already around the time of saga writing, and that it may have been stronger in Iceland than in other lands because of a shared history with a clearly defined beginning (Mundal 1997, 14–15). Sverrir Jakobsson believes that the concept of nationality existed throughout the Middle Ages, but that it differed from our modern understanding of it. The definition of nationality varied in different situations and contexts; it was often defined

geographically, but it could include smaller or larger areas depending on context; sometimes, but far from always, the concept of “a nation” was equivalent to the subjects of one king (Sverrir Jakobsson 1999b, 112–15).

None of these theories can be easily dismissed because each of them depends on how it interprets the term “nation”, but there is no doubt that the medieval concept of nationality was different from how we perceive it today – it was broader and more variable (Sverrir Jakobsson 1999b, 111–12; 2005, 328–32). The discussion of the situation in the North is not made any easier by the fact that the Old Norse term *þjóð* can denote both “a people” in the sense of ethnicity or shared origin and “a nation” in a more political sense, which makes it difficult to distinguish these concepts from each other in the sources (Gunnar Karlsson 1987, 131). The term *þjóð* has even more varied meanings in the medieval sources – it can denote any large crowd of people or “the public”; in some sources it refers to the people of one land or the people belonging to one legal assembly, but also to all Norsemen regardless of the kingdoms, or even to all Christians (Sverrir Jakobsson 1999b, 111–15; 2005, 114–24, 332–35).

Despite such difficulties, there is no reason to assume that nationality in the sense of awareness of ethnical, geographical, cultural, and language identity did not exist in the Middle Ages, although it was not based on the concept of a political nation state in the modern sense (Gunnar Karlsson 1999, 143–44; Sverrir Jakobsson 2005, 332). Gunnar Karlsson has contributed to a solution of the terminological problems by formulating three stages of the development of national identity: ethnical identification, cultural nationalism, and political nationalism (Gunnar Karlsson 1987, 132–33). As to the question of when ethnical identification started in Iceland, Gunnar Karlsson agrees with Kirsten Hastrup, who argues that the distinction between Icelanders and Norwegians was at first mainly geographical, until “Icelandicness” was defined in the twelfth century by the writing of *Íslendingabók* and *The First Grammatical Treatise*, which can be regarded as the starting point of ethnical identification (Hastrup 1984, 239–40; Gunnar Karlsson 1987, 133–34; see also Sverrir Jakobsson 2005, 335).

Cultural nationalism, according to Gunnar Karlsson, became distinct in Iceland in the sixteenth century, in connection with the European humanism. It is best represented by Arngrímur Jónsson’s works *Brevis commentarius de Islandia* (1593) and *Crymogæa* (1609), in which he refutes the contemporary continental perception of Icelanders as a primitive people and underlines the importance of Icelandic history and language. He also connects the term *þjóð* with the term *frelsi* (freedom), and he describes Iceland’s medieval union with Norway as a tragedy, but at the same time he expresses loyalty to the contemporary Danish king (Gunnar Karlsson 1987, 134–35; 1999, 160–64). Political nationalism in the sense of a connection between collective identity and the claim to a politically independent state appeared in Iceland only in the first half of the nineteenth century (Gunnar Karlsson 1987, 135–36).

Recent studies have shown that there was little connection between collective identity and state even in medieval Norway, although it was a kingdom. While some of the kings’ sagas, such as *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna*, express a unity of Norway as a nation, Sverrir Jakobsson has argued that these texts do not reflect the society’s general attitudes, but rather the royal court’s official ideology, which these works sought to shape, rather than reflecting already established attitudes (Sverrir Jakobsson 1999a, 96, 99–100). Accordingly, Sverrir Jakobsson distinguishes between “public identity”, which was consciously formed by the monarchy, and

“popular identity”, which seems to have been mainly regional or local (Sverrir Jakobsson 1999a, 93, 99–101).

Furthermore, Sverre Bagge has pointed out that the traditional monarchic “public identity”, as reflected in the classical kings’ sagas, is mainly based on the notion of a shared Norwegian identity in the sense of patriotic sentiments, when the Norwegians are praised for bravery and other qualities in contrast to other Scandinavians, but there is not any direct link between national community and state (Bagge 1995, 6–7). On the other hand, when the focus on the connection between the people and the state was strengthened during the reign of Hákon Hákonarson, this was due to the acceptance of an international royal ideology, which offered less space for Norwegian cultural specificity than the older concepts. Collective identity was now based on the idea of being the subjects of one king, rather than on notions of shared culture or specific qualities (Bagge 1995, 8–11).

In general, research has mainly focused on formulating a unified and universal collective identity of medieval Icelanders, Norwegians, and other “nations”. As such, it has been limited by the fact that the medieval concept of identity was multi-layered and the perception of identity was situational, as well as by the sources’ focus on the ruling class and its individual members. In the present study it is attempted to analyse various categories of medieval Icelandic identity and specific cultural myths that contributed to the construction of identity, while keeping in mind that some of these aspects were more significant than others at various times, in different situations, and for different groups of people. The study also focuses on individual identities and social roles. The narrative accounts of these identities must be regarded as a combination of how the individuals presented themselves, how their contemporaries perceived them, and how the saga writers transformed the real historical persons into character types. The narrative interpretations of contemporary persons create indirect evaluations of the events in which these persons participated, and as such, they are not only portrayals of individuals, but also reflections of more general values and concerns that were current in the society. Due to this focus on specific cultural myths and individual character types, the study does not aim at defining a uniform medieval Icelandic identity that could be perceived as “national” in the modern sense. The study is nevertheless based on the idea that the medieval Icelanders regarded themselves as a distinct group in their relations with each other and with people from other lands.

2. 4. 3. Medieval Icelandic identity and the “cultural myths”

As Kirsten Hastrup has pointed out, the definition of Icelanders as a people was a gradual process. The settlement of a land does not necessarily immediately create a people as a defined group – common habitat does not automatically mean “self-definition by reference to a shared identity” (Hastrup 1984, 236–37). According to Ann-Marie Long it is, however, likely that after the settlement, the Icelanders’ physical dislocation from the centre prompted the need for self-definition in the periphery. This, in turn, required an interpretation of the past and present that allowed the migrants to find, express, and establish their identity in a new environment (Long 2017, 1). This autonomous Icelandic identity was based on the Icelanders’ definition of their relationship to Norway as a social space, to kings and monarchy, and to Norwegians as a people.

Such relationships formed a series of *cultural myths*. In Long’s definition, which is based on Jan Assmann’s theory, a *myth* – in the sense of a cultural, rather than religious myth – is a

narrative, oral or written, with which a community identifies itself. Functioning as statements of differentiation, *myths* provide a cognitive and interpretative framework for the related issues of “who we are” and “where we come from”. As such, they possess a normative and formative power, constructing the identity of a group through the creation of a shared past, the belief in which forms a socially constructed “imagined community” (Long 2017, 63–65).

The Icelanders’ relationship to Norway as a social space was defined by stories of the settlement and of individual Icelandic history and culture, which formed the Icelandic “foundation narrative” or “myth of origin”. According to Kirsten Hastrup, a certain break in the historical and linguistic continuity with Norway occurred in the twelfth century, when a separate history and a distinct language were perceived by Icelanders as defining aspects of the Icelandic social space. They were formulated in two major works of early Icelandic scholarship: *Íslendingabók* (ca. 1130) and the *First Grammatical Treatise* (ca. 1150). *Íslendingabók* endowed Icelanders with their own written history from the settlement to the time of writing. In the *First Grammatical Treatise*, the author not only speaks about “us, the Icelanders”, which is the first documented example of conscious self-identification, he also formulates the general idea of different peoples (*þjóðir*) speaking different languages. With these two works, the criteria of geography, language, and history merged into a multiple definition of autonomous cultural identity. Nevertheless, neither *Íslendingabók* nor the *First Grammatical Treatise* reject the idea of affiliation with Norway and the rest of Scandinavia, nor do they imply a claim to political sovereignty in the modern sense. Instead, they offer room for a dual relationship of inclusion and contrast between Iceland and Norway (Hastrup 1984, 239–43).

The Icelanders’ relationship to kings and monarchy and their perception of their own society was reflected in the “myth of the Free State”. According to Hastrup, the sagas of Icelanders present the Saga Age, the first century after the settlement of Iceland, as a period of legal and social integrity, honour, and kin loyalty, creating an image of an original “Free State” as the essence of Icelandic social identity. That way, the Icelandic community was retrospectively identified as a self-contained and well-bounded society from its very beginning (Hastrup 1984, 248–51).

The narratives of Icelandic history depict a kingless society, but that does not mean that they reject the idea of kingship and monarchy in general. Even some of the earliest written works from the twelfth or early thirteenth centuries show a tendency to compare Icelandic leaders to monarchs. Bishop Gizurr Ísleifsson (1082–1118) is depicted in *Íslendingabók* (ca. 1130) as the supreme ruler of Iceland, popular and obeyed by everyone; *Hungrvaka* (ca. 1200) and *Kristni saga* (ca. 1300) even refer to him explicitly as the “king of Iceland”; in *Morkinskinna* (ca. 1220) it is implied in a direct speech by a Norwegian ruler that Gizurr is fit to be a king (Ármann Jakobsson 1994b, 33–36; 1999, 48; Long 2017, 236–38). Similarly, the contemporary sagas about earlier times portray the leading chieftains of the twelfth century, Gizurr Hallsson (ca. 1115–1206) of the Haukdælir and Jón Loptsson (1124–1197) of the Oddaverjar, as noble leaders with almost royal qualities (Ármann Jakobsson 1994b, 36–38; 1999, 48–49). The idea of an Icelander who can be compared to a king was thus one of the elements that constructed the notion of the noble Icelandic society, equal to any society with royal rule. The idea that a society prospers in the presence of a strong ruler was clearly not foreign to Icelanders, as it was an inseparable part of the literary construction of the Free State.

Furthermore, the saga literature's focus on the Free State should not be interpreted as an indication of any intention to deny Iceland's cultural and political contact with the rest of Scandinavia. The existence of extensive compilations of kings' sagas reveals that medieval Icelanders showed active interest in kingship and that monarchy was always a part of their cultural consciousness, long before King Hákon Hákonarson became actively involved in Icelandic politics (Ármann Jakobsson 1994b, 41–42; 2003, 40–41, 50). These sagas were neither neutral accounts of events nor uncritical praise of the monarchs, but rather a narrative analysis of royal power, of its legitimacy, and of the political relationships between kings, aristocrats, and farmers. That means that Icelanders did not regard the concept of royal rule as something foreign that did not concern them. And it was surely not a coincidence that the Icelandic saga writers focused – with a few scarce exceptions – on Norwegian kings. From *Sverris saga*, the writing of which was commenced around 1185, through *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Heimskringla* from the 1220s and *Hákonar saga* from the 1260s to the long compilations about Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson from the fourteenth century, Icelanders wrote about Norwegian monarchs, which implies that they felt more closely connected to Norway than to other kingdoms.

The compilations of kings' sagas from the first half of the thirteenth century contain some scenes that highlight the idea of the original settlers' opposition to Norwegian kings, which was a part of the Icelandic “myth of origin” (Ármann Jakobsson 1999, 52). Nevertheless, such episodes are counterbalanced by the generally positive attitude to monarchy reflected in the kings' sagas and by their insightful analyses of various aspects of royal power. *Heimskringla* focuses on the principles of the kings' political success and on the pragmatic character of their relationship with the local leaders. Instead of idealizing some individuals and condemning others, it explains the political circumstances of events and conflicts (Bagge 1991, 226–31, 236–39). The main theme of *Morkinskinna* is the king's role in the society, the nature of royal power, and the social life at the royal court and elsewhere in the medieval kingdom (Ármann Jakobsson 2014, 14). The compilation presents an ideal of kingship, in which the most important elements are moderation and magnanimity; the portrayals of individual kings depict their better and worse qualities, but the ideal is always present as a reference point (Ármann Jakobsson 2014, 243–56). The kings' sagas show a deep understanding of royal power, which Icelanders would hardly have possessed if they had despised monarchy and distanced themselves from it.

Besides the Icelanders' relationship to the monarchy, another important aspect of identity was their relationship to Norwegians as a people. This relationship is best reflected in narrative accounts of Icelanders travelling to Norway or Norwegians travelling to Iceland, which form the “myth of otherness and contact”. As Patricia Boulhosa has pointed out, the travel stories have a double function in the sagas: to reaffirm the Icelanders' Norwegian ancestry, and to affirm their new identity as Icelanders (Boulhosa 2005, 166–73, 182).

Stories of Icelanders travelling to Norway, mainly the *þættir* in the kings' sagas, admit that Norwegians often stereotypically regarded Icelanders as foolish and awkward due to their lack of social experience or lack of fashionable manners. However, the Icelander always eventually proves his worth and receives proper appreciation for his cleverness, courage, or personal integrity. Ármann Jakobsson has shown that in the *þættir* in *Morkinskinna*, Iceland and Norway are presented as closely interconnected, although the compilation was written

before Iceland's official union with Norway (Ármann Jakobsson 2014, 129–31). A person's Icelandic origin nevertheless matters more in Norway than anywhere else, but the notion of Icelandicness is a matter of personal identity and has nothing to do with ideas of opposition to monarchy (Ármann Jakobsson 2014, 275–92). The Icelandic self-image presented in *Morkinskinna* is twofold, containing an inferiority complex as well as self-assurance, and relatedness to Norway as well as a sense of individuality (Ármann Jakobsson 2014, 291–92).

The sources also show that Norwegians frequently came to Iceland, usually as merchants, but as a rule, they spent longer periods of time there, and mutually binding alliances often developed between them and the local chieftains and farmers. The Norwegians could then become involved in local Icelandic conflicts, and they were often appreciated for their fighting skills. Some wished to settle down in Iceland, and if they married a local woman and acquired some land, they were no longer strangers, regardless of their origin. Ownership of land and belonging within a local family were essential conditions of integration into the society (Sverrir Jakobsson 2005, 304–20; 2007a, 142–48, 154).

Conflicts between local farmers and Norwegian merchants could occur, but they were the same as any other local conflicts, rather than being based on any national antagonism (Sverrir Jakobsson 1999b, 135–38; 2007a, 149). Strangers were not automatically marginal, although they are sometimes portrayed as bearing some traits of marginality – berserker tendencies, sorcery, or being hired as assassins – but Icelanders are depicted in such roles just as often. In getting a stranger to do the dirty work, one could just as easily use someone from another district as someone from abroad. “Otherness” was defined by being a stranger, not by being a foreigner in the sense of nationality (Sverrir Jakobsson 2005, 322–24; 2007a, 153–54). In general, the Norwegian merchants in Iceland could be perceived as strangers in the sense that they could not rely on their kin group, rather than in the sense of national identity. The term *austmaðr*, which is dominant in the sagas, implies that they were regarded as inhabitants of the eastern part of the same social space.

It can be concluded that Icelandic medieval literature does not show any signs of unequivocal enmity towards Norwegians and the Norwegian monarchy, only of ambiguity. The ambivalent image of Norway in the sagas can be explained by the Icelanders' need to form their own identity, which had to be constructed partly in connection with and partly in opposition to Norway (Mundal 1997, 23–24). This relationship was, however, one of dualism, rather than one of contradiction. With an awareness of this dualism, Icelandic identity was constructed in texts dealing with both the distant past and the recent past. In these texts, real historical events, as well as stories formed in oral tradition, were transformed into a narrative discourse which shaped the Icelanders' ideas of who they were and what their position in the world was. This discourse was based on three dominant cultural myths: the myth of origin, the myth of the Free State, and the myth of otherness and contact.

2. 4. 4. The narratives of Icelandic social development as an object of study

Medieval Icelandic identity was constructed with an awareness of a historical, social, and cultural community with Norway in terms of language, a shared past, economic ties, and later an ecclesiastical community within the Church province of Niðarós (see Wærdahl 2011, 36–39). Any ideas of individuation were therefore always combined with a sense of relatedness. This perception, however, is absent in many existing studies of the relationship between medieval Iceland and Norway and of the processes that gradually led to the formation of the political foundations of this relationship during the Sturlung Age. Apart from the obvious bias caused by the political climate in Iceland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one of the main reasons for the prevailing negative attitude toward the union has been the lack of interest in the narrative principles that form the contemporary sagas, the texts that most directly reveal the medieval Icelanders' own perceptions of the union. Research has focused on the sagas with supposedly higher literary value, such as the sagas of Icelanders and the sagas of kings, while the narrative substance of *Sturlunga saga* has been underrated, and the text has at best been used as a source of facts in studies of the social-historical background of other saga subgenres (for a discussion of research tendencies see Úlfar Bragason 1986a, 3–10, 193–95).

In the second half of the twentieth century, some scholars finally turned their attention to the narrative principles employed in the contemporary sagas, but most of these studies still focus only on individual narrative features, rather than on the overall narrative structure and its role in the construction of meaning (Glendinning 1966; Glendinning 1974; Clunies Ross 1994; for a detailed overview of research see Úlfar Bragason 1986a, 11–36). A notable exception is the work of Úlfar Bragason, who has undertaken detailed studies of the connection between the structure and meaning of *Sturlunga saga*, and he has drawn attention to the fact that the contemporary sagas are based on the same narrative principles as the sagas of Icelanders (Úlfar Bragason 1981; 1986a, 37–83; 2010, 67–91, 267–68). He stresses the necessity of recognizing the contemporary sagas' narrative nature for assessing their value as history, because their representation of historical events is determined by discursive principles. That is to say that the factual events do not necessarily predetermine the meaning, it is rather the selection and representation of events in a discourse that provides the sagas with meaning (Úlfar Bragason 1986a, 80–82; 1988, 267–68; 2010, 265–66). The structure of the sagas is determined by the value system shared by the texts' creators and audience (Úlfar Bragason 1988, 268). Similarly, Stephen Tranter has analysed the compiler's work with the introductory sagas of the *Sturlunga* compilation and argued that these sagas draw attention to certain aspects of the social development depicted in the compilation, providing a guideline for the perception of a specific message in the central work of the compilation, *Íslendinga saga* (Tranter 1987, 28–29).

These studies are excellent in terms of method, but their interpretation of the contemporary sagas is still too strongly influenced by the notion of Iceland's integration into the Norwegian kingdom as a negative, even tragic event, and by the traditional perception of *Sturlunga saga* as an image of a decline of moral values and a downfall of the social system. In Úlfar Bragason's words, the compilation's "image of history is tragic" (*sögusýn hennar er tragísk*, Úlfar Bragason 2010, 266) and "it creates an apocalyptic image of how the magnates' immoderation in their greed for wealth and power leads to the only possible solution being the acceptance of the Norwegian king's rule" (*þar er dregin upp spámannleg mynd af því hvernig*

hófleysi valdamanna í sókn til auðs ok valda leiðir til þess að eina lausnin er að játast undir Noregskonung, Úlfar Bragason 2010, 267). Both Úlfar Bragason and Stephen Tranter believe that *Sturlunga saga* expresses dissatisfaction with the social situation at the time of its origin after the establishment of Iceland's union with Norway, and that it presents history as a decline from a "golden age" in the first century after the settlement of Iceland to the miserable present (Tranter 1987, 2–3, 224; Úlfar Bragason 1991b, 316–21; 2000, 481–82; 2010, 228–40). Similarly, Lois Bragg characterizes *Sturlunga saga* as "the history of the thirteenth-century disintegration of the Icelandic Free State" that shows "unrelievedly dark and disfigured reality" (Bragg 1994, 18–19).

In Úlfar Bragason's opinion, the purpose of the compilation was to reveal the causes of the decline and explain the reasons for the social breakdown (Úlfar Bragason 2010, 240). Similarly, Tranter believes that the perception of the Sturlung Age as a tragedy had a specific purpose at the time of the compilation's origin. He regards *Sturlunga saga* as a direct response to the allegedly increasingly threatening political situation after 1300, which in his opinion was characterized by a renewed decline of the society after a period of optimism in the late thirteenth century. He argues that the message of *Sturlunga saga* was a warning to contemporary Icelanders against a repetition of the horrors of the Sturlung Age, which the compiler may have perceived as an imminent danger at the break of the fourteenth century (Tranter 1987, 226–35).

Helgi Þorláksson has argued against this view by showing that around 1300, fights and physical violence had been effectively reduced by the new legislation, so it was unnecessary to put effort into creating an extensive narrative that would emphasize the necessity of peace and reconciliation, because there was no reason to be afraid of war (Helgi Þorláksson 2012, 67–68). The most pressing social problem in the late thirteenth century was the conflict between secular and ecclesiastical power, which nevertheless did not involve any serious violence and was terminated by an agreement before 1300. The disruption of social harmony during this conflict was caused by the absence of a strong ruler after the death of King Magnús Hákonarson (1263–1280), whose son Eiríkr Magnússon (1280–1299) was still a child. As soon as the king came of age and took the reign fully in his hands, the dispute was solved. This only confirmed the importance of strong royal rule for social stability.

Furthermore, the view of the *Sturlunga* compilation as an image of decline has also been challenged by several scholars, such as Guðrún Nordal and Ármann Jakobsson. Nordal has presented an extensive argumentation for the view that *Íslendinga saga* reflects a complex set of moral values. She agrees that brutal violence is criticized in the narrative, but she argues that the saga does not portray a deterioration of morality. Instead, it reflects the fact that obligations and motivations became more complex in the Sturlung Age. The Church demanded political autonomy, bishops became involved in politics, and chieftains swore oaths of loyalty to the king, while the conventional obligations to kinsmen and allies continued to be binding. Various obligations could therefore contradict each other in many situations and cause moral dilemmas (Nordal 1998, 19–29, 227). Nordal emphasizes that with a few exceptions, kinship ties remained surprisingly strong under such circumstances (Nordal 1998, 28–29, 42–44, 220).

Similarly, Ármann Jakobsson believes that *Íslendinga saga* condemns violence by always criticizing the aggressors and praising the defenders in fight scenes (Ármann Jakobsson 1994a, 44–75; see also Gunnar Karlsson 1988, 217–20; Nordal 1998, 199–200). Nevertheless, he argues that instead of portraying the Sturlung Age as a time of a general moral downfall, the

saga criticizes individual aggression, but it shows that positive values, such as fearlessness in protecting others or in striving for peace, were still present in the society (Ármann Jakobsson 1994a, 76–78). Instead of suggesting that the compilation expresses discontent with the situation at the time of writing and fear of a renewed breakdown of the society, Ármann Jakobsson believes that the saga propagates the new political system in the union with Norway as the right one because it secures peace (Ármann Jakobsson 1994a, 44).

These studies have brought a significant impulse to the re-evaluation of the contemporary sagas, but they focus primarily on moral issues, rather than on identity and on the Icelanders' relationship with the rest of the world and with the Norwegian royal power. These aspects of Icelandic history have been the subject of several other recent studies, but these studies tend to neglect the contemporary sagas as sources of cultural history and focus on other types of texts.

The broadest and most innovative study of Iceland's relationship to Norway has been Patricia Boulhosa's *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway* (2005). Building on an analysis of legal sources and the sagas of Icelanders, Boulhosa re-evaluates the political and ideological aspects of the historical connections between the two countries. She challenges the notion of the union as a formal, radical, and sudden event, and argues that the sources show that the relationship between Iceland and Norway was formed by a constant process of negotiation (Boulhosa 2005, 1–4, 209–13). Nevertheless, although Boulhosa focuses on the thirteenth century, when most of the extant texts were written and Iceland's formal integration into the Norwegian kingdom took place, she pays little attention to the contemporary sagas that directly depict this time, referring to them only sporadically and using them as sources of facts, rather than as sources of attitudes.

In his study of the medieval Icelanders' worldview and of the way they perceived their position in the world and their connection to other lands, Sverrir Jakobsson (2005) analyses mainly sources dealing with the "outer world", translated texts, encyclopaedic texts, and kings' sagas. He points out the significance of Christianity for medieval identity (Sverrir Jakobsson 2005, 100–60). Accordingly, he suggests that Iceland was a marginal place primarily in the sense of being a periphery of the Christian world – the Christian history had happened elsewhere, and the centres of the Church were far away (Sverrir Jakobsson 2005, 160–66). Sverrir Jakobsson characterizes the medieval Icelanders' identity as multi-layered: Icelanders perceived themselves as a unified group in contact with foreigners and in the process of constructing their own history, but regional and local identity was significant in other contexts; the perception of the various layers of identity depended on where the individual was and whom he was interacting with (Sverrir Jakobsson 2005, 279–303). The specificity of Icelanders showed itself mainly in accounts of their contacts with the Norwegian king and royal court; mutual distrust or tests of intellect and courage could occur in such situations, but the overall relationship was not based on opposition or enmity (Sverrir Jakobsson 2005, 343–46).

The construction of Icelandic identity and the ambivalent relationship to Norway are the subjects of a recent study by Ann-Marie Long (2017), in which she analyses *Íslendingabók*, the different versions of *Landnámabók*, and selected sagas and *þættir* of Icelanders from the perspective of memory studies. While admitting that the sources show a nuanced and multi-layered relationship between the two lands, Long assumes that some of the later sources were "written by individuals or sponsored by a class of individuals who may have had a deep-seated and persistent resentment towards their ancestral homeland and its monarch" (Long 2017, 4).

She even refers to a medieval Icelandic perception of “the ominous ever-present figure of a distant king who had the potential to threaten unwanted intervention in the island’s domestic affairs” (Long 2017, 101). She suggests that the relationship between Iceland and Norway went, in general, from a focus on shared past through a phase of open opposition in the thirteenth century to a final acknowledgement of royal authority that was then “retrospectively interpolated into the memory of earlier relationships” (Long 2017, 252), so “ironically it may be the case that, once under the rule of a Norwegian king, the Icelanders finally gained the guarantee of status and security of identity they had always desired” (Long 2017, 256). This may, however, not be so paradoxical, and it is the thirteenth-century phase that needs to be re-assessed. That can be achieved only by a careful analysis of the contemporary sagas.

The presumed opposition to the Norwegian monarchy in medieval Iceland is even more central in Nicolas Meylan’s study (2014) of alleged “Icelandic polemics against the kings of Norway” (Meylan 2014, 47). The study is focused on the motifs of magic in various Old Norse texts. The exclusion of the contemporary sagas from the study is justified by the fact that these texts do not contain any motifs of magic, but the lack of insight into the contemporary sagas’ meanings leads the author to taking the idea of the medieval Icelanders’ opposition to royal rule for granted. He then states that “magic became part of the discursive arsenal mobilized by Icelanders in the thirteenth century in response to the Norwegian Crown’s encroachment on their kingless and armyless island” (Meylan 2014, 126), and he speaks of “an Icelandic subtext of political resistance which made use of magic as an effective ideological instrument” (Meylan 2014, 198). It is not unlikely that certain anti-royal attitudes existed in medieval Iceland and that they may be reflected in some of the sources discussed by Meylan. The study, however, presents opposition as the dominant attitude to royal rule, which is an opinion that should be re-evaluated with a focus on the contemporary sagas as a major source of attitudes.

In recent decades, the role of kings in Icelandic history has been thoroughly re-evaluated also in studies focusing more directly on the time of Hákon Hákonarson’s rule. Gunnar Karlsson has concluded that King Hákon “never did anything to force Icelanders to accept his rule” (*gerði aldrei neitt sem neyddi Íslendinga til að játaast undir yfirráð hans*, Gunnar Karlsson 1975, 52) and that “it can certainly be assumed that many thirteenth-century Icelanders wished to become a king’s subjects like other civilized people in the world” (*víst má gera ráð fyrir að margir 13. aldar Íslendingar hafi viljað komast í tölu konungsþegna eins og annað siðað fólk heimsbyggðarinnar*, Gunnar Karlsson 1975, 53). Similarly, Ármann Jakobsson has pointed out that *Íslendinga saga* expresses approval of royal power as a solution to the bloody fights of the Sturlung Age: “It is the king who cuts the knot of killings and hostility that is depicted in the compilation. *Íslendinga saga* expresses no doubt that the way out of the vicious circle of violence that the Icelanders chose by their agreement to pay tax to the Norwegian king in 1262–1264 was the only right one” (*Það er einmitt konungurinn sem heggur á þann hnút ættvíga og ófriðar sem lýst er í bókinni. Í Íslendinga sögu er hvergi efast um að sú leið út úr ófriðarvitahringnum sem Íslendingar völdu með því að gangast undir skattgjald til Noregskonungs 1262–1264 hafi verið sú eina rétta*, Ármann Jakobsson 1994b, 31). Ármann Jakobsson has also emphasized that the king’s direct interventions into Icelandic politics were a result of the Icelandic political leaders’ own initiative, and that the king never intentionally increased the internal strife in Iceland (Ármann Jakobsson 1995, 176–78). Nevertheless, an in-

depth study of the contemporary sagas and the processes of the construction of meaning in them has not been carried out in this research due to its strictly historical focus.

Most of the studies of Icelandic internal relations that use the contemporary sagas as sources also have a purely historical focus (Gunnar Karlsson 1975; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999; Sverrir Jakobsson 2016). They shed light on the historical connections and circumstances of the events depicted in the contemporary sagas, but they treat the sagas mainly as records of facts, rather than as sources of interpretations and evaluations. They do not sufficiently explain why the Icelandic social elite around 1300 felt the need to invest considerable means into the production of *Sturlunga saga*. If we agree that the compilation has a deeper meaning than simply storing factual knowledge about the past, we must ask what role *Sturlunga saga* played within the Icelanders' cultural memory. And if we accept the idea that early-fourteenth-century Icelanders had no need for a warning against war, it is unlikely that criticism of violence was the main objective of the compilation, although it is one of its significant themes. What, then, was the motivation for undertaking the difficult task of creating the compilation?

Helgi Þorláksson has suggested that the chief motivation was the need of the Icelandic aristocracy around 1300 to prove that it was descended from noble families, whose previous generations had done memorable deeds, in order to substantiate its power claims (Helgi Þorláksson 2012, 69–82; see also Úlfar Bragason 2010, 259–61). Nevertheless, while a focus on noble and worthy ancestors was certainly typical of the early-fourteenth-century Icelandic aristocracy, a view of *Sturlunga saga* as primarily genealogical material is limiting. I agree that the purpose of *Sturlunga saga* was to define and strengthen the position and identity of the Icelandic aristocracy in the early fourteenth century, but I believe that the compilation reaches much deeper in fulfilling this purpose than simply documenting the activities of individual men's ancestors. Such an extensive work was probably created first and foremost with the purpose of defining identity in a broader sense (cf. comparable studies of *Hauksbók*: Sverrir Jakobsson 2007b; 2010). My hypothesis, which 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.

3. THE STURLUNG AGE: INTERPRETATIONS AND IDEAS

The predominant tendency has long been to study the political development in Iceland during the Sturlung Age as an isolated process, largely independent of the contemporary developments in Norway, and to regard any connections that were formed in this period as external Norwegian interventions into Icelandic matters. Furthermore, most scholars have believed that the internal strife among various royal pretenders and power factions in Norway did not allow the Norwegian rulers to focus on Iceland until the power struggle ended with the defeat of Skúli Bárðarson in 1240 (see Long 2017, 230; Wærdahl 2011, 103). Here it will be argued, however, that it was just this internal strife in Norway that initiated the Norwegian rulers' active interest in Iceland already around 1220 because they sought powerful Icelanders' support in their mutual competition. Iceland became a significant power unit in Norwegian politics, and the political ties that were created at this time went both ways and stemmed from both sides' initiative.

The situation between 1220 and 1240 was dominated by two parallel internal power struggles – between the established Oddaverjar and the quickly ascending Sturlungs in Iceland, and between King Hákon Hákonarson and Jarl Skúli Bárðarson in Norway. In the following it will be argued that these two conflicts were more closely interconnected than has previously been assumed. The argumentation will be based on how the events and the overall concept of the alliance between Icelanders and Norwegian rulers are depicted in *Íslendinga saga*, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, and *Arons saga Hjörleifssonar*.

3. 1. THE STURLUNGS AND THE POWER GAME

Íslendinga saga is the longest and chronologically broadest part of the *Sturlunga* compilation, so it offers the best insight into the development of power structures during the period of the most intense social transformation in Iceland. It begins around the year 1180 and continues until the end of the Sturlung Age and the formal establishment of Iceland's union with Norway in 1264. Although the saga depicts the overall social development in Iceland, it focuses on one of the central powerful clans of the time, the Sturlungs. In one of the preceding parts of the *Sturlunga* compilation, *Sturlu saga*, we see Sturla Þórðarson the elder securing his local power, while the supremacy of the traditionally most influential Icelandic clans, the Oddaverjar and the Haukdælir, is still unshakeable. Sturla's sons, on the other hand, already have the ambition to assume a position among the land's leaders. The beginning of *Íslendinga saga* focuses on their ascent to power, and while there is no central conflict, the rivalry between the Sturlungs, the Oddaverjar, and the Haukdælir is clearly described in the narrative.

As the oldest brother, Þórðr Sturluson begins to establish his power first. He uses two traditional methods: resolution of conflicts among local farmers, and marriage to a wealthy woman, Guðrún Bjarnadóttir (ch. 4). Next, he makes another traditional move by furthering his assembly man's interests in a legal case against Þorvaldr Gizurarson of the Haukdælir and other powerful chieftains (ch. 5).

After Þórðr it is his younger brother Sighvatr who establishes his position. He marries a woman from the powerful Ásbirning family, Halldóra Tumadóttir. He also receives the

Sturlungs' *goðorð* from his kinsmen, and he gains land through advantageous agreements with a woman from the district (ch. 6). Soon after, Sighvatr tests his power in a lawsuit against an influential opponent, Sæmundr Jónsson of the Oddaverjar (ch. 7). The text underlines the significance of this move for the power relations between the chieftains:

Var um þessi mál alltiðrætt, því at mönnum þótti þat in mesta nýjung, ef nokkurir menn vildi deila þingdeildum við Oddaverja í þann tíma. (Sturlunga saga I, 236)⁶

Everybody talked much about this event, because people thought it was surprising news that somebody wanted to file a lawsuit against the Oddaverjar at that time.

The power of the previously invincible chieftain clan is challenged, and Sighvatr even manages to win the lawsuit with the help of other powerful men. The text emphasizes the importance of Sighvatr's victory for gaining power and supporters (ch. 7). At the Alþingi Sighvatr also arbitrates a reconciliation after a vengeance killing of Þorvaldr Gizurarson's adherent before any other chieftain can get involved in the case, thus demonstrating his influence (ch. 8). The text points out that Sighvatr has increased his power by gaining popularity among the farmers and by his alliance with the powerful chieftain Kolbeinn Tumason of the Ásbirnings (ch. 18):

Hann gerðist mikill höfðingi ok vinsæll við sína menn. Með þeim Kolbeini Tumasyni var in mesta vinátta með tengðum. Kolbeinn réð þá mestu fyrir norðan land [...]. (Sturlunga saga I, 243)

He became a powerful chieftain, popular among his people. There was a strong friendship between him and Kolbeinn Tumason, as they were in-laws. Kolbeinn was the most influential chieftain in the north at that time [...].

The youngest brother, Snorri Sturluson, finally also affirms his position. He gets a rich bride, Herdís Bersadóttir, with the help of his powerful ally Sæmundr Jónsson of the Oddaverjar (ch. 10), and he also supports Sæmundr in his dispute with Sigurðr Ormsson about a farmer's inheritance (ch. 11). Sighvatr and Kolbeinn, on the other hand, support Sigurðr. This is a typical case of conflicting loyalties – Snorri finds himself opposing his brother when he chooses to support his ally. It is, however, likely that Snorri acts pragmatically and chooses the strongest party in order to increase his own power. The dispute is finally solved by arbitration, and Bishop Páll pronounces a judgement:

Gerir hann eignir allar til handa Sæmundi, en stillir svá gerðum, at hvárir tveggja máttu vel við una, en Sæmundr hafði virðing af málum þessum. Kolbeini Tumasyni líkaði illa þessar málalyktir, en Sighvati verr. (Sturlunga saga I, 238)

He decided that all the property should belong to Sæmundr, under such conditions that both parties could be satisfied with, but in such a way that Sæmundr would gain honour from the case. Kolbeinn Tumason was dissatisfied with the decision, but Sighvatr even more so.

It is obvious that the property mainly serves as a pretext, and the real object of the discord is power. Snorri improves his position by choosing the more successful side. Soon after that, he inherits the farm Borg from his wife's father (ch. 15) and gains the farm Reykjaholt by agreement (ch. 16), thus securing the material aspect of his power as well. The text then states that he has become an influential chieftain and does not lack property. As a powerful and

⁶ All references to *Sturlunga saga* follow the 1946 edition by Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn. Translations are my own, unless stated otherwise.

respected man, Snorri is asked to arbitrate in conflicts between significant farmers (ch. 33), which shows that he has gained a sufficient authority.

At this point, the competition for power inevitably leads to rivalry between Snorri and his ally Sæmundr Jónsson of the Oddaverjar, whom the text openly marks as the noblest (*göfgastr*) man in Iceland at the time (ch. 17). This is a position that Snorri wishes to take over, but he cannot attack his ally directly, so he uses petty discords and lawsuits as a pretext for trying to gain superiority over him. A trivial fight between the adherents of the Sturlusons and of Sæmundr Jónsson at the Alþingi leads to battle preparations among most of the chieftains at the assembly (ch. 34). A reconciliation is finally reached, and Sæmundr gets the right to judge, which proves that he is still regarded as being more influential than the brothers:

Þá er Sæmundr kom i búð sína, þá talaði einn hans maðr, at enn færi sem oftár, at Sæmundr hefði enn einn virðing af málum þessum. Sæmundr svarar: „Hvat tjóir slíkt at mæla, því at bræðr þessir draga sik svá fram, at nær engir menn halda sik til fulls við þá.“ (Sturlunga saga I, 268)

When Sæmundr entered his booth, one of his companions said that it had again turned out as usual and Sæmundr had again been the only one to gain honour from the case. Sæmundr answered: “What is the point of saying such things, when these brothers are so eager to increase their power that almost nobody can fully hold his ground against them?”

This dialogue shows that Sæmundr feels that his status is threatened by the unusually ambitious and capable Sturlung brothers. It is proven later in the same chapter that he has good reasons for his worries: Snorri Sturluson wins a lawsuit in an inheritance case against Sæmundr’s kinsman Magnús. The court decides that the property belongs to a farmer who will pay dues to Snorri. Again, the narrative stresses the chieftain’s gain of esteem:

Snorri hafði virðing af málum þessum. Ok í þessum málum gekk virðing hans við mest her á landi. (Sturlunga saga I, 269)

Snorri gained esteem from this case. And this case increased his esteem more than anything else in this land.

Snorri’s influence continues to grow afterwards, but he realizes that the legal competition offers only limited possibilities of improving one’s status. He does not wish to start an open armed conflict, so he decides to travel to Norway and increase his social prestige by seeking alliance with the Norwegian rulers.

It is surely not a coincidence that Snorri chooses to sail to Norway at a time when a dispute has arisen between Sæmundr Jónsson of the Oddaverjar and Norwegian traders. Sæmundr blames the people of Björgyn for causing his son Páll’s death in a shipwreck, and he requests compensation for the death from Norwegian merchants who are in Iceland at the time. They are unwilling to pay, because they have nothing to do with the matter, but Sæmundr confiscates a part of their property (ch. 35). The merchants respond by slaying Sæmundr’s brother Ormr, his son Jón, and two other men; as a revenge, one of Ormr’s kinsmen drags a Norwegian out of a church and kills him. The tension between the Oddaverjar and the Norwegians is now stronger than ever. Snorri decides to travel to Norway immediately after these events, in the summer of 1218. The saga does not directly explain his motivations, but the context clearly implies that Snorri understands that the Oddaverjar’s disadvantaged position in Norway can help his strategy of gaining superiority over them by establishing alliances with the Norwegian rulers.

3. 2. ICELANDERS AS A FORCE IN THE NORWEGIAN POWER STRUGGLE

In Norway, the process of power concentration involved strife among various factions no less than in Iceland. Civil wars among numerous royal pretenders took place in the twelfth century. After Sverrir Sigurðarson's (1184–1202) decisive victory over Magnús Erlingsson (1161–1184), Sverrir's descendants, supported by the Birkibein faction, claimed the throne, but they were constantly opposed by the Bagall faction. The Birkibein kings managed to retain the throne after Sverrir's death in 1202, although they were forced to some compromises with the Bagall faction. Sverrir's son Hákon (1202–1204) died shortly after his father, however, and during the short reign of the child king Guttormr Sigurðarson (1204), Sverrir's grandson, the real power was in the hands of Jarl Hákon Fólkviðarson galinn, who acted as regent for the underage king. He then held the position of jarl also during the reign of Ingi Bárðarson (1204–1217), Sverrir's nephew. After Jarl Hákon's death in 1214, King Ingi Bárðarson appointed his own brother Skúli Bárðarson to the office of jarl. Skúli then made a failed attempt at being elected king after Ingi's death in 1217. Instead, the new king was Sverrir's other grandson Hákon Hákonarson, who was thirteen years old at the time, and Skúli retained his position as jarl.

The scholarly assessment of the power struggle in Norway after 1217 has varied considerably. Ólafía Einarsdóttir (1992) believes that there was little rivalry between Hákon and Skúli until 1238, with the exception of a few individual crises. Her argumentation points to the fact that they issued documents together, that they are both equally praised in Snorri Sturluson's poem *Háttatal*, and that *Hákonar saga* repeatedly states that they got along well while they were together (Ólafía Einarsdóttir 1992, 99–104).

Sverre Bagge, on the other hand, argues that “the rivalry between Hákon and Skúli starts immediately after King Ingi's death. After Hákon's victory in the struggle for the throne in 1217–1218, which is finally confirmed in 1223, the two protagonists compete for the actual power over the country” (Bagge 1996, 107). At the beginning of his co-rule with Hákon, Skúli refused to swear an oath of loyalty to Hákon until he had received a sufficient part of the country to govern as jarl (Bagge 1996, 108; HS ch. 25).⁷ The marriage between Hákon and Margrét Skúladóttir was planned already in 1219, but this actually implies that there was imminent conflict and such a step toward peace was necessary – otherwise there would not have been such haste to arrange a marriage for a 9-year-old maiden. In the text of *Hákonar saga*, Hákon even expresses his opinion that the betrothal will not change anything (HS ch. 57). Around that time, Skúli put great effort into fighting the rebel factions, the Slittungs and the Ribbungs, whom he finally forced to surrender in 1223. Only after that, the question of Hákon's succession was finally settled at an assembly in Björgyn, and the two rulers divided the land between themselves (Bagge 1996, 108–09). After this agreement, their relationship was stabilized, but it was not free from tension. Skúli received the task to guard the defeated Sigurðr Ribbungr, but Sigurðr escaped in 1224 (HS ch. 109) and rebelled against Hákon again, and this time Skúli

⁷ The references to *Hákonar saga* here follow the 2013 edition by Sverrir Jakobsson, Þorleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, in which the chapter numbers differ from the edition used by Bagge.

was reluctant to help Hákon. Skúli probably did not do much to prevent Sigurðr's escape either, although the saga does not directly mention any such suspicion (Bagge 1996, 109).

All of this implies that the power struggle between Hákon and Skúli defined their relations throughout the whole period of their co-rule; it can be assumed that Skúli planned to claim the throne right from 1217 (see Orning 2018, 206–15). That is, however, not contradictory to the fact that Hákon and Skúli issued documents together and frequently stayed together without any open strife in the 1220s and 1230s, which are the main points in Ólafía Einarisdóttir's argumentation for largely positive relations between the two rulers. Skúli was clearly a skilled politician, and as such, he must have known when it was best to keep his plans hidden and quietly observe the situation. He wanted to secure himself sufficient support first, and one of the strategies by which he strengthened his power base before he openly turned against Hákon was gaining influential Icelandic allies.

The idea to involve Icelanders in the power struggle probably came to Skúli's mind at some point during Snorri Sturluson's stay in Norway in 1218–1220. Skúli must have noticed that Snorri was an ambitious and capable player in the political game. It was also quite natural for Snorri to choose Skúli as his preferred ally at this time because Skúli must have wielded much more real power than the underage king. This allowed Skúli to get several steps ahead in involving Icelanders in Norwegian politics as his own allies. King Hákon did not follow suit immediately, probably because he was too busy fighting his opponents in his own land – the last rebel faction finally surrendered only in 1227 (HS ch. 170). Around this time, however, King Hákon started forming his own alliances with Icelanders as well.

Aron Hjörleifsson, who had been outlawed by the Sturlungs in Iceland, fled from his enemies to Norway in 1225. These events are mostly known from *Arons saga Hjörleifssonar* (ch. 15), but they are also mentioned in *Íslendinga saga* (ch. 55). Aron joined the retinue of Jarl Skúli at first; the text does not directly explain his motivations for this decision, but it mentions three relevant circumstances. Firstly, Skúli ruled the third of Norway around Þrándheimr, where the ship landed. Secondly, Skúli was known to be friendly toward Icelanders (*beztr Íslendingum*), and finally, he appreciated Aron's courage and invited him to his retinue (ch. 15). This implies that inviting Aron was the jarl's initiative in the first place, and that he probably intended to broaden his Icelandic power base by gaining the support of Icelanders outside of the Sturlungs' political network. A conflict occurred between Skúli and Aron, however, when Aron wished to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem as he had promised, but Skúli refused to give him leave (ch. 15). The text says that “he believed that Aron was not worse off near him than further from him” (*honum þætti Aron ekki kominn verr nær sér en fírr, Sturlunga saga II, 269*); this may refer to Skúli's opinion that it is better to keep his Icelandic retainers within reach, because if they left, they would neglect his interests.

Aron felt an obligation to obey Skúli, but he was eager to fulfil his important promise to God, so he decided to make the pilgrimage anyway, and he reached Jerusalem (ch. 15). After his return to Norway, he went straight to King Hákon's court, probably because he feared Skúli's wrath. The king attempted to reconcile Aron with Skúli, but Skúli refused to accept Aron back into his retinue because he did not trust him: “Aron has played such a game with me that our time together must be short” (*kvað Aron svá tafli teflt hafa við sik, at okkur sambúð mun skömm vera, Sturlunga saga II, 270*). The text does not state that the reason for this mistrust was connected to the strife between Skúli and Hákon, but the circumstances imply that it is

likely. Skúli probably felt that Aron's unforgivable misdeed against him was not the pilgrimage, which must have been perceived as a virtuous deed in every Christian's eyes, but rather his decision to visit King Hákon immediately after his return. Skúli surely felt that he did not need an Icelandic ally who would not be willing to support him against King Hákon.

When Skúli refused to reconcile with Aron, King Hákon accepted Aron into his own retinue, arranged a good marriage for him, and gave him land and a source of income (chs. 15–16). This implies that he must have been aware of the potential value of promoting Aron to a privileged position and earning his loyalty. Aron was not from a powerful family, but he had many influential contacts in Iceland, so the king could hope to employ him as a mediator between himself and Icelandic chieftains. Aron was never sent to Iceland as a royal representative, but he chose to stay at the royal court and was a retainer for almost thirty years until his death in 1255.

Snorri Sturluson returned to Iceland in 1220 as Skúli's ally and formally as the king's vassal, and he certainly felt that this strengthened his position, but his situation was not easy. Beside his original rivals, the Oddaverjar, he now also had to face his extremely ambitious nephew, Sturla Sighvatsson. Sæmundr Jónsson, the leader of the Oddaverjar, died in the autumn of 1222, and the clan was substantially weakened by his death. Sighvatr Sturluson's oldest surviving son Sturla used the opportunity to gain some of the Oddaverjar's power, and already the following spring he married Sæmundr's daughter Sólveig. Their wedding was hosted by Þorvaldr Gizurarson of the Haukdælir (chs. 49–50). This was a gesture of good will, and the Sturlungs further strengthened their alliance with the Haukdælir when Snorri Sturluson gave his daughter Ingibjörg to Gizurr Þorvaldsson. Snorri himself gained powerful allies and substantial wealth by establishing a relationship with the widow Hallveig Ormsdóttir of the Oddaverjar (chs. 52–54).

At this time, Sturla Sighvatsson entered the high political game by getting involved in the dispute between Þorvaldr Snorrason and the sons of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, which was a continuation of a previous conflict between Þorvaldr and Hrafn.⁸ When Hrafn was killed by Þorvaldr in 1213, his sons were too young to take revenge, and a reconciliation for the killing was arranged. In 1222, however, Hrafn's sons decided to attack Þorvaldr, as they felt that he had broken their agreement (chs. 46–47). Snorri Sturluson supported them at first, and there was enmity between him and Þorvaldr, but Sighvatr Sturluson and Sturla Sighvatsson mediated a reconciliation between Snorri and Þorvaldr. It is underlined in the text that the chieftains were concerned not only about the outcome of the conflict, but also about its effect on their reputation and social position:

Ok sótti Sturla föður sinn at því, at hann kæmi sættum á með þeim Þorvaldi ok Snorra, þeim er Þorvaldr mætti vel við una. Fór Sighvatr þá suðr í Stafaholt á fund Snorra ok leitaði eftir, hvern veg þess mætti verða, at Snorri hefði sæmð af þessum málum, en Þorvaldr yrði alsýkn saka afarkostalaust, en Sturla hefði slíka sæmð af, sem hann beiddi. (Sturlunga saga I, 301)

Sturla urged his father to mediate a reconciliation between Þorvaldr and Snorri, so that Þorvaldr could be satisfied with it. Sighvatr then rode south to Stafaholt to visit Snorri and sought to arrange matters in such a way that Snorri would gain esteem from the case, and Þorvaldr would be acquitted of all the charges without trouble, but Sturla would gain such esteem as he was asking for.

⁸ This conflict is described in *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, which will be discussed in the following.

Þorvaldr Snorrason strengthened his position by an alliance with Snorri Sturluson, which was reinforced by his marriage to Snorri's daughter Þórdís (ch. 51). Hrafn's sons then sought a powerful ally as well, and Sturla Sighvatsson agreed to protect them on the condition that they would give him their chieftaincy in return (ch. 56). This shows that power was a priority for Sturla, even though it meant that he had to oppose his kinsman Snorri. He did not, however, intend to support any violent action, but rather to advocate a reconciliation, but he failed. Hrafn's sons finally attacked Þorvaldr and burned him in a house (chs. 66–68). As a revenge for their father, Þorvaldr's sons attempted to attack Sturla Sighvatsson. He was not at home, but the attackers raided his farm and wounded some people from his household (chs. 70–71).

The enmity between Sturla and Snorri was increased by the attack, and Sturla attempted to gather a force against Snorri, but men refused to participate. Both parties attended the Alþingi with a large following. No fighting took place at the Alþingi, but Hrafn's sons were outlawed for the burning, and Þorvaldr's sons were prosecuted for raid and plunder (chs. 73–75). Later Sturla intended to attack Þorvaldr's sons, but they offered him self-judgement and paid a high sum as a compensation. After this reconciliation, however, Sturla's adherents complained about being plundered by Þorvaldr's sons (chs. 77–79). Sturla finally attacked Þorvaldr's sons on their way to Snorri because he felt that they had broken their agreement by attacking his adherents. Sturla refused to accept a settlement, even though Þorvaldr's sons offered him their chieftaincy as a compensation. In the end they had to give up and were killed (chs. 83–85).

Shortly after, in 1233, Sturla Sighvatsson undertook his first journey to Norway (chs. 88, 92). The official reason was the archbishop's summons because of the Sturlungs' conflicts with Bishop Guðmundr Arason, but it can be assumed that the journey was also politically beneficial for Sturla, because it offered him a new source of power – an alliance with the king. The prolonged power struggle in Iceland had brought no decisive results, and Sturla must have realized that he needed more powerful allies than those he could get in his homeland.

In the meantime, the conflicts between the king and the jarl in Norway were intensified in the winter 1232–1233, when Skúli was suspected of preparing an assault on Hákon. A confrontation between Hákon and Skúli took place at the assembly in Björgyn in the autumn of 1233; the king accused the jarl of misdeeds that are not specified in the text, and the jarl finally accepted a settlement that was designed according to the king's wishes (HS chs. 188–193). The tension was clearly not removed by this formal reconciliation, and even the text admits that “those who believed they knew both rulers' minds said that there was never full trust between them again” (*þat hafa þeir menn sagt er vita þóttusk hvarstveggja skaplyndi at aldri hafði síðan orðit fullr trúnaðr milli þeira*, HS II, 23).

The text blames the disagreements on evil men's talk, but there were probably other reasons in reality. Up until 1229 Skúli had believed that he had no sons, so he could have been happy with the plan that his daughter's sons with Hákon would inherit the kingdom. Then, however, he found out that he had an illegitimate son, Pétr, whom he deeply cared about ever since. The saga admits that in 1236 he requested the right for his son to inherit his part of the land, which the king rejected (HS ch. 206). Another reason for his dissatisfaction may have been the new division of the land between him and Hákon (HS ch. 211), which was probably established when he was given the title of duke in 1237 (Bagge 1996, 110–11). The title itself was intended as a conciliatory gesture, but it probably had little real significance.

Skúli probably hoped that he would gain universal support in Iceland before Hákon managed to form his own alliances with Icelanders. This did not happen, however, mainly because the Icelandic chieftains were in the middle of a power struggle among themselves and were unwilling to unite themselves for *any* cause. For this reason, neither Skúli nor Hákon had received any decisive support in Iceland when their mutual strife intensified in the early 1230s. It is not surprising that when Sturla Sighvatsson arrived in Norway just at this time, in 1233, Skúli was extremely eager to secure his support, as is shown in *Íslendinga saga* (ch. 92):

Sturla Sighvatsson fór útan um sumarit at Gásum ok nökkurrir menn með honum. Hann varð síðbúinn ok tók Nóregr fyrir norðan Stað ok helt til Borgundar. Þar var þá fyrir Álfr af Þornbergi, mágr Skúla hertoga. Hann tók allvel við Sturlu ok bað hann þar biða þess, er hertoginn kæmi norðan, ok sagðist vilja koma honum í vináttu við hertogann. Sagði Álfr Sturlu, at hertoginn myndi gera hann at inum mesta sæmdarmanni, slikt afbragð, sem hann var annarra manna, en kallaði hertogann vera inn mesta vin Íslendinga ok þó mestan Sturlunga. (Sturlunga saga I, 363)

That summer Sturla Sighvatsson sailed to Norway from Gásir with several other men. They set sail late and landed in Norway, north of Staðr. Sturla went to Borgund, where he met Álfr of Þornberg, who was related to Duke Skúli⁹ by marriage. Álfr gave Sturla an extremely warm welcome and asked him to wait there for the duke to return from the north. He said that he wished to establish friendship between him and the duke. He also said to Sturla that the duke would make him a highly honoured man, because Sturla was so much more excellent than other men, and he called the duke a true friend of Icelanders and mainly of the Sturlungs.

The formulations in the text suggest that it was a rather pressing matter for Álfr to persuade Sturla to accept an alliance with Skúli, probably because the support of powerful Icelanders was regarded as an important factor in the Norwegian power struggle at the time. Álfr used his eloquence to praise both parties, calling Sturla “more excellent than other men” and Skúli “a true friend of Icelanders and mainly of the Sturlungs”. This is probably a reference to Skúli’s alliance with Snorri.¹⁰

Sturla Sighvatsson was, however, not interested in forming any alliance with Skúli. This is best explained by the fact that there had already been serious disputes between Sturla and Snorri, first because of the strife between Þorvaldr Snorrason’s sons and Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson’s sons, and later because of competition for the Sturlungs’ *goðorð* and other power struggles. Sturla was therefore probably planning to form an alliance with King Hákon against Skúli and Snorri. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the scene contains a direct reference to the conflict between Skúli and Hákon and to their meeting in Björgyn, where Skúli accepted conditions that were unfavourable for him:

Sturla vildi ekki annat en fara suðr til Björgynjar á fund Hákonar konungs, en þó var sundrþykki mikit með þeim mágum, ok drógu þeir þá lið saman, slikt er þeir fengu. Þeir fundust um haustit í Björgyn ok sættust, ok þótti hertoganum sér þá heldr erfitt veita sættin. Þetta var kallat hákarlahauast. Þá var Sturla í Björgyn ok svá öndverðan vetr. Síðan réð hann til suðrferðar [...]. Fann Sturla Hákon konung í Túnsbergi, ok tók hann allvel við honum, ok dvalðist hann þar lengi inn síðara vetr, er hann var í Nóregi, ok töluðu þeir konungrinn og Sturla jafnan. (Sturlunga saga I, 363–64)

Sturla insisted on going south to Björgyn and meeting King Hákon, although there was a sharp conflict between Hákon and his father-in-law Skúli, and they both gathered as many men as they could. In the autumn they met in

⁹ Skúli was in fact not a duke at this time, but he was best known by that title when the saga was written.

¹⁰ A very similar account is also found in *Elzta Guðmundar saga* (ch. 250), where Álfr of Þornberg is mentioned, as well as the fact that Skúli was a friend of Icelanders and of the Sturlungs; the conflict between Hákon and Skúli is also mentioned. The idea that Skúli was “the noblest man and friendly towards Icelanders” (*inn gófgasti maðr ok beztr Íslendingum*, *Sturlunga saga II*, 269) is also expressed in *Arons saga Hjörleifssonar* (ch. 15). This can be regarded as a sufficient proof that the information about Skúli’s important alliance with Icelanders was not based on a subjective interpretation by the writer of *Íslendinga saga*, but it was a generally accepted fact.

Björgyn and were reconciled, but the duke felt that the settlement was difficult to accept for him. It was called the Shark autumn.¹¹ Sturla was then in Björgyn until the beginning of the winter. After that he set out on his pilgrimage [...]. Sturla met King Hákon in Túnberg, and the king gave him a very warm welcome, and Sturla spent most of his second winter in Norway there, and the king and Sturla often talked to each other.

By this time, the king certainly wielded much more real power than in 1220, so an alliance with him was an attractive option for Sturla. And it is surely not a coincidence that King Hákon showed interest in such an alliance just at the time of an intense dispute with Skúli. He must have been aware of Skúli's alliance with Snorri, and he was probably worried that if all the Sturlungs – now the leading clan in Iceland – supported Skúli, it could influence the Norwegian power struggle to Skúli's advantage. He therefore wanted to make sure to have some of the Sturlungs on his side, and he understood that he could achieve that most efficiently by promising them power. This is obvious from both *Íslendinga saga's* and *Hákonar saga's* account of the negotiations between the king and Sturla:

Hákon konungur var ok mikill vinr Sturlu, því at þat var mjök talat, at þeir Sturla hefði þau ráð gert, at hann skyldi vinna land undir Hákon konung, en konungur skyldi gera hann höfðingja yfir landinu. Hafði Hákon konungur þar mest varaðan Sturlu við, at hann skyldi eigi auka manndráp á landinu ok reka menn heldr útan. (Sturlunga saga I, 439)

King Hákon was also a true friend of Sturla, and many said that the king and Sturla had decided that Sturla should make the land submit to King Hákon, who would then let him rule the land. King Hákon had then mainly warned Sturla against adding to the killings in the land; he should rather expel men from the land.

Konungur hafði Sturlu í boði sínu ok talaði við hann marga hluti. lét konungur illa yfir því er Sturla sagði honum ófrið mikinn af Íslandi. Konungur spurði hversu mikið fyrir mundi verða at koma einvaldi á landit ok lét þá mundu verða friðbetra efeinn réði mestu. Sturla tók þessu líkliga ok kallaði litit mundu fyrir verða ef sá væri harðyrkr ok ráðugr er við tæki. Konungur spurði ef hann vildi taka þat ráð. Hann kvezk til mundu hætta með konungs ráði ok forsjá ok eiga slíkra sæmða ván af konungi sem honum þætti verðugt ef hann fengi þessu á leið komið. Konungur sagði svá at eigi skyldi með manndrápum vinna landit, en bað hann taka menn ok senda útan eða fá ríki þeira með öðru móti ef hann mætti. Sturla var ofiliga fyrir konunginum um vetrinn, ok töluðu þeir um þetta mál. (Hákonar saga II, 24–25)

The king invited Sturla to his court and discussed many matters with him. He was displeased when Sturla told him about the fierce fights in Iceland. The king asked how difficult it would be to establish monarchy in the land, and he said that there would be better peace if one man decided most matters. Sturla agreed and said that it would not be difficult if the man who took up the task was determined and resolute. The king asked him whether he wished to take up the task himself. Sturla answered that he would try it with the king's approval and support, and that if he succeeds, he expects to receive as much honour from the king as he feels he deserves. The king told him not to win the land by killing his opponents, but rather by capturing them and expelling them from the land, or by gaining their domains by other means if he can. Sturla was often with the king that winter, and they talked about this matter.

The rhetoric of *Hákonar saga* focuses more directly on peace, as can be expected, but in fact the content of both passages is the same. The king probably believed that Sturla would manage to gain power over all Iceland with as little bloodshed as possible, and if the king then had Iceland's sole leader on his side, he would practically enjoy the support of all Icelanders in his power struggle with Skúli.

The sagas show, however, that Sturla's methods after his return to Iceland were far less peaceful than the king would have wished, and the unification of the land under one man's rule would take much longer than the king had believed. In Sturla's absence, the brothers-in-law

¹¹ Hákarlaust: when Skúli arrived in Björgyn before the meeting with King Hákon, his ships were anchored at Hákarlaströnd, the Shark Coast (HS chs. 191–193).

Kolbeinn Arnórsson of the Ásbirnings and Snorri Sturluson's son Órækja had fully entered the power game. Órækja attacked and killed one of Sturla's allies (chs. 93–94), and both men prepared to attack Sturla's father Sighvatr together. This plan failed, but such open enmity could not be easily forgotten, and no lasting reconciliation was brought about (chs. 97–98). Sturla joined in the conflict after his return, and together with his father he started gathering a force against Órækja, Snorri, and their ally Þorleifr Þórðarson of Garðar (chs. 112–113).

Sturla and Sighvatr planned an attack on Snorri with the pretext of vengeance for Órækja Snorrason's plundering in their district, but the real reason for the attack was probably their effort to take over Snorri's power – something that Sturla dared to attempt now that he enjoyed the king's support. Snorri refused to fight his own brother and ran away, so Sturla seized a part of Snorri's property and chieftaincy without any direct armed encounter (ch. 114). Órækja was captured and maimed by Sturla, after which he left Iceland (chs. 115–116). In 1237 Sturla defeated Þorleifr Þórðarson in the battle of Bær and forced him to leave Iceland as well (chs. 121–124). The same summer Snorri Sturluson also sailed to Norway in order to escape Sturla's aggression (ch. 126). Sturla then turned against Gizurr Þorvaldsson and Kolbeinn Arnórsson, which proves that his intentions went far beyond vengeance on Órækja. *Hákonar saga* (ch. 187) shows that the king reproached Sturla for his violent behaviour, which he regarded as a breach of their agreement:

Þetta sumar kom Órækja Snorrason af Íslandi ok sagði þaðan mikinn ófrið af Sturlu frænda sínum, ok virði konungr svá sem Sturla hefði harðara at farit en hann hafði honum ráð fyrir gert. (Hákonar saga II, 36)

That summer Órækja Snorrason came from Iceland and brought news about his kinsman Sturla's fierce violence. The king believed that Sturla had behaved more ferociously than he had advised him.

Sturla Sighvatsson's immoderate ambition eventually led to his fall, as his conflicts with Gizurr Þorvaldsson and Kolbeinn Arnórsson culminated in 1238 in the battle of Örlygsstaðir, in which Sturla and his father and brothers were killed. This had significant consequences for Icelandic power relations. Snorri Sturluson was in Norway with Duke Skúli and his son at the time.

In light of the alliance between Skúli and Snorri it may be possible to interpret the unclear passages in the sagas that deal with the conflict between Snorri Sturluson and King Hákon. *Íslendinga saga* (ch. 143) describes the matter rather vaguely:

Um vetrinn eftir Örlygsstaðafund váru þeir með Skúla hertoga í Niðarósi Snorri Sturluson ok Órækja, sonr hans, ok Þorleifr Þórðarson, en Þórðr kakali var í Björgyn með Hákonu konungi. En um várit fengu þeir skip, er átti Guðleikr á Skartastöðum, vinr Snorra, ok bjuggu þat til hafs með ráði hertogans. En er þeir váru búnir ok höfðu lagt út undir Hólmi, þá kómu menn sunnan frá konungi ok með bréfum, ok stóð þat á, at konungr bannaði þeim öllum Íslendingum at fara út á því sumri. (Sturlunga saga I, 444)

Snorri Sturluson, his son Órækja, and Þorleifr Þórðarson spent the winter after the battle of Örlygsstaðir with Duke Skúli in Niðarós, but Þórðr Kakali was in Björgyn with King Hákon. But in the spring, they took the ship owned by Snorri's friend Guðleikr of Skartastaðir and prepared it for sailing with the duke's approval. And when they were prepared and had sailed out past Hólmi, the king's men came from the south with letters stating that the king forbade all Icelanders to leave Norway that summer.

No explanation of the ban is given in this passage. *Hákonar saga* (ch. 214) provides slightly more information, but the circumstances are still not fully clarified:

Íslenzka menn, þá sem með hertuga váru, það konungr ekki út fara fyrr en þeir hefði ráð fyrir gert með hverjum erendum þeir skyldu fara, því at áðr um haustit hafði spurzk at þeir höfðu barizk í Skagaafirði, Kolbeinn ungi ok Gizurr, við Sturlunga ok Sturlungar höfðu fallit. (Hákonar saga II, 43)

The king asked the Icelanders who were staying with the duke not to leave Norway before it was decided on whose behalf they should go, because the previous autumn the news had arrived of a battle in Skagafjörður of Kolbeinn the Young and Gizurr against the Sturlungs, in which the Sturlungs had been defeated.

The formulation implies a connection between Sturla Sighvatsson's death and the ban. Now that Sturla was dead, the king had lost his most powerful ally in Iceland, and he had reasons to worry that Snorri would now become more successful in gaining power in Iceland on behalf of Skúli, which could affect the power balance in Norway. The formulation "*með hverjum erendum þeir skyldu fara*" seems to mean "on whose behalf they should go", and it probably refers to the king's intention to prevent Snorri from gaining power in Iceland on behalf of Duke Skúli, and instead to persuade him to act on behalf of the king. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that both sagas' accounts continue by stating that the Icelanders disregarded the king's ban – probably because they had already decided to continue to support Skúli:

Tók konungur þá fréttir bæði norðan ór landi ok sunnan. Hann frétti at hertugi hafði gefið orlof Snorra Sturlusyni ok Órækju syni hans ok Þorleifi til Íslands ok fengit skip þat er hann átti hálf en hálf Guðleikr af Skartastaðum. Þegar sem konungur frétti þetta þá gerði hann norðr bréf ok bannaði at þeir færi. Þessi bréf kómu til þeira er þeir lágu við haf, ok fóru þeir eigi at síðr í banni konungs. (Hákonar saga II, 43)

The king received news both from the north of the land and from the south. He found out that the duke had given Snorri Sturluson, his son Órækja, and Þorleifr permission to return to Iceland and to use the ship that he owned together with Guðleikr of Skartastaðir. As soon as the king found out about this, he sent letters to the north and forbade them to sail. They received these letters when they were ready to sail, and they left Norway despite the king's ban.

Þeir sýndu Snorra bréfin, ok svarar hann svá: „Út vil ek.“ Ok þá er þeir váru búnir, hafði hertoginn þá í boði sínu, áðr þeir tóku orlof. Váru þá fáir menn við tal þeira hertogans ok Snorra. Arnfinnr Þjófsson ok Óláfr Hvítaskáld váru með hertoganum, en Órækja ok Þorleifr með Snorra. Ok var þat sögn Arnfinns, at hertoginn gæfi Snorra jarlsnafn, ok svá hefir Styrmir inn fróði ritat: „Ártíð Snorra fólgsnarjarls“ –, en engi þeira Íslendinganna lét þat á sannast. (Sturlunga saga I, 444)

They showed Snorri the letters, and he answered: "I will sail." And when they were ready, the duke invited them to his court before they took leave. There were few men present when the duke talked to Snorri – Arnfinnr Þjófsson and Óláfr Hvítaskáld were there with the duke, and Órækja and Þorleifr with Snorri. And Arnfinnr later said that the duke gave Snorri the title of jarl, and Styrmir the Learned has written "the anniversary of Snorri the Secret Jarl's death",¹² but none of the other Icelanders confirmed it.

The formulation that Duke Skúli and Snorri Sturluson talked together in secret, and that the duke secretly granted Snorri the title of jarl, implies that Snorri was intended to become the sole leader of Iceland with the title of jarl when Skúli had conquered the throne in Norway. Understandably, it was in Snorri's own interest to keep his title secret until it was certain who would win the throne, nor could he reveal that he knew about Skúli's plans (see Jón Jóhannesson 1956, 300). The text clearly suggests that there was a close political cooperation between Skúli and Snorri, but Ólafía Einarsdóttir most probably goes too far when she writes:

Snorri og Skuli var begge skyldige i rejsningen mod kong Hákon. Det er meget muligt, at var ikke Snorri kommet på sit andet Norgesbesøg, og havde ikke Sturla Sighvatsson tabt slaget ved Örlygsstaðir, så var ikke det ulykkesår kommet over Skuli som skulle blive hans sidste. (Ólafía Einarsdóttir 1992, 111)

Both Snorri and Skúli were guilty of the rebellion against King Hákon. It is well possible that if Snorri had not visited Norway the second time, and if Sturla Sighvatsson had not lost the battle of Örlygsstaðir, Skúli would not have experienced the unlucky year that came to be his last.

¹² Styrmir Kárason the Learned was a priest, *lögsgúmaðr*, and later prior of the Viðey monastery. He probably wrote this note in a calendar belonging to a church, so that the death would be commemorated during mass.

Ólafía Einarasdóttir believes that Snorri Sturluson played a decisive role in convincing Skúli to finally claim the throne. Snorri was exiled from Iceland by Sturla Sighvatsson in 1237, and when the news of Sturla's death in the battle of Örylsstaðir in the summer of 1238 reached him in Norway, he saw a chance to re-establish his position in Iceland, but that was only possible with the help of a powerful Norwegian ally. Since his Norwegian ally was Skúli Bárðarson, Snorri's only chance of regaining his power was Skúli's ascent to the Norwegian throne, to which Snorri, according to Ólafía Einarasdóttir, persuaded him before leaving for Iceland in 1239 (Ólafía Einarasdóttir 1992, 108–11).

It is doubtlessly true that Snorri's alliance with Skúli played a significant role in the power struggle in both lands, but it is unlikely that it would have been so decisive in Norway. There is nothing in the sagas to imply that Snorri initiated Skúli's plans, although he probably participated in them. If Skúli had not made his own decision to try to dethrone Hákon and claim the throne, an individual Icelander's argumentation would not have persuaded him – especially since this Icelander had lost his power, so he could not provide Skúli with the support that Skúli had hoped for. There was too much at stake for Skúli, so he could not afford to make any spontaneous decisions inspired by private conversations – he must have planned his attempt to claim the throne a long time ahead and carefully kept his intentions secret.

Skúli's attempt to conquer the throne started when he gained strong support in Þrándheimr, including the support of the canons, who were able to confirm his rightful hereditary claim to the throne. November 6, 1239, Skúli received the title of king at Eyrarþing, and soon after that he won an important battle against King Hákon. Then, however, he lost the decisive battle of Oslo in the spring of 1240. He fled from the battle but was captured and killed by Hákon's men on May 24, 1240 (see Ólafía Einarasdóttir 1992, 110–11). Hákon was willing to forgive those of Skúli's supporters who swore loyalty to him, but some of those who did not do so were killed.

Snorri Sturluson lived at his farm at Reykjaholt when the ships from Norway brought letters about Skúli's fall, as well as the king's command that Snorri must be either sent to Norway or killed. According to the royal letter, he had committed high treason:

Var þar á, at Gizurr skyldi Snorra láta útan fara, hvárt er honum þætti ljúft eða leitt, eða drepa hann at öðrum kosti fyrir þat, er hann hafði farit út i bani konungs. Kallaði Hákon konungr Snorra landráðamann við sik. Sagði Gizurr, at hann vildi með engu móti brjóta bréf konungs, en kveðst vita, at Snorri myndi eigi ónaudigr útan fara. Kveðst Gizurr þá vildu til fara ok taka Snorra. (Sturlunga saga I, 453)

It was written there that Gizurr should make Snorri travel to Norway, whether Snorri agreed with it or not, or else, if there was no other way, he should kill him for having left Norway despite the king's ban. King Hákon proclaimed Snorri guilty of high treason. Gizurr said that he did not wish to disregard the king's letter in any way, but he said he knew that Snorri would never travel to Norway unless he was forced to do so. He said he intended to go and capture Snorri.

According to *Íslendinga saga*, the king's letters were little regarded (*beim var lítt upp haldit*), but Snorri apparently expected an attack, as he built a fortification around Reykjaholt. It did not protect him, however. September 23, 1241, he was killed by Gizurr Þorvaldsson's men at night in the cellar of his house. Gizurr was probably primarily furthering his own interests when he killed Snorri, since Snorri was one of his major rivals in Icelandic politics, and the king's order mainly served him as a welcome excuse for the killing. Accordingly, Gizurr made no attempt at bringing about the king's preferred solution, to make Snorri leave Iceland (see Orning 2008,

239). From a brief note in *Íslendinga saga* (ch. 121) we know that Gizurr had become King Hákon's retainer already in 1227, but the saga does not imply that he did much on the king's behalf until now. It seems that the king preferred Sturla Sighvatsson as his Icelandic representative, but now that Sturla was dead, the king had to rely on Gizurr.

It is unlikely that the king would have accused Snorri of high treason only because he had left Norway without permission. Admittedly, according to *Hirðskrá*, vassals who left Norway against the king's will were traitors and forfeited their rights and property (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 72). King Hákon clearly based his claim on Snorri's domain on this, but he would probably not have been so uncompromising in his dealings with Snorri if the Sturlung had not been allied with Skúli. This idea is reflected in how ready the king was to forgive Snorri's son Órækja for the same misdeed, according to *Hákonar saga* (ch. 285):

Þat haust kom af Íslandi Órækja Snorrason, ok höfðu þeir tekit hann, Kolbeinn ungi ok Gizurr, ok sent útan. Hann kom á vald Hákonar konungs í Björgyn, ok gaf hann honum skjótt upp reiði sína er hann hafði á honum fyrir þat er hann fór út í banni hans. En þó sagði konungr at hann væri betr til fallinn at deyja fyrir þá sök en faðir hans – „ok eigi mundi faðir hans dái hafa ef hann hefði komit á minn fund.“ (Hákonar saga II, 119)

Órækja Snorrason came from Iceland that autumn, after Kolbeinn the Young and Gizurr had captured him and forced him to leave. He gave himself up to King Hákon in Björgyn, and the king soon gave up his wrath against him for having left Norway despite his ban. And yet the king said that he would have deserved to die for this offence more than his father – “and his father would not have died if he had come to me.”

When the king explicitly states that he would have spared Snorri if he had come to him, it probably means that Snorri would have had to assure the king of his loyalty. The treason that Snorri was accused of must have consisted in his involvement in Skúli's efforts to conquer the throne. Snorri's unlucky end was the result of his choice of the wrong party in the Norwegian power struggle, but that is always an inevitable risk in entering high politics. Snorri made some unwise decisions, but he was surely not a passive victim. The sagas show that both Snorri Sturluson and Sturla Sighvatsson, far from passively accepting Hákon's and Skúli's will, were active participants not only in the Icelandic power struggle, but also in Norwegian politics. They were willing to negotiate with the Norwegian rulers and to serve their interests, as long as they were not contradictory to their own interests. Snorri's conflict with King Hákon must therefore not be interpreted as a sign of enmity between Iceland and Norway, but rather as an episode in the complicated process that inseparably connected both lands together.

It can be concluded that the Norwegian power struggle was the primary impulse for the Norwegian rulers' active interest in Iceland. It was Snorri Sturluson's own initiative to seek Norwegian alliances, but his journey would not have created such firm political bonds between the two lands if it had not been for the competition between Skúli and Hákon, because the Norwegian rulers would not have felt any need to form binding alliances with Icelanders. Due to the rivalry for the Norwegian throne, Skúli aimed at gaining the support of powerful Icelanders already during Snorri Sturluson's first visit to Norway in 1218–1220. King Hákon followed suit as soon as he could because he understood that Icelanders had become a significant force in the power struggle. If one of the Sturlungs had managed to gain power in all Iceland on behalf of one of the rulers, it would probably have affected the power balance in Norway, but that did not happen. Due to the highly unstable political situation in Iceland, none of the chieftains managed to gain enough power to be able to significantly influence the political situation in Norway.

After Skúli's fall, King Hákon no longer needed the Icelanders' support in any internal power struggle, but by that time, the idea of having an Icelandic royal representative had probably become a natural part of his political strategies, and he saw no reason to give it up. After all, influential Icelanders continued to seek his support of their own free will, and he never forced them into anything. Due to the political developments in the preceding decades, the chieftains needed centralized power, which was now offered to them. King Hákon's position was stabilized after Skúli's defeat, and the Icelandic chieftains were doubtlessly happier to accept a strong ruler than a king who was fighting for his position against opponents within his own land.

With this outline of how the central Icelandic and Norwegian events of the first half of the thirteenth century were interconnected, we can now turn to analysing the contemporary sagas from the perspective of cultural memory.

4. 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 medieval European societies, but as has been mentioned here, scholars have typically perceived this development of Icelandic society and the internal power struggle that accompanied it as a sign of social disintegration and downfall (f. ex. Tranter 1987, 127–28). Stephen Tranter has focused on the fact that the introductory sagas of the *Sturlunga* compilation, which depict the time before the Sturlung Age, show gradually intensifying conflicts and decreasing possibilities of full reconciliation (Tranter 1987, 52–53). It is true that this tendency is reflected in the texts, but Tranter automatically presupposes that the increasing intensity of conflicts marks an absence of moral concerns, and that the difficulty of reconciliation is the central theme of the texts (Tranter 1987, 53–54).

Here it will be 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 decisive peaceful chieftains, who actively aim at preventing armed clashes. The character type of the peaceful chieftain presents an ideal model of behaviour and shows that moral concerns were still a significant value before and during the Sturlung Age. The peaceful chieftain is usually portrayed in contrast to an aggressor, so his moderation counterbalances the brutality that is also depicted in *Sturlunga saga*. Another important stabilizing element is the presence of mediators, who lead negotiations between the disputing parties, aiming at a non-violent solution by agreement or arbitration. The mediators are usually not central characters in the sagas on the level of the plot of the story, but they are of central importance to the construction of the sagas' meaning on the level of discourse. Like the peaceful chieftains, they can be portrayed in contrast to troublemakers, who cause strife or encourage violence, and this contrast helps emphasize the important role of mediators in the narratives.

4. 1. THE MEDIATOR

4. 1. 1. The narrative type of the conflict story and the importance of reconciliation

The conflict story is the most frequent narrative type in saga literature. 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). This structural pattern can form either whole sagas or only parts of sagas (Lönnroth 1976, 68–82), but it is usually significant not only for forming the story line, but also for the construction of meaning. It reflects the cyclical principle of the re-establishment of social harmony. Disputes

are inevitable and cannot be prevented by the society's internal mechanisms, but these mechanisms can renew balance after each conflict. Furthermore, conflicts partly contribute to social cohesion, because they motivate the forming of alliances or strengthen existing alliances, so social units larger than kin groups are created and maintained. That means that the conflict stories do not necessarily portray conflict as a destructive element, but rather as an inseparable part of the non-centralized society. This has been aptly expressed by Jesse Byock, who has pointed out that "the family sagas have often been characterized as a literature of conflict, but this formulation tells less than half the story, for the sagas are as much, if not more, a literature of resolution" (Byock 1982, x). And this applies not only to the family sagas, but also to the contemporary sagas (Byock 1982, 5, 35; Úlfar Bragason 1981, 164–70), although the mechanisms of conflict resolution underwent a certain degree of change between the Saga Age and the Sturlung Age. It is therefore 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". Nevertheless, the character type of the mediator is not entirely unknown in the sagas of Icelanders. As the best example, we can mention the role played by Snorri goði in the final part of *Laxdæla saga*. In this saga, the central conflict between Kjartan Ólafsson and Bolli Þorleiksson culminates when Bolli kills Kjartan (ch. 49). In revenge for this killing, Bolli is slain by Kjartan's brothers and a man named Helgi Harðbeinsson (ch. 55). Years later, Bolli's wife Guðrún incites her sons to kill Helgi in revenge for their father, which they do (ch. 64). Snorri goði then finds out that Bolli's sons intend to attack Kjartan's brothers as well, because they do not deem their father sufficiently avenged. Snorri persuades them to agree to a reconciliation instead, and he negotiates with Kjartan's brothers about the conditions of the agreement (ch. 71). Both parties accept his suggestions because they respect him, a compensation is paid for the killing of Bolli, and this marks the final reconciliation between the two parties. This example shows how mediation can terminate a conflict after many years and several killings, break the circle of vengeance, and renew peace.

Another example is the final part of *Njáls saga*, the aftermath of the burning of Njáll by Flosi and his companions. Kári Sölmundarson, Njáll's son-in-law, escapes from the burning and prosecutes the arsonists at the Alþingi, but the legal case turns into a fierce quarrel and then into a violent clash (ch. 145). Several men are killed, including Ljótr, son of Hallr of Síða. The fight is terminated by Snorri goði, who separates the two parties from each other, preventing further violence. Hallr then proclaims that he wishes to contribute to reconciliation by claiming no compensation for the killing of his son, which is an extraordinary gesture of good will (*góðgirnd*), and he is praised for it by everyone (see Andersson 1970, 587–88). Snorri goði then begins to mediate, and he manages to persuade everyone but Kári and his ally Þorgeirr to accept a reconciliation. The chieftains ask Snorri to judge the case together with others, and the text underlines that he gains prestige (*virðing*) by his mediation. Later, Hallr of Síða persuades Flosi to agree to a settlement with Þorgeirr (ch. 146), accompanies him to a meeting, and leads the negotiation until Þorgeirr accepts a reconciliation (ch. 147). Kári and Flosi are later reconciled

on their own initiative (ch. 159). Like the previous example, this episode underlines the significance of mediation in a situation when bloodshed seems inevitable but can still be prevented by an influential peacemaker.

It may or may not be a coincidence that it is Snorri goði who is presented as the main mediator in both these stories. He is only a supporting character in both sagas, but he may have represented a typical mediator figure in the cultural memory that shaped the sagas. He has all the necessary preconditions: he is influential and decisive, but also moderate. The text in which he is the main protagonist, *Eyrbyggja saga*, shows that he is not an ideal peaceful chieftain, as he does not always avoid violence and kills several men. Nevertheless, he is much more willing to advocate peace in conflicts that he is not directly involved in, and he makes an excellent mediator due to his cleverness, eloquence, and sense of diplomacy.

While these examples of a clearly defined character type of the mediator are quite exceptional in the sagas of Icelanders, the conflict stories in the contemporary sagas 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 does not mean that the text creates 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.

Various types of characters can act as mediators in the contemporary sagas. They are often clerics, because as clerical identity became more clearly defined in the thirteenth century, priests no longer got actively involved in violent conflicts, so they could act as neutral third parties. They also enjoyed respect and influence associated with their ecclesiastic position. Mediators could also be secular chieftains, especially the most powerful ones, who could intervene in less powerful men's conflicts "from above" due to their supreme authority. What connects these characters is that they are not the main protagonists of the story, but they are significant for the structure and meaning of the narrative. They represent positive personal qualities, such as wisdom and moderation, and they enjoy some type of influence – secular power or clerical dignity.

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.

4. 1. 2. *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*: Troublemakers and peacemakers

Þorgils saga ok Hafliða, the first long narrative in the *Sturlunga* compilation, is a conflict story dealing with a dispute between two chieftains, taking place in the years 1117–1121. The saga starts by outlining the causes of the dispute between its two protagonists and continues by a description of the gradually escalating conflict and the subsequent mediation and reconciliation. Within this structural pattern of the conflict story, the narrative focuses on the contrast between several peaceful characters and the central troublemaker. This contrast is introduced as the main theme of the saga at the very beginning by means of a direct characterization of Hafliði and his nephew Már. Of Hafliði it is said that he is “wise and righteous and a powerful chieftain” (*forvitri ok góðgjarn ok inn mesti höfðingi*, *Sturlunga saga I*, 12). His portrayal is brief, but all the clearer in defining the essential personal qualities of a good chieftain. Már, on the other hand, is presented as the opposite – as the black sheep of the family. This introduction predicts that he will cause more trouble in the times to come:

Hann var óvinsæll ok illa skapi farinn ok ólíkr góðum frændum sínum, hafði nökkurt fé ok helzt illa á. Hann var oft með Hafliða, frænda sínum, á vetrum ok var honum óskaptíðr. (*Sturlunga saga I*, 12)

He was unpopular and evil-minded and different from his good kinsmen. He owned some property, but he took bad care of it. He often stayed with his kinsman Hafliði in winter and caused him trouble.

The chieftains start their dispute because of a feeling of obligation to assist their kinsmen and assembly men. Such an obligation was defined by the Icelandic social structure, in which both kinship and any patron-client relationships were binding. And again, the focus is on the troublemaker; the narrative clearly states that the first discord starts because of Már’s reckless behaviour. Már is fostered by a man named Þórðr, who is Þorgils Oddason’s assembly man, but Már is aggressive toward his foster-father, wounds him, and seeks Hafliði’s support when Þorgils prosecutes him (ch. 3). Már then continues to cause trouble: he mistreats a farmhand who is also Þorgils’ adherent (ch. 4), and he kills a commoner for a petty reason (ch. 5). His behaviour is criticized by Hafliði, and he is again called a black sheep of the family (*ónytjungr, frændaskömm*, *Sturlunga saga I*, 18).

Már does not take Hafliði’s reproaches seriously and continues to mistreat the farmers in the district, this time having one of the farmers killed (ch. 6). Hafliði condemns his behaviour again, constantly emphasizing that Már does not fit among his kinsmen (*kallar hann mjök segjast ór sinni ætt*, *Sturlunga saga I*, 19). Such frequent comments by the protagonist cannot be regarded as a random literary convention, they clearly are a narrative device for constructing the message of the story by building up a contrast between the troublemaker and the peaceful characters.

Hafliði loses some of his assembly men’s loyalty because of Már’s violence, and these farmers turn to Þorgils instead (ch. 7). This is a typical example of conflicting loyalties – Hafliði is expected to be loyal to his kin as well as to his assembly men, but in this case, it is not possible. The text also shows that Hafliði is aware of the contradiction between protecting his evil kinsman and his other social obligations. When Hafliði criticizes Már for his attempt at attacking Þorgils’ adherent (ch. 9), he mentions luck in this context:

Hafliði lét illa yfir för þeira ok kvað þess ván, at Már myndi eigi hafa gæfu við Þorgils – „ok ger þú aldri heimanför slíka síðan.” (*Sturlunga saga I*, 23)

Hafliði criticized their expedition and said that it could be expected that Már would not be lucky in his conflict with Þorgils – “and you must never make such an expedition again.”

In context of the story, it makes best sense to understand luck in a social context – the troublemaker must fail in the end because everyone will turn against him.

The conflict continues with more killings among both chieftains’ adherents (chs. 11–14), and the chieftains fail to reach an agreement (ch. 15). Both chieftains carry an axe to a lawsuit, and when Þorgils sees that Hafliði is armed, he swings his axe at him and cuts off one of his fingers (chs. 16–18). Þorgils is outlawed for this attack, but he refuses to accept his outlawry (ch. 18). A violent clash becomes imminent, but it is prevented by mediators. In this section, the troublemaker figure disappears from the narrative, and the focus turns to the mediators. Their argumentation is described in detail and receives much attention. The text focuses on how the chieftains are reminded of the importance of moderation for personal honour (*virðing, sómi*), and such a striking focus on honour draws attention to the theme of what it is that constitutes honour (see Jørgensen 2017, 53). When a man named Guðmundr, who is related to Þorgils and a friend of Hafliði, mediates between them and prevents an armed clash (ch. 19), he underlines the importance of peacefulness for honour:

„[...] ok ger svá vel, at þú far varlīga, og gæt virðingar þinnar ok sóma, af því at svá er mikit fjölmenni fyrir, at þú hefir ekki liðs við, ok eigu menn mikit í hættu, ef eigi gætist vel til, ok er þér engi svívirðing í at búa þar mál þitt til, er þú kemr framast lögum at ok yðr er óhætt. Mun ek ok með þeim ykkrum at snúa, at mín orð virðir meira, með þá menn alla, sem ek fæ til. Haf þú nú við ráð vina þinna, at þú fylgir svá ateins málum þessum, at þú gætir vel sóma þíns.“ (Sturlunga saga I, 36)

“[...] and please act prudently and think of your honour and esteem, for you are facing so large forces that your own troop does not compare to them, and men will be in great danger if you are not careful. It is no dishonour for you to prepare your case in such a way that you can best apply the law and avoid danger. I and all the men I can get will support the one of you who respects my words more. Follow your friends’ advice and further your case only in such a way that you can retain your honour!”

Hafliði, the protagonist whose voice is the central voice of the saga, agrees with Guðmundr and praises him for being “good-willed and wise” (*heilráðr ok vitr, Sturlunga saga I, 36*).

Similarly, when the priest Ketill tries to persuade Hafliði to agree to a settlement (ch. 29), he uses a story from his own life, in which he also underlines the honour (*mannvirðing, sæmd*) connected to moderation:

„[...] Ok sá ek þá, at þat eitt var hjálpráðit til, at skjóta málinu á guðs miskunn, því at allt tókst þá áðr öðru þungligar til mannvirðingar um mitt ráð. Ok ek sagða ofrkapp vera ok metnað Möðruvellinga, hvé þung heift mér myndi vera. Fann ek þá þat, alls ek hugða þá at mannvirðinginni, at ekki myndi þær bætr fyrir koma, er myndi at sæmd verða. Gerða ek þá fyrir guðs sakir at gefa honum upp allt málit. Vissa ek, at þá mynda ek þat fyrir taka, er mér væri haldkvæmst. Ok bauð ek honum til mín, ok var hann með mér lengi síðan. Ok þá snerist þegar orðrómrinn ok með virðing manna, ok lagðist mér síðan hvern hlutr meir til gæfu ok virðingar en áðr. Ok vænti ek ok af guði, at þér muni svá fara. [...]“ (Sturlunga saga I, 48)

“[...] Then I understood that the only helpful decision was to commit the matter to God’s mercy, because everything concerning my honour had gone worse than ever so far. I realized that it was due to the immoderation and pride of the men of Möðruvellir that my wrath had become so fierce. When I thought about my honour, I understood that I would never receive a compensation that would increase my esteem. I decided for God’s sake to give up the whole case to [my opponent]. I knew that for that I would receive the reward that was most welcome to me. I also invited him to my home, and he stayed with me for a long time. My reputation and esteem among people changed soon, and since then everything has brought me better luck and more honour than before. And I assume that God will let it go the same way with you as well. [...]”

Honour and moderation are presented as interconnected values and as the decisive characteristics of a good chieftain. The contrast between moderation and aggression forms the central line of the saga's meaning. While the opposition between the two chieftains is central to the *plot*, it is another opposition, between the mediators and the troublemakers, that is central to the *discourse*. The question that the text asks is not whether Þorgils or Hafliði will prevail in the conflict, but whether they will reconcile or fight. In the absence of troublemakers and in the presence of mediators, the chieftains choose the peaceful option: at the end of the saga, they reach a reconciliation (ch. 31), and they remain faithful allies for the rest of their lives (ch. 32).

Overall, the text shows that discord is caused by individual troublemakers, who behave violently and immoderately and do not follow the social rules. The saga does not, however, show any general moral disintegration, because the troublemakers are counterbalanced by the mediators and by the chieftains who may behave unwisely under pressure, but who make the right decisions in the end. The duality is thus double – between troublemakers and peacemakers, and between wise and unwise choices. The mediators' monologues emphasize the idea that honour is based on wise decisions, guided by a sense of moderation. This focus on individual mediators and on their opinions expressed in direct speech distinguishes the contemporary sagas from the typical conflict stories dealing with the Saga Age, but both groups of texts nevertheless express the same general ideas about the importance of reconciliation.

The distance from the narrative type concerns another aspect of the saga. Unlike the typical conflict stories in the sagas of Icelanders, *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* does not involve a killing of either of the protagonists because the mediators interrupt the escalation of the conflict already before the main violent clash. This ending of the saga disrupts the horizon of expectations created by the narrative type of the conflict story, in which the reconciliation usually takes place only after the killing of a protagonist and the subsequent revenge. The beginning of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* invokes this horizon of expectations by alluding to the possibility that the troublemaker might distort the peace between the two chieftains. Then there is a moment in the middle of the saga when it seems likely that serious bloodshed, which is typical for the conflict story, will take place, but the conclusion turns out to be unexpectedly peaceful because the reconciliation takes place before the violence fully escalates. Such a distance from the horizon of expectations created by the given narrative type draws attention to the significance of the stabilizing forces in the society, which can thus be regarded as the main theme of the saga.

As Sverrir Jakobsson has pointed out, the emphasis on the role of clerics as mediators in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, which was originally written around 1240, probably reflects rather the time of writing than the time of the events. Clerical identity was not yet fully developed in the early twelfth century because many men were priests and chieftains at the same time, and they did not avoid participation in violent conflicts (Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 37–41). That means that already about a century after the events, the story was shaped by newly developed ideas, and its interpretation was influenced by the society's perception of its own present. At the same time, however, the saga is also shaped by a narrative type and character types known from stories dealing with the distant past. That shows how cultural memory allows for constant re-evaluation of events in context of both the present and the past.

4. 1. 3. *Guðmundar saga dýra*: An influential leader as a mediator

Compared to *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, *Guðmundar saga dýra*, which deals with the years 1184–1200, follows the narrative type of the conflict story more closely and creates less distance from its horizon of expectations. The decisive mediation takes place only after the killing of one of the protagonists, and the peace becomes fragile again after the first reconciliation, which is also typical for the conflict story. I believe, however, that the difficulty and fragility of reconciliation is not the central theme of *Guðmundar saga dýra*. Instead, the dominant theme of the saga is the social importance of an influential leader who can act as a mediator due to his authority. This theme is first implied when the protagonist Guðmundr is presented as a powerful chieftain, capable of resolving other chieftains' disputes by arbitration (ch. 3). His influence in his district is a step toward the establishment of territorial power and geographically defined domains (see Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 83–86). When Guðmundr later becomes one of the parties in a dispute, the role of the central leader is given to Jón Loptsson of the Oddaverjar. Jón arbitrates in the saga's central conflict after the burning of Önundr Þorkelsson's farm by Guðmundr dýri and Kolbeinn Tumason (chs. 14–15). The text implies that Jón is the only man in Iceland capable of resolving such a serious conflict (ch. 15):

En Eyjólfur Hallsson af Grenjaðarstöðum reið suðr til Keldna ok hitti þar Jón Loftsson. Hann ætlaði ekki til þings at riða, áðr Eyjólfur sagði, at þar var helzt til sættar stofnat, er hann gerði um mál þessi. Jón svarar: „Eigi em ek til þess fær,“ segir hann, „því at ek hef aldri fyrr átt um slíkt at mæla.“ Eyjólfur svarar: „Þat mun þó til liggja at leita við, at menn sættist. Ok eigi er sýnt, hvern þá má gera, ef þú þykkist eigi til fær.“ En þá bað Eyjólfur fyrir guðs sakir, at hann skyldi eigi undan skerast. En þat varð um síðir, at Jón fór til þings. (Sturlunga saga I, 193)
Eyjólfur Hallsson from Grenjaðarstaðir rode south to Keldur to meet Jón Loptsson. Jón did not intend to go to the assembly until Eyjólfur told him that a reconciliation was most likely if Jón arbitrated the case. Jón answered: “I am not capable of that because I have never judged such a case before.” Eyjólfur answered: “It is nevertheless necessary to aim at a reconciliation. And I cannot see who could arbitrate if you do not consider yourself capable of it.” And Eyjólfur begged Jón not to avoid the task for God's sake. And it finally turned out that Jón went to the assembly.

Jón Loptsson's arbitration stops the bloodshed because he possesses a strong enough authority to dissuade the opponents from continuing the violence. Jón dies soon after, however, and there is no dominant leader after his death (ch. 15). The situation in the absence of a strong leader is commented on by Jón's son Ormr, who points out that it is dishonourable to break the reconciliation established by Jón or to support anyone who has broken it (ch. 18):

„[...] Vér áttum föður þann, er hafði mikil metorð hér á landi, svá at eigi var sá maðr, er eigi þætti sínu máli vel komit, ef hann skyldi um gera. En nú veit ek eigi,“ segir hann, „hvárt meir er frá dæmum um málaefni þau, er seld váru, eða sættirnar þær, er hann gerði nú síðast. Nú hafa þeir þat upp goldit,“ segir Ormr, „ófin þau, er ger váru, er menn ætluðu, at aldri myndi goldin verða ok þat myndi at sættabrigðum verða. En þeir, er við tóku gjaldinu, hafa nú rofit ok bakferlat allt þat, er hann mælti um, ok er mér óskapfellt at veita Þorgrími ok svívirða orð föður várs ok hann sjálfan ok alla oss, sonu hans.“ (Sturlunga saga I, 200)

“[...] Our father enjoyed great respect in this land, so nobody was dissatisfied with his case if it was judged by our father. And I do not know,” he said, “what is more extraordinary – the dispute that was committed to him the last time, or the reconciliation he brought about. Now the compensation has been paid,” said Ormr, “although it was so high that people thought that it would never be paid, and that the reconciliation would be broken for that reason. But now his whole judgement has been broken and disregarded by those who have accepted the compensation. I disapprove of supporting Þorgrímr and dishonouring our father's decision, as well as him and all of us, his sons.”

This monologue underlines the importance of the powerful leader even after his death. In the absence of such a leader, on the other hand, peace becomes fragile. The reconciliation reached

after the burning is broken when Öundur's daughter incites her brothers and husband to avenge the burning (ch. 17). The revenge consists in killing some of the participants of the burning, while Guðmundr successfully escapes the avengers' attempts at ambushing him (ch. 18). Guðmundr knows that he must expect a direct attack (ch. 19), and the avengers finally assault and wound him; he retaliates soon and strikes back with a much larger force (ch. 23). After this, a reconciliation is reached when the avengers offer Guðmundr self-judgement (ch. 23). When Guðmundr gives up his chieftaincy and becomes a monk soon after (ch. 26), it can be perceived as a morally positive aftermath that confirms the peaceful conclusion of the conflict.

The saga reflects the new conditions that result from the historical development of Icelandic society. Stephen Tranter is certainly right in stating that mobilization of large forces for aggressive and defensive purposes occurs in *Guðmundar saga dýra* (Tranter 1987, 174). Furthermore, there is little doubt that the original reasons for disputes become ever less important, as the real motivation for opposition is rivalry for power between the leading groups (Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 90). These are historical facts that the saga cannot possibly deny. The narrative, however, does not present this social development as a downfall, as it shows that the forces perpetuating social order are still present in the society. Compared to the conflict stories that take place in the Saga Age, the saga pays more attention to individual mediators, who possess a moral codex of honour based on justice and moderation, and who naturally need to be more and more influential as the extent of the conflicts increases. The text implies that social order is threatened not only by individual aggression, but also by the absence of an authority that could keep aggressors under control. Nevertheless, the saga shows that such authority is not constantly absent in the society, only temporarily – in this case, it is caused by the death of an influential chieftain. The saga thus does not create an image of social disintegration, but it may also propagate centralized rule, which ensures the constant presence of mediators – royal officials with constant authority.

4. 1. 4. *Svínfellinga saga*: Troublemakers and peacemakers once more

Like *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* and *Guðmundar saga dýra*, *Svínfellinga saga* has a simple structure, consisting of one single conflict story. The two protagonists, Sæmundr Ormsson and Ögmundr Helgason, get into a dispute soon after the death of Sæmundr's father in 1241 (ch. 3). The main cause of the dispute is a struggle for regional power. Ögmundr is not a chieftain, but he is popular in the district, and his influence increases when the young and inexperienced chieftain Sæmundr replaces his father.¹³ Open conflict between Sæmundr and Ögmundr breaks out in 1248 due to an insignificant disagreement, which serves as a pretext in their competition for power. Sæmundr summons Ögmundr to a lawsuit (ch. 4), but Ögmundr prefers to solve the case by agreement, which is mediated by Abbot Brandr at the assembly (ch. 5). After that, however, Sæmundr stays with Þórðr Sighvatsson, who deems such a compromise disgraceful (ch. 5). At his instigation, Sæmundr and his brother Guðmundr gather a force to attack Ögmundr. A violent clash is prevented only because Ögmundr manages to gain the support of

¹³ The situation resembles events that took place before the beginning of the Sturlung Age (especially those described in *Sturlu saga*, see below), although *Svínfellinga saga* takes place several decades later. This shows that the concentration of power in Iceland was a gradual process with diverse phases taking place at different times in different parts of the land.

the local men, so Sæmundr's troop is outnumbered and forced to turn back (ch. 6). Ögmundr rides away to avoid a clash, and he stays with Þórðr Sighvatsson, who tells him that he should not back away from Sæmundr (ch. 6). After the unsuccessful attack, Sæmundr chooses to pursue the matter by legal means – he sues Ögmundr at the assembly like he intended the previous year, and since Ögmundr is not present and nobody answers for him, he is easily outlawed, and Sæmundr confiscates his property (ch. 8). Abbot Brandr then finally persuades Sæmundr to let him arbitrate and bring about an agreement (ch. 9). There is, however, still much mistrust between the two parties (ch. 9), and in the end, Ögmundr breaks the agreement, attacks the brothers, and kills them (ch. 11). Then the case is again arbitrated by Abbot Brandr, who decides about Ögmundr's sentence for the killings (ch. 14).

Like in *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*, the moral framework of the saga is formed by an emphasis on the contrast between an instigator and a mediator. In scenes that do not depict direct clashes, these characters almost receive more attention than the protagonists. In the role of instigator there is Þórðr Sighvatsson, who plays no other part in the narrative and stays in the background, but his intervention is of fatal importance to the story. He goads both protagonists into open conflict, and he discourages them from compromise and conciliation (chs. 5–6). In the text, Þórðr is directly criticized for causing trouble and then leaving Iceland without taking care of the consequences:

Ríðr Þórðr heim norðr. Ok þat sumar ferr hann útan, ok er þat mál manna, at hann skilði harðliga við þetta mál. (Sturlunga saga II, 95)

Þórðr rode home to the north. And the same summer he sailed abroad, and people said that he left the case after having made it difficult.

Interestingly, the role of instigator is attributed to Þórðr Sighvatsson specifically in *Svínfellinga saga*. In *Þórðar saga kakala*, on the other hand, he is portrayed as a magnanimous chieftain, and it is even stated that he mediates between Sæmundr and Ögmundr to secure peace (ch. 48):

Þetta sumar urðu þeir nökkut missáttir Sæmundr Ormsson ok Ögmundr Helgason. Kærðu þeir þat fyrir Þórði, ok setti hann þær greinir þá niðr, er váru á milli þeira ok þeim bar á. Mælti þá ok engi maðr á móti því, er Þórðr vildi, at væri. (Sturlunga saga II, 86)

The same summer (1249) some disagreements occurred between Sæmundr Ormsson and Ögmundr Helgason. They complained to Þórðr, and he settled the matters that were between them and that they argued about. Nobody protested against Þórðr's decisions at the time.

This is an illustrative example of how the sagas can treat the same event differently in order to underline the aspects that are significant for the construction of meaning in every individual saga. In this case, Þórðr's involvement in the conflict in reality probably included some degree of instigation as well as some degree of mediation, and each saga focuses on the aspect that fits its moral structure. As the historical events are turned into narrative discourses, they are endowed with new meanings, which are not contained in the events themselves. That does not necessarily mean that the creators of the texts deliberately twisted the truth; it is rather a sign of how different texts can emphasize different aspects of the same events, depending on the central theme of each text. Even before the texts were written down, the events had become integrated into cultural memory by being turned into narrative discourses in oral tradition. Several discourses that did not completely accord with each other could exist simultaneously,

or the focus on various aspects of an event could change over time, reflecting the development of the circumstances that shaped the context of the narrative.

Svínfellinga saga builds up a contrast between the instigator Þórðr and the central mediator, Abbot Brandr, who is the focus of the narrative from the very beginning, even before the outset of the conflict. In the introductory chapter there is no characterization of the two protagonists, whereas Brandr is characterized quite extensively and very positively (ch. 1):

Brandr prestr Jónsson [...] var ágætr höfðingi, klerkr góðr, vitr ok vinsæll, ríkr ok góðgjarn. Ok í þann tíma hafði hann mest mannheill þeira manna, er þá váru á Íslandi. (Sturlunga saga II, 87)

The priest Brandr Jónsson [...] was a fine nobleman, a good cleric, wise and popular, influential, and benevolent. And at that time, he enjoyed the greatest popularity of all the men in Iceland.

Brandr contributes to preventing strife by his wise advice, which is accounted for in detail. He warns Ögmundr against supporting his friends immoderately in unjust cases, and he also disapproves of Sæmundr's actions against Ögmundr, although they are not undertaken without reason. He predicts that violent clashes may easily break out between the two because he knows their intemperate personality (ch. 4):

Ábóta likar ok illa fjárupptektin, þótt sakir væri til, ok kveðst ugga, at til meira myndi draga með þeim en þá var fram komit, því at Sæmundr var ofsamaðr mikill ok óeirinn ok gerði at því engan manna mun. En Ögmundr var ótillátssamr ok átti mikit undir sér. (Sturlunga saga II, 90)

The abbot also disliked the confiscation, although it had not happened without reason, and he said he feared that there would soon be more trouble between the two than there had been so far, because Sæmundr was a very fierce man, little forbearing with everyone without difference, and Ögmundr was unyielding and influential.

Brandr's natural authority is clearly shown in the first reconciliation, when both opponents willingly accept his decision despite their uncompromising personality. Brandr is also directly praised for his mediation by a reference to the public opinion (ch. 5):

Af þinginu riða þeir ábóti heim, ok þótti þá sem jafnan, at Brandr ábóti hefði sér inn bezta hlut af deildan. (Sturlunga saga II, 90)

The abbot and the others rode home after the assembly, and as always, it was believed that Abbot Brandr had chosen the best option.

In the account of the second reconciliation after Sæmundr's attack, the mediators, of whom Abbot Brandr is most important, are again directly praised in the text (ch. 9). After the reconciliation, Brandr continues in his effort to maintain peace: he appeals to Sæmundr's sense of honour by reminding him that breaking the agreement would be much more dishonourable than accepting a compromise (ch. 9). Finally, after the bloody attack, Ögmundr lets Abbot Brandr arbitrate to make sure that the abbot's authority will terminate the conflict and prevent future violence (ch. 14). Ögmundr and his followers willingly accept Brandr's sentence, showing that they fully respect his authority. This focus on the mediator's supremacy over the aggressor gives the saga a morally positive tone.

Apart from the contrast between the instigator and the mediator, the saga also builds up a contrast between the aggressors and the victims of aggression. Both parties in the conflict are in the role of the attacker at some point, but it is the episode of the final killings that is decisive for the moral perspective of the saga. In this episode, the condemnation of violence is underlined by a narrative focus on the defenders. Their point of view is first introduced in the

foreshadowing of their killing: the evening before the attack, Sæmundr's neck itches in the place where he later receives the wound, and in the morning, Guðmundr speaks about his dream, although it is not described directly in the text (ch. 10). The foreshadowing draws attention to the brothers and creates sympathy with them, as both the physical symptom and the uneasy dream probably reflect the anxiety that the brothers are beginning to feel.

In the description of the assault itself, it is emphasized that the brothers are outnumbered, caught unaware, and given no chance to defend themselves (ch. 11). The three priests who are sent for at Sæmundr's request beg for Sæmundr's life and condemn Ögmundr's misdeed (*glæp*), but he does not heed it. The religious aspect is underlined in the death scene, in the depiction of how Sæmundr falls on his knees and repents his sins immediately before the beheading. The narrative then focuses on the brothers' wounds, while at the same time stressing that they faced death with courage and dignity. The fact that Guðmundr asks for mercy is not presented as cowardice or disgrace, but rather as an attempt at avoiding unnecessary bloodshed. This impression is strengthened by Guðmundr's utterance that he prefers dying to living after the death of his brother:

Guðmundr Ormsson ok prestarnir lásu þá sjau sálma, ok fann engi maðr, at hann brygði sér nökkut við þessi tíðindi – annan veg en hann kvað nökkut harðara at orðunum en áðr. Þá var hann átján vetra. Guðmundr mælti til Ögmundar, þá er þeir höfðu lesit sálmana: „Gott væri enn at lifa, ok vilda ek grið, fóstri.“ Ögmundur leit frá ok mælti: „Eigi þorum vér nú þat, fóstri minn,“ segir hann. Var hann þá rauðr sem blóð. Guðmundr svarar þá: „Sá liggir héðan nú skammt í brott, at eigi er betra at sæma við yðr ok lifa eftir hann dauðan.“ (Sturlunga saga II, 100)

Guðmundr Ormsson and the priests then recited seven psalms, and nobody noticed him being affected by what had happened – apart from the fact that he recited the words somewhat more vigorously than before. He was eighteen years old at the time. When they had finished the psalms, Guðmundr said to Ögmundr: “It would be good to stay alive, and I would like to ask for mercy, foster-father.” Ögmundr looked away and said: “I dare not let you have it now, foster-son.” He was red as blood when he said that. Guðmundr replied: “There lies the man not far from here, for whose sake it is better for me not to reconcile with you and not to live when he is dead.”

The violence is condemned by the focus on the defenders' moderation and fearlessness. The idea that there is no heroism in brutal attacks on defenceless opponents is also underlined by statements about the unwillingness of Ögmundr's followers to perform the attacks (chs. 11–12). Furthermore, the saga shows that Ögmundr's acts are not only morally unacceptable, but that he also loses most of his property and must leave the district as a punishment (ch. 14), so he clearly loses much of his social position. That way, *Svínfellinga saga* illustrates how the aggressor, by disrupting social harmony, also loses his own place within the society. Nevertheless, rather than depicting a general moral decline, the saga contrasts the morally reprehensible characters with a positive model of behaviour, represented first and foremost by Abbot Brandr. This contrast highlights the social importance of mediators. In the end, the text expresses a belief that the abbot has managed to terminate the conflict and that the aggression will not be continued. That is a typical ending of the conflict story; *Svínfellinga saga* follows the structural pattern of this narrative type and creates no significant distance from its horizon of expectations. The conflict story admits that some degree of violence is inevitable in a society with weak central power, but it focuses on the society's internal mechanisms that re-establish peace and order after each conflict.

In comparison with the conflict stories in the sagas of Icelanders, *Svínfellinga saga* puts more emphasis on the contrast between the mediator and the instigator and between the attacker

and the victims. That way, it draws more attention to the moral aspects of the conflict, especially to the idea of individual responsibility for violence. The mediator is a side character in the plot of the story, but he is of essential importance on the level of discourse as an embodiment of the internal mechanisms of conflict resolution that are present in the society. The foregrounding of this character emphasizes the continuing presence of these stabilizing forces in the Icelandic society of the Sturlung Age.

4. 2. THE PEACEFUL CHIEFTAIN

4. 2. 1. The narrative type of the peaceful chieftain's story

The contemporary sagas do not avoid direct and detailed depictions of fights, violence, and bloodshed, but they never praise aggression as a positive value. As Gunnar Karlsson has pointed out, that does not mean that bravery in fights is no longer presented as a significant value, but rather that courage is praised only in defence. That is especially true if the protagonist first attempts to solve the conflict peacefully, but when it is not possible and he is attacked, he defends himself bravely or accepts inevitable death fearlessly. The texts also appreciate allies and followers who are willing to risk their lives for their chieftains in defence, contrasting them to those who run away in a cowardly manner (Gunnar Karlsson 1988, 213–15). But while the contrast between defence and aggression is one of the central themes of *Sturlunga saga* (see Ármann Jakobsson 1994a), the narrative focuses even more on the ideal of decisiveness in preventing bloodshed, which is represented by the character type of the peaceful chieftain.

The narrative type of the peaceful chieftain's story, just like the other narrative types that shape the contemporary sagas, is known from the saga tradition and represents a significant part of the medieval Icelanders' cultural memory. The peaceful chieftain is an important character type especially in the sagas of Icelanders, where he 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. As Theodore Andersson has shown, the sagas of Icelanders usually praise peacefulness and show the tragic consequences of insisting on revenge (Andersson 1970).

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 bloodshed appears even more tragic because it is presented as unnecessary – it could have been prevented if all the characters had followed the peacemaker’s advice and had not insisted on solving their disputes violently. The tragedy is completed when the peaceful chieftain himself becomes a victim of violence together with his kinsmen or friends, although he has never committed any violent act (see Andersson 1970, 585–88). His moral integrity then increases the tragedy of his failure and violent death.

As a typical example of the peaceful chieftain, we can name the protagonist of one of the best-known sagas of Icelanders, *Njáls saga*. Njáll Þorgeirsson is presented as a wise man who knows the law and always aims at peaceful, legal solutions to disputes, and at preventing violence. He repeatedly brings about reconciliation on behalf of his closest friend, Gunnarr Hámundarson, and he warns him against continuing to fight; he also predicts that if Gunnarr commits two killings in the same family, it will lead to his downfall. Gunnarr nevertheless continues to fight, commits two killings in one family, and breaks a reconciliation, after which he is outlawed and killed. Then we see Njáll’s own sons in the role of aggressive fighters when they thoughtlessly start a conflict with Gunnarr’s kinsman Þráinn and kill him. Njáll arranges a reconciliation again in his effort to prevent further bloodshed, and he takes care of Þráinn’s son Höskuldr, but Njáll’s sons later kill Höskuldr because they envy his position and popularity. The efforts at arranging a reconciliation fail and Flosi, a kinsman of Höskuldr’s wife, takes revenge by burning Njáll’s farm. Njáll refuses to leave his sons and chooses to die together with them. The horizon of expectations of the inherently tragic narrative type is thus entirely fulfilled in this saga.

In *Sturlunga saga*, the character type of the peaceful chieftain is represented by several central characters. The compilation creates a parallel between them, which highlights the importance of this character type for the overall message of the text. The personal qualities of the peaceful chieftain are typically further emphasized by a contrast to another character, who is presented as an aggressor. This is the case both in some of the introductory sagas of the *Sturlunga* compilation, which deal with the time before the Sturlung Age, and in *Íslendinga saga*, the central text of the compilation. The tragic horizon of expectations of the peaceful chieftain’s story is fulfilled in some of these 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.

4. 2. 2. *Sturlu saga*: The moral and political superiority of the peaceful chieftain

Sturlu saga deals with a dispute between Sturla Þórðarson the elder and Einarr Þorgilsson, son of Þorgils Oddason from *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, that took place in the years 1148–1183. The saga is shaped by the narrative type of the peaceful chieftain’s story, and its central focus is the contrast between the good chieftain, represented by Sturla, and the bad chieftain, represented by Einarr. Einarr Þorgilsson inherits his social position from his father, the leading chieftain in the district, but Einarr is far less capable and has serious character flaws. He frees a rover and killer from captivity and assists him in escaping from the land, and the saga is quite direct in expressing the public’s condemnation of such behaviour (ch. 7). When Einarr is not only unable, but clearly also unwilling, to rid his district of a rover band, his reputation worsens, and the loss of popularity leads to a loss of power (ch. 8):

Eftir þessa atburði lagðist sá orðrómr á, at mjök þótti annarr hátttr á um heraðsstjórnina en þá er Þorgils hafði. Ok tóku þá margir, þeir er mikit þóttust at sér eiga, at ráða sér til eigna í aðra staði, þar sem þeim þótti sér helzt trausts at ván. (Sturlunga saga I, 72)

After these events people said that the leadership in the district seemed very different from how it had been at Þorgils' time. Many of those who felt that much was at stake, started to seek property in other districts, where they believed they could expect support.

Sturla Þórðarson comes from a less powerful family than his adversary, but he is more capable and more honourable, and he is characterized positively from the beginning of the saga (ch. 4). The two chieftains get into a dispute while protecting their assembly men's interests (chs. 4–5), as well as due to more personal matters (ch. 9). Einarr behaves dishonourably in his conflict with Sturla, attacking and burning his farm while Sturla is away and cannot defend his property (ch. 10). Sturla, on the other hand, shows good will even in matters that concern him personally, as he willingly accepts arbitration after Einarr's attack in order to prevent further hostilities. Einarr and his followers generally act more aggressively and recklessly, while Sturla's party turns to violence only in necessary defence (chs. 11–20).

When the decisive fight between the adversaries takes place, the structural pattern of the peaceful chieftain's story leads to the expectation of Sturla's violent death. This expectation is, however, not fulfilled in the saga. Einarr Þorgilsson receives a serious wound in the battle and must ask for quarter, which Sturla grants him (ch. 21). The saga thus creates a distance from the expectation of a contrast between the protagonist's moral superiority and his tragic defeat – instead of such an ending, *Sturlu saga* combines the protagonist's moral and political victory. The idea that a rightful victory, accompanied by mercy and magnanimity toward the defeated opponent, increases a chieftain's honour much more than a killing of the opponent, is supported by a reference to the public opinion (ch. 22). The text shows that Sturla is superior to his adversary not only in military power, but also in popularity and moral qualities. The distance from the tragic element of the narrative type emphasizes the saga's overall positive evaluation of the society, in which negative forces are present, but they are counterbalanced by the peacefulness and moral integrity of some of its most successful leaders.

Sturla is, however, not a sufficiently strong magnate yet – he possesses all the necessary personal qualities, but his power position is not fully established. For this reason, a lasting reconciliation between him and his adversary cannot be reached without the intervention of a more powerful magnate, whose authority is practically undisputed. The saga thus connects the portrayal of the peaceful chieftain with a focus on the importance of a strong leader. The peaceful, influential, and highly respected chieftain Jón Loptsson arbitrates between Sturla and Einarr after the fight, and the reconciliation has a lasting effect (ch. 22). Sturla then continues to defend his assembly men, as well as his position and prestige, against other neighbouring chieftains (chs. 23–34). It is, however, not these petty disputes that receive most of the narrator's attention, but rather Jón Loptsson's role as arbitrator, mediator, and advisor:

Váru þá sem mestar virðingar Jóns, ok var þangat skotið öllum stórmálum, sem hann var. [...] ok kómu þessi mál öll undir Jón Loptsson á þingi, ok réð hann einn sem hann vildi ok skipaði svá, at flestum líkaði vel. (Sturlunga saga I, 104–05)

Jón's esteem was then greater than ever, and all the important cases were committed to him. [...] and all these matters were committed to Jón Loptsson at the assembly, and he decided everything alone as he wished, and he solved the matters in such a way that most people were satisfied.

Ok ganga menn nú meðal þeira ok beiða, at Sturla játaði í dóm Jóns um málit, – kváðu þess ván, at honum myndi í því aukast mestr sæmðarhlutr [...]. [Sturla] kvað nú svá at orði: „Kunnigt mun mönnum vera um málaferli vár Páls ok um þá svivirðing, er mér var ætluð at gera, ef fram kæmi. Ok olli því meir hamingja mín en tilstilli þess, er gerði. Síðan var sætt á málit ok selt mér sjálfðæmi af Páli. En nú eru sóttir at inir æðstu menn á Íslandi, at þetta mál skyli nú í gerð leggja, er áðr kom í sjálfðæmi. Nú ef dæmi finnast til, at svá hafi menn fyrr gert, þá væri á at líta. En þeir menn, er sik binda nú við málit – nefni ek fyrst til þess Jón Loftsson, er dýrstr maðr er á landi þessu ok allir skjóta sinum málaferlum til, – þá veit eigi ek, hvárt annat er nú virðingar vænna en reyna, hvern sóma hann vill minn gera. Nú kann vera, at ek hafa eigi vit til at sjá mér hlut til handa, en vilja mynda ek halda sæmð minni.“ (Sturlunga saga I, 113)

And people mediated between them and asked Sturla to agree to Jón's judgement in the matter – they said it was likely that it would increase his honour [...]. [Sturla] uttered these words: “People know about my dispute with Páll and about how he intended to dishonour me, although he failed, and that was due to my luck, rather than due to his will. We then reached a reconciliation, and Páll gave me self-judgement. But now the foremost men in Iceland are encouraged to judge this case, although it has been solved by self-judgement. If there are any examples of this having been done before, I might consider it. But out of the men who will now be connected to the case, I name Jón Loftsson first, the most powerful man in the land, to whom everyone commits their disputes – I do not know what would be more likely to increase my esteem than trying what honour he will grant me. Maybe I am not clever enough to see what is best for me, but I would like to retain my honour.”

When violence becomes imminent in Sturla's dispute with his opponent Páll Sölvason, Jón manages to moderate Sturla's ambition without impeding his honour; to increase Sturla's esteem even more, Jón offers to foster his son Snorri (ch. 34). Everyone is satisfied with his solution, nobody suffers a loss of honour, and no serious bloodshed is committed. The narrative shows that this would not have been possible without Jón's intervention, and he thus becomes the central figure of the second half of the saga. He represents the character type of the peaceful chieftain, and at the same time he is also portrayed as an embodiment of centralized power. This aspect is noted by Tranter, who criticizes the reduced involvement of the community in the process of reconciliation, as the dominant voice in mediation now belongs to one individual (Tranter 1987, 132–33). Instead of showing the situation in negative terms, however, the saga presents Jón Loftsson as a highly positive figure, who is both righteous and moderate and works for the common good. The saga thus shows that disorder increases in the absence of such a strong leader, but his presence contributes to peace and stability. That means that the narrative supports the idea of centralized power.

4. 2. 3. Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar: The typical narrative of the peaceful chieftain

Unlike *Sturlu saga*, *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* follows the structural pattern of the peaceful chieftain's story without creating any significant distance from it. The saga deals with the life of the chieftain Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson around the break of the thirteenth century, and it depicts his conflict with the neighbouring chieftain Þorvaldr Snorrason. Þorvaldr is a typical aggressive chieftain, who refuses to accept compensations, attacks Hrafn's assembly men, and repeatedly attempts to kill Hrafn. Hrafn manages to defend himself, but as a typical peaceful chieftain, he refuses to attack Þorvaldr in response. When Þorvaldr finally succeeds in attacking Hrafn's farm, the structural pattern of the peaceful chieftain's story leads to the expectation of the protagonist's violent death, and in this case, the expectation is fulfilled. Hrafn surrenders because he wishes to save his men, and he is beheaded. The killing is followed by an arbitration, and Þorvaldr must pay compensation and leave Iceland for three years.

Hrafn's saga is the only secular contemporary saga that is preserved both in the *Sturlunga* compilation and in a complete separate version, which was probably originally composed around 1230–1250 (Úlfar Bragason 1988, 267). A detailed comparison of the two versions has been undertaken by Úlfar Bragason, who concludes that whereas the separate saga focuses more on the dichotomy between good and evil and on the spiritual aspects of the protagonist's decisions, the version in *Sturlunga saga* omits some of this material and turns the narrative into a more typical conflict story (Úlfar Bragason 1986a, 152–69; 1988, 285–89). Similar conclusions have also been reached by Stephen Tranter (1987, 31–50).

While that is doubtlessly true, here the focus of analysis will be the central themes that are shared by both versions of the saga, and it will be argued that both versions express the same ideas, although they employ somewhat different narrative devices. The *Sturlunga* redaction leaves out the long introduction of *Hrafn's saga* that most directly emphasizes the moral aspects of Hrafn's story, but it employs another narrative device to highlight the very same aspects. The structure and meaning of the compilation, especially of its first half, are formed by its emphasis on the narrative type of the peaceful chieftain. Apart from Hrafn, this type is also represented in *Sturlu saga* by Sturla Þórðarson the elder and in *Íslendinga saga* by Þórðr Sturluson, who also appears in the role of arbitrator in *Hrafn's saga*. This narrative type underlines the moral significance of peacefulness, albeit in a more secular sense than the introduction of the separate *Hrafn's saga*, which has a strongly religious undertone.

In line with the standard focus of its narrative type, *Hrafn's saga* presents a contrast between a peaceful chieftain and his aggressive, immoderate opponent. Þorvaldr is presented as a man who treats others unjustly, but at the same time is unwilling to tolerate even the slightest injustice against himself, refuses to accept compensation, and prefers violent retaliation. Hrafn, on the other hand, is shown to be decisive in legal conflicts, but opposed to any form of aggression. Stephen Tranter is right in stating that Hrafn's peacefulness is not appreciated, but rather ridiculed as cowardice, by his opponents in the saga (Tranter 1987, 192), which is also a typical element of the peaceful chieftain's story. Tranter does not, however, sufficiently stress the fact that Hrafn is praised by the narrative voice of the saga; this dichotomy between mockery on the level of action and praise on the level of discourse is also typical for the narrative type of the peaceful chieftain's story.

This dichotomy has been emphasized by Úlfar Bragason (1988, 277–89), who nevertheless places too much emphasis on the difference between the separate version and the version in *Sturlunga saga*. In his opinion, the question of the relationship between moderation and weakness remains open in the *Sturlunga* redaction because the text without the morally oriented introduction does not replace the secular code of honour by the religious code of spiritual glory (Úlfar Bragason 1988, 288–89). In this statement, however, Úlfar Bragason ignores the fact that aggression and reckless violence are not defined as honourable behaviour in any section of *Sturlunga saga*. On the contrary, the condemnation of aggression is a recurrent theme in the compilation. It has been shown here that the contrast between peacefulness and aggression is the central theme of all the other introductory texts of *Sturlunga saga*, and *Hrafn's saga* further develops this theme, creating an even more striking contrast between these qualities and underlining the moral implications of this contrast by its tragic ending. Hrafn is presented as an innocent victim of injustice and violence, but he cannot be regarded as passive,

as he makes important choices motivated by clearly defined moral considerations. The moral aspects of the story are further emphasized by specific narrative strategies.

The main evaluative device in *Hrafns saga* is an extraordinary abundance of various forms of predictions and foreshadowing, which form the saga's moral framework. In the separate version, Þorvaldr's father predicts that his goodwilled son Hafliði will die young, while his other children will cause trouble (ch. 8). Later, the old wise woman Ragnheiðr warns Hrafn not to trust Þorvaldr, comparing him to a wolf (ch. 10). These predictions not only build up tension in the narrative, but, more importantly, they contribute to building up the contrast between Þorvaldr as the aggressor and Hrafn as the peaceful chieftain. They are not a part of the *Sturlunga* redaction because all the first eleven chapters are omitted there, but the foreshadowing that immediately precedes the attacks is included in both versions.

The frequency and intensity of the predictions increases as the violence draws near. There is a series of prophetic dreams and visions preceding the first attack (ch. 14), including a vision of light and dreams of ominous figures reciting stanzas. This foreshadowing is the same in both versions of the text; it takes up almost the whole chapter, and the stanzas are quoted in their entirety. This implies that the compiler of *Sturlunga saga* was aware of the moral framework created by the foreshadowing, and that he deemed it important for the meaning of the narrative – otherwise he could have omitted this section of the text that does not directly depict action.

Another series of predictions precedes Hrafn's death (chs. 17–19). Several people see a mysterious fire, and others see blood without knowing where it came from. There is also a vision of three riders armed with long spears, a vision of a large man armed with a sword, and several visions of light. This is followed by an account of an actual miracle (ch. 19): when Þorvaldr wants to attack Hrafn again, he binds all the people on the nearby farms, so that they cannot warn Hrafn. One of the bound people invokes Saint Þorlákr, and his bonds break, so he can free everybody else. They nevertheless do not warn Hrafn in time, but the event can clearly be qualified as miraculous. Such occurrences are not usual in *Sturlunga saga* otherwise, but the scene is not omitted in the *Sturlunga* redaction because it underlines the overall moral framework of *Hrafns saga*.

The supernatural aspects that dominate both sets of predictions, both in the form of pre-Christian symbolism and Christian allusions to the theme of evil and sin, give the foreshadowing a meaning that transcends the given situation and presents a universal condemnation of violence. The emotional intensity of the predictions draws attention to Hrafn's upcoming suffering, marking a clear narrative focus on the protagonist's undeservedly tragic end. The death scene is immediately preceded by a scene in which a *drápa* of Saint Andrew is recited to Hrafn, and he comments on the saint's martyrdom after every stanza; it is also mentioned that a man dreams about Saint Andrew's death the same night. These allusions suggest a parallel between Hrafn and the saint, and they are included in both versions. The parallel to a saint concludes the moral evaluation of Hrafn as a positive model to be followed, just like he himself followed the example of saints. This underlines the central theme of the saga, which is the portrayal of an ideal peaceful chieftain in contrast to his evil, aggressive counterpart.

As Torfi Tulinius has pointed out, the increased focus on peaceful chieftains in thirteenth-century Iceland was a part of what was happening everywhere in western civilisation at the time (Tulinius 2016, 92). A significant aspect of the Church's rise to power in twelfth-century

Europe was its insistence on the link between government and service. This can be relevant to our understanding of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson in particular, but also of the generally changing, and possibly debated, role of the chieftain in Icelandic society at the time, with a focus on the leaders' obligation to protect and take care of their flock (Tulinius 2016, 92, 99–100).

The *Sturlunga* compilation underlines the importance of the narrative type of the peaceful chieftain's story by combining several such narratives, whereas the separate *Hrafn's saga* must employ other narrative devices to create the intended focus on the protagonist's moral integrity. The emphasis on this specific character type in *Sturlunga saga*, created by the parallel between Sturla Þórðarson the elder, Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, and Þórðr Sturluson, replaces the long introduction of the separate *Hrafn's saga* with its focus on Hrafn's virtues, so the overall meaning of the text is not lost when the introduction is omitted. Both versions of the saga thus present the same central idea. The separate version expresses a more spiritual perspective and the *Sturlunga* redaction a more social perspective, but the message does not differ: the ideal chieftain should be decisive in legal conflicts, but equally decisive in rejecting violence and aggression and in striving for peace and for the common good.

The comparison between the two versions of *Hrafn's saga* perfectly illustrates how the compiler consciously employed the narrative types in constructing the meaning of *Sturlunga saga*. The use of the narrative types known from stories about the distant past allowed him to create connections between various stories from the recent past, not on the basis of direct causal links between events, but of typological similarity. Such connections enabled him to interpret stories in context of each other, and thus to endow them with new layers of meaning without the necessity of employing more direct interpretative devices, such as those contained in the original introduction of *Hrafn's saga*. As recipients of the texts, we need to reveal the narrative types and their inherent meanings in order to fully appreciate the deeper layers of meaning that are hidden below the surface of the seemingly straightforward historiographical style of the *Sturlunga* compilation.

The peaceful chieftain's story, despite its inherently tragic ending, draws attention to the continuing presence of morally positive values in the Icelandic society during a time of inevitable internal destabilization. *Hrafn's saga* thus presents the recent past as a time of difficulty, but not of a downfall. Furthermore, as the two other central stories of peaceful chieftains in *Sturlunga saga* create a distance from the tragic horizon of expectations of this narrative type, the recipient is reminded that the gloomy ending of *Hrafn's saga* is not the only possible option, and that the overall image of the society in *Sturlunga saga* is more optimistic. Such intertextual interpretation is only possible due to the typological connections between various stories, which are enabled by the narrative types.

4. 2. 4. *Íslendinga saga*: Þórðr Sturluson as the perfect peaceful chieftain

Now that we have understood how the compiler of *Sturlunga saga* employed the narrative type of the peaceful chieftain's story in constructing the structure and meaning of his work, we can turn to the role of this narrative type in the central part of the compilation, *Íslendinga saga*. The long and extensive *Íslendinga saga* can be divided into three main sections. The first section describes the gradual increase of the power of the Sturlung brothers Þórðr, Sighvatr, and Snorri and their subsequent downfall, caused by mutual disputes. The second section deals with the

bloody conflict between the Sturlungs on the one hand and their political rival Gizurr Þorvaldsson and his allies on the other. The third section deals with Gizurr Þorvaldsson's rise to power in Iceland.

The first two sections illustrate the disastrous consequences of disputes among kinsmen, which cause instability within the clan and undermine the Sturlungs' social position. The narrative presents a contrast between the ideal peaceful chieftain Þórðr Sturluson and his aggressive brothers Sighvatr and Snorri, nephew Sturla Sighvatsson, and their arch enemy Gizurr Þorvaldsson. This contrast is essential for the overall moral structure of the saga. The text depicts political intrigue and violent clashes, and it does not avoid direct portrayal of brutal bloodshed, but it does not present the Sturlung Age as a time of general moral downfall or social disintegration. Instead, it illustrates the causes that lead to the fall of influential and capable men, and it criticizes individuals for their aggressive behaviour, immoderation, and excessive greed for power. This criticism is, however, counterbalanced by the saga's emphasis on the continuing presence of positive moral values in the society. These values are represented by several characters, but first and foremost by Þórðr Sturluson, who is primarily characterized by his peacefulness and moderation. On the level of the plot of the story, Þórðr is overshadowed by his brothers, but he is a key figure on the level of discourse. The text employs various narrative devices that draw attention to Þórðr and to the values that he represents.

The contrast between the brothers is shown already at the beginning of *Íslendinga saga*, in a scene that foreshadows the upcoming development. Þórðr defends one of his adherents in a lawsuit and wishes to keep the conflict on the legal level and avoid violence. One of the plaintiffs, however, hurls his axe at Þórðr's back, but Þórðr stays unharmed despite wearing no armour. His brother Sighvatr wants to avenge the attack, and several men are wounded before the fight is interrupted, but Þórðr agrees to a peaceful agreement and pays compensation for the wounds caused by Sighvatr to avoid the cycle of revenge (ch. 5). Although there is no overt reference to divine intervention protecting Þórðr, the scene has a symbolic value due to its focus on the peaceful chieftain, who remains unhurt, as if protected by his good intentions alone. The same symbolic protection later becomes an option to all who are willing to show moderation and follow Þórðr's wise advice. Þórðr is consistently portrayed as a chieftain committed to lessening the cruelty of the power struggle, always choosing peaceful solutions.

The matter becomes complicated when Þórðr is attacked by his own nephew, Sturla Sighvatsson, in a conflict over the family's chieftaincy (chs. 60–62). Sturla does not want to hurt his uncle, but he hurts several of his men. Realizing the inappropriateness of the attack, he stops in the middle of the fight and offers truce and reconciliation to Þórðr. Þórðr accepts the offer, and he refuses Snorri's incitement to attack Sturla in revenge, insisting on solving the dispute in a peaceful manner. Despite this reconciliation, however, the conflicts among the Sturlungs continue, but Þórðr always does his best to dissuade his kinsmen from attacking each other. He keeps Snorri from using force against Sturla, offers to mediate between them, and prevents a meeting while both opponents are in a fierce mood (chs. 64–65). When Sighvatr and Sturla intend to attack Snorri (chs. 112–114), Þórðr criticizes his brother, tries to dissuade him, and predicts the unlucky future of the Sturlungs, suggesting that it is their own immoderate behaviour that will bring about their downfall:

Sighvatr ok synir hans, Sturla ok Kolbeinn, Þórðr kakali, kómu pálmásunnudag í Borgarfjörð með tíu hundruð manna. En er Þórðr Sturluson spurði þat, reið hann í móti þeim ok fann Sighvat, bróður sinn, í Hvítársíðu. Veitti hann Sighvati átöglur miklar um þat, er hann fór at bróður sínum á hátíðum, ok segir, at hann myndi stór gjöld fyrir slíkt taka af guði, gamall maðr. Sighvatr tók undir í gamni ok með nökkurri svá græsku: „Hvárrgi okkar þarf nú at bregða öðrum elli, – eða hvárt gerist þú nú spámaðr, frændi?“ Þórðr svarar: „Engi em ek spámaðr. En þó mun ek þér verða spámaðr. Svá mikill sem þú þykkist nú ok trúir á mátt þinn ok sona þinna, þá munu fáir vetr líða, áðr þat mun mælt, at þar sé mest eftir sik orðit.“ „Reiðr ertu nú, frændi,“ segir Sighvatr, „ok skal eigi marka reiðs manns mál. Kann vera okkr talist betr í annat sinn, þá er vit erum báðir í góðu skapi, ok skal þess at bíða.“ Reið Þórðr þá í brott. (Sturlunga saga I, 391–92)

Sighvatr and his sons Sturla, Kolbeinn, and Þórðr kakali arrived in Borgarfjörðr with ten hundred men on Palm Sunday. When Þórðr Sturluson found out about it, he rode to meet them and met his brother Sighvatr at Hvítársíða. He strongly reproached Sighvatr for intending to attack his brother during the feast days. He said that Sighvatr would pay dearly to God for such an act, an old man as he was. Sighvatr answered jokingly, and yet with some malice: “Neither of us needs to remind the other of his age. And are you pretending to be a prophet now, brother?” Þórðr replied: “I am not a prophet. But I will nevertheless make a prophecy for you. As influential as you now regard yourself, believing in your own and your sons’ power, few winters will pass before people say that most of your power is gone.” “You are angry now, brother,” said Sighvatr, “and an angry man’s words should not be taken seriously. Maybe we can talk better another time, when we both are in a good mood, and we shall wait for that.” Þórðr then rode away.

Þórðr’s prediction draws attention to the central theme of this section of the saga – the destructive effect of internal disputes within the Sturlung clan. The conflicts among the Sturlungs form a distinct part of the saga’s structure, contrasting with their rise to power at the beginning. Þórðr’s peacefulness counterbalances these troublesome events, underlining the text’s focus on the stabilizing forces that hold the society together despite some individuals’ aggressiveness and excessive greed for power. This emphasis on the positive values is further highlighted by the fact that *Íslendinga saga* creates a distance from the tragic ending of the peaceful chieftain’s story. The narrative type builds up the expectation of the protagonist’s violent death, but instead, Þórðr dies of old age in his bed, surrounded by his sons and friends, and the text implies that he dies unafraid of death and satisfied with his life:

Eftir þat var hann óleaðr, er hann hafði til skipat. En hann andaðist föstudag fyrir pálmásunnudag at miðjum degi ok söng í andlátinu: Pater, in manus tuas commendo spiritum meum – eftir Hauki presti. Lik Þórðar var þar jarðat á Eyri, sem hann hafði fyrir sagt, fyrir framan kirkjuna. (Sturlunga saga I, 401)

When he had proclaimed his decisions, he was anointed. He died on Friday before Palm Sunday in the middle of the day, and in the moment of his death he sang *Pater, in manus tuas commendo spiritum meum*, repeating the words after the priest Haukr. Þórðr’s body was buried at Eyri, as he had wished, in front of the church.

According to Guðrún Nordal, Þórðr’s peaceful death is presented as a reward for his efforts towards peace throughout his life, and it underlines his moral righteousness (Nordal 1998, 182–83). As Úlfar Bragason has pointed out, the death scene can highlight the essence of a protagonist’s character and the overall interpretation of his life; the importance of the death scene can be emphasized by narrative symmetry and foreshadowing (Úlfar Bragason 1991a, 453–55). The technique of symmetry is used in the death scene of Þórðr Sturluson – the peacefulness of his death is underlined by a parallel with the death of Bishop Guðmundr Arason, which in turn echoes the deaths of other saintly bishops. Þórðr’s peaceful death contrasts with the bloody events of the Sturlung Age, providing a new perspective. If we interpret Þórðr as the saga’s key figure, which is an interpretation encouraged by the structural pattern of the peaceful chieftain’s story, we see that the saga, instead of portraying the Sturlung Age as a time without moral values, offers positive models of behaviour, based on a clearly defined set of moral values.

4. 2. 5. *Íslendinga saga*: Sturla Sighvatsson and Gizurr Þorvaldsson as fighters

The central conflict in *Íslendinga saga* takes place between Sturla Sighvatsson and Gizurr Þorvaldsson. It must be taken into consideration, however, that it is not the enmity between these two men alone that brings about the Sturlungs' tragic end. It is the mutual strife among the Sturlungs that weakens the clan and makes its members vulnerable. When the open conflict between Sturla and Gizurr breaks out, Snorri Sturluson has fled from Sturla to Norway, and the peacemaker Þórðr Sturluson has died. Without them, Sturla and his father Sighvatr have become relatively weak. This weakness probably makes Sturla even more eager to improve his position by defeating his enemies, but this time it leads to his fall.

Open enmity between Sturla and Gizurr starts in the spring of 1238, when Sturla captures Gizurr during an originally friendly meeting near Apavatn and forces him to swear him oaths and promise to leave the land (ch. 129). Sturla's pretext for this act is Gizurr's refusal to join him on a planned expedition, which Sturla understands as a betrayal. In fact, however, Sturla's aggression against Gizurr is motivated by rivalry in the power struggle. It is directly admitted in a dialogue that Sturla intends to gain power over all Iceland, and that he feels that Gizurr threatens his position in Iceland more than anyone else:

Gizurr spyr Sturlu þá, hví hann léti leggja hendr á hann. Sturla bað hann ekki efast í því, at hann ætlaði sér meira hlut en öðrum mönnum á Íslandi. „En mér þykkir sem þá sé allir yfirkomnir, er þú ert, því at ek uggi þik einn manna á Íslandi, ef eigi ferr vel með okkr.“ (Sturlunga saga I, 414)

Gizurr asked Sturla why he made his men capture him. Sturla told him not to doubt that he intended to gain a higher position than other Icelanders. "And I believe that everyone will be defeated if you are defeated, because you are the only Icelander I fear, if there is not agreement between us."

After this, it becomes clear that a decisive battle is inevitable. This is directly stated in the text when Gizurr's ally Kolbeinn Arnórsson prepares for the final fight against Sturla (ch. 129):

Þeir Kolbeinn frændr réðu þat á Kilinum, at þeir skyldi flokka uppi hafa ok slíta eigi fyrr en aðrir hvarir væri í helju, Sturla eða þeir. (Sturlunga saga I, 415)

Kolbeinn and his kinsmen decided at Kjölur to gather forces and not to dissolve them until either Sturla or they were in Hel.

Gizurr is held prisoner, but he escapes and joins Kolbeinn Arnórsson, who is already gathering a force against Sturla (ch. 130). Both parties show open enmity toward each other by plundering and armed clashes (chs. 131–135). August 21, 1238, the Sturlungs are finally defeated and killed by Gizurr and Kolbeinn in the battle of Örylgsstaðir (chs. 137–138). After the defeat of the Sturlungs, Kolbeinn gains the entire northern domain and seizes Sighvatr's inheritance, claiming that the Sturlungs have forfeited it (chs. 139–142). Snorri Sturluson returns from Norway and intends to claim compensation for the loss of his kinsmen at the Alþingi in 1241, but Kolbeinn arrives with a large force and refuses to negotiate with him (ch. 148). Soon after that, September 23, 1241, Gizurr attacks and kills Snorri at his farm in Reykjaholt (ch. 151).

The remaining significant Sturlungs, Órækja Snorrason and Sturla Þórðarson, now have every reason for open enmity against Gizurr. They kill his kinsman Klængr Bjarnarson (ch. 153) and intend to attack Gizurr, but they fail because they are badly informed about his whereabouts, but he is well informed about their intentions (chs. 153–155). A battle finally breaks out at the Skálholt bishopric, but the outcome is not decisive, and both sides agree to let

Bishop Sigvarðr arbitrate between them (ch. 156). That is, however, not the end of their dispute because Gizurr and his kinsman Ormr Bjarnarson still hold a grudge against the Sturlungs for the killing of Klængr. A meeting is arranged to negotiate the matter, but during the meeting, Gizurr and Kolbeinn capture Órækja and Sturla in a treacherous manner. Órækja is forced to leave Iceland, and Sturla is forced to swear allegiance to Kolbeinn (ch. 157). After these events, Gizurr Þorvaldsson becomes the most powerful chieftain in Iceland. The text does not conceal the idea that he gained this position by partly unfair means, but he cannot be regarded as the undisputed villain of this section of the saga because his opponents do not behave much better in some situations. Overall, the moral interpretation of this section is ambiguous, and its message must be sought in the deeper layers of the text's meaning.

The portrayal of Gizurr Þorvaldsson in *Íslendinga saga* is so ambivalent that it has been regarded as inconsistent, and some scholars have even argued that the sections in which he is depicted positively were not originally in Sturla Þórðarson's text but were interpolated by *Sturlunga saga*'s compiler from an independent, now lost saga of Gizurr (Olsen 1902, 311–25; Kålund 1904, iv; Pétur Sigurðsson 1933–1935, 42; Nedrelid 1994, 615–16; Helgi Þorláksson 2012, 60–61; 2017, 209). This assumption, however, makes little sense in context of the saga's overall pattern of evaluation of the protagonists. Although Gizurr Þorvaldsson and Sturla Sighvatsson are presented as arch enemies – or, with regard to the internal logic of the text, just because of that – there is a remarkable narrative symmetry between them in the saga. This has been noticed by several scholars, but their interpretations of this fact have not been convincing.

Guðrún Nordal has suggested that the two opponents are constantly presented as contrasting characters, representing the opposition between recklessness and moderation (Nordal 1998, 53–61). She has focused on the negative portrayal of Sturla and on how the description of his excessive ambition is emphasized by the symbolism of the wolf (Nordal 1998, 163–71). Enlightening as this analysis of symbolism in the saga is, Nordal lets it overshadow various other aspects of Sturla's personality that are depicted in the accounts of his action throughout the saga. Furthermore, Gizurr's behaviour can hardly be regarded as an example of moderation, as he often acts much more violently than necessary.

Úlfar Bragason, on the other hand, states that both the birth scene and the death scene mark Sturla Sighvatsson as the undisputed hero of the saga. He refers to studies of the literary motif of a heroic last stand with its typical narrative features, such as dreams and omens, unequal forces, or the narrative focus on the hero, and concludes that Sturla is presented as a conventional positive hero (Úlfar Bragason 1986b, 68–76). Nevertheless, drawing a conclusion about the concept of heroism in the whole saga on account of one single scene is too limiting because it isolates the death scene from the saga's general portrayal of Sturla and his opponents. In the following, it will be attempted to shed better light on the meaning of the narrative parallel between Sturla and Gizurr.

The two protagonists are directly characterized by the narrator throughout the saga, and such direct characterization is usually positive. In the direct characterization of Sturla Sighvatsson it is emphasized that he gives wise advice and is a popular chieftain, a good troop leader, and a brisk man:

[...] engi flokkur þótti betr siðaðr vera en sá, er Sturla hafði. Lagði hann vel til ok allgegnliga þessa mála ok fekk af því mikla vinsæld suðr þar. (*Sturlunga saga I*, 285)

[...] no troop seemed to have better manners than the one led by Sturla. He gave good and useful advice in these matters, so he gained much popularity there in the south.

Reið Sturla á lötum hesti, er Álfarleggr var kallaðr, allra hesta mestr ok friðastr. Hann var í rauðri ólpu, ok hygg ek, at fáir muni sét hafa röskliga mann (Sturlunga saga I, 334)

Sturla rode a tame horse named Álfarleggr, the largest and best-looking of all horses. He was wearing a red jacket and I think that few people have seen a brisker man.

Similarly, the direct characterization of Gizurr Þorvaldsson is altogether positive and portrays him as a popular and capable chieftain. Most importantly, it emphasizes that Gizurr does not behave immoderately:

[...] Hann gerðist höfðingi mikill, vitr maðr ok vinsæll. Þá hafði hann átta vetr ok tuttugu. [...] Gizurr var meðalmaðr á vöxt ok allra manna bezt á sik kominn, vel limaðr, snareygðr, – og lágu fast augun –, ok skýrligr í viðbragði, betr talaðr en flestir menn hér á landi, blíðmæltr ok mikill rómrinn, engi ákafamaðr ok þótti jafnan inn drjúgligsti til ráðagerðar. En þó bar svá oft til, þá er hann var við deilur höfðingja eða venzlamanna sinna, at hann var afskiptalítill, ok þótti þá eigi víst, hverjum hann vildi veita. Hann var frændrikr, ok flestir inir bestu bændr fyrir sunnan land ok víðar váru vinir hans. [...] (Sturlunga saga I, 402)

[...] He became an influential chieftain, a wise and popular man. He was then twenty-eight years old. [...] Gizurr was a man of average height, but extremely well-built, with strong arms and legs and keen eyes with a firm look – and he answered cleverly, was more eloquent than most men in this land, and he spoke kindly, but with a strong voice. He did not behave immoderately and seemed to always stick to his decisions. Sometimes, however, when he witnessed other chieftains' or his friends' disagreements, he intervened only little, and it was not certain whom he wished to support. He had many kinsmen, and most of the best farmers in the south of the land were his adherents.

In contrast to this directly expressed praise, the indirect characterization of both protagonists in individual episodes shows that they often act immoderately and unwisely, and that they tend to turn to excessive and often unnecessary violence. The criticism of such behaviour is expressed either by the narrative focus on the defender, or more directly in dialogues and comments.

Sturla Sighvatsson's character is revealed in several key scenes, which are not an essential part of the saga's account of the historical events, but they are important as a means of evaluation. In an introductory scene from his youth, Sturla wants to try a precious sword owned by a farmer, takes it without asking for permission, and a fight breaks out. Sturla fights carelessly, hurts the farmer more than he intends to, and is criticized for it by his father, who then brings about a reconciliation for the wound (ch. 32). Later in the saga, Sturla fights for power recklessly and violently; his behaviour is again criticized by his father Sighvatr, who is a rather aggressive man himself but understands that his son's ambition is excessive. He ridicules Sturla's greed for power in a long monologue, in which he lists the most influential chieftains as Sturla's future farm servants (ch. 125). Sturla's hot temper is reflected in his response: he jumps up in anger, goes out, and leaves his father's farm soon after. Sighvatr then begins to indirectly predict Sturla's fall:

Þá tók Sighvatr til orða: „Hvé lengi mun haldast ofsi sjá inn mikli, er Sturla hefir umfram alla frændr vára?“ Már svarar: „Þat þykkir líkligt, at lengi haldist fyrir þínar sakir ok annarra frænda yðvarra göfugra. En þó muntu slíku næst geta, bóndi, ok vilda ek heyra, hvers þú gætir til eða hversu þér segði hugr um þetta.“ Sighvatr svarar: „Ekki kann ek til slíks at sjá, en fá eru óhóf alllangæ. En þó má vera, at þetta sé langætt, ef hann drepr eigi brátt feti, en ef hann drepr, þá mun hann drepa eigi sem minnst.“ (Sturlunga saga I, 411)

Sighvatr said: "How long will this huge immoderation, which characterizes Sturla more than any other of our kinsmen, last?" Már answered: "I deem it likely that it will last long, due to you and your other noble kinsmen. But you would surely make a better guess, yeoman, and I would like to hear what you expect or how you feel about this." Sighvatr replied: "I am not able to predict such things, but immoderation seldom lasts too long. It is

nevertheless possible that this time it will last long, if he does not stumble soon, but if he stumbles, he will not stumble too little.”

Sighvatr attempts to dissuade Sturla from his immoderate plans, and he criticizes his actions again. Sturla’s response is more ambivalent this time: at first, he jumps up and goes out again, but then he comes back and sits humbly by his father’s feet. This probably shows that Sturla understands that he is going too far, and that he feels uncertain about his actions:

Ok þegar er hann kom á bæinn, gekk hann til föður síns ok fagnaði honum ok settist niðr at fótum honum. Sighvatr spurði hann at ferðum hans ok erindum í fjörðuna. En Sturla lét sér fátt um finnast. Sighvatr var styggr í talinu ok sagði þat eitt erindi verit mundu hafa, en vera myndi verra en ekki. Sturla kvað hann þat eigi mundu vita. Spratt hann þá upp ok gekk út, kom inn afir ok settist í sama stað. Sighvatr tók þá til orða: „Ætlar þú suðr um land?“ Sturla svarar: „Mælt hefi ek þat.“ „Þar hefir þú illt erindi, er þú ætlar at deila um fé Kols,“ segir Sighvatr, „því at þar er þat fé, er margr mun stórt illt af hljóta, því at illa er fengit.“ (Sturlunga saga I, 411)

And when he arrived at the farm, he went to his father, greeted him, and sat down by his feet. Sighvatr asked him about his journeys and errands in the Firths, but Sturla did not like such questions. Sighvatr talked angrily and said that it had surely been only such errands that Sturla should not have undertaken. Sturla replied that Sighvatr could not know that. He jumped up and went out, but then he came back and sat down in the same place. Then Sighvatr asked: “Are you going to travel south?” Sturla answered: “I have been talking about it.” Sighvatr said: “You have a bad errand there if you intend to claim Kolr’s property, because that property will cause many men great trouble, for it is being gained unjustly.”

Sturla’s uncertainty is also obvious in his behaviour toward Gizurr at the beginning of their conflict. When Sturla captures Gizurr, his indecision at a crucial moment reveals his doubt. He clearly considers killing Gizurr, but when he cannot decide to do so, it is not a sign of mercy and moderation, but rather of his inability to predict the development of events and to make up his mind (ch. 129):

Þat er sögn Gizurar sjálfs, at þá er þeir námu staðar í hrauninu fyrir ofan Álftavatn ok sátu á baki, ok þagði Sturla svá um hrið. Ok er svá hafði verit um stund, mælti hann: „Ríðum enn.“ Hefir Gizurr þá helzt grunat, hvárt Sturla efaðist þá eigi, hvern veg hann skyldi af gera við hann ok enn fleiri menn aðra. (Sturlunga saga I, 414)

Gizurr himself has said that when they made a stop in the lava field near Lake Álftavatn and sat on their horses, Sturla was silent for a while. After some time, he said: “Let us ride on.” Gizurr then suspected that Sturla was in doubt as to what he should do with him and some others.

Sturla now acts as the opposite of the ideal chieftain, who is moderate, and yet decisive. Sighvatr’s comments throughout this section of the saga serve as a narrative device for evaluating Sturla’s behaviour. There is an obvious opposition between Sighvatr’s and the narrator’s evaluation of Sturla, but it is unlikely to be an inconsistency. Instead, it seems to be a sophisticated narrative device for comparing the protagonist to an ideal. This becomes even clearer when we note that the same pattern is also found in the portrayal of Gizurr Þorvaldsson.

The first negative perception of Gizurr is also expressed by Sighvatr Sturluson. When he is asked about his opinion of the boy, he answers “I do not like that frowning brow” (*ekki er mér um ygglibrún þá, Sturlunga saga I, 300*), indicating that he feels that Gizurr is fierce and stubborn. Sighvatr’s utterance is followed by a dialogue in which Gizurr’s father Þorvaldr predicts the future conflict:

Þá mælti Sighvatr: „Þess vil ek biðja þik, Þorvaldr, at vit gætum svá til með sonum okkrum, at þeir haldi vel vináttu með frændsemi.“ Þorvaldr leit niðr fyrir sik – ok heldr áhyggjusamliga – ok mælti: „Gætt mun, meðan vit lífum báðir.“ Þetta virðist mönnum in mesta spásaga, at því sem síðar varð, því at Þorvaldr var sálaðr, þá er Apavatnsförför var. (Sturlunga saga I, 300)

Then Sighvatr said: “I want to ask you that favour, Þorvaldr, that we both keep an eye on our sons, so they retain their friendship and respect their kinship.” Þorvaldr looked down – somewhat worried – and he said: “It will be so while we both live.” People thought that this was a significant prediction, with regard to what happened later, for Þorvaldr was dead when the meeting by Apavatn took place.

Such direct references to future events, as opposed to enigmatic prophecies in dreams, are unusual in *Sturlunga saga*. This dialogue thus draws attention to the upcoming conflict, and it serves as a device for structuring the narrative and constructing its moral framework.

The contrast between the positive direct characterization and indirect portrayal is even more striking in the key scenes that depict Gizurr’s action. Gizurr is repeatedly criticized for his aggressiveness, whether it is physical violence in the battle of Örlygsstaðir (ch. 138), or unfair behaviour, such as the betrayal of Sturla Þórðarson and Órækja Snorrason (ch. 157). Before the account of the battle of Örlygsstaðir, the horror of bloodshed is underlined in the text by a long sequence of prophetic dreams with stanzas about death and destruction (ch. 136), which emphasize the condemnation of Gizurr as the aggressor. The description of Gizurr’s brutality in the battle speaks for itself, so no additional comments are necessary for expressing an evaluation:

Þat segja menn þeir, er hjá váru, at Gizurr hljóp báðum fótum upp við, er hann hjó Sturlu, svá at loft sá milli fótanna ok jarðarinnar. (Sturlunga saga I, 436)

Those who were there say that when Gizurr hewed at Sturla, he jumped up with both legs, so one could see air between his feet and the ground.

Within the terse saga style, this is an unusually open depiction of violence, and as such, it emphasizes the impression of Gizurr taking pleasure in killing his opponent. After this unusually merciless killing, Gizurr also plunders Sturla’s body and steals his money, jewellery, and weapons. No direct comment is needed for understanding the moral evaluation of such acts.

In his conflict with Órækja Snorrason and Sturla Þórðarson (ch. 157), Gizurr promises them a peaceful negotiation, but then he captures and imprisons them. His treachery is sharply criticized by the two clerics who witness it, and even by some of the men from his ally’s troop:

Biskup ok Brandr ábóti bregðast mjök reiðir við þetta ok kalla in mestu svik við sik ger ok alla þá, er hlut áttu at þessum málum. [...] Bændr nökkurir ór flokki Kolbeins gengu þá til Órækju ok kváðust skyldu berjast með honum ok kváðu þetta in mestu svik. [...] Sigvarðr biskup ok Brandr ábóti ámæltu Gizuri mjök um þessar málalyktir, at honum hefði illa farit. (Sturlunga saga I, 468)

The bishop and Abbot Brandr became enraged by this and called it the worst betrayal of themselves and of everyone who was involved in the case. [...] Some farmers from Kolbein’s troop went over to Órækja and offered to fight for him, because they deemed this the worst betrayal. [...] Bishop Sigvarðr and Abbot Brandr strongly reproached Gizurr for his decision, saying that he had committed a misdeed.

Gizurr’s arrogance is clearly shown when he answers that he sees more harm in everything else than in this (*Gizurr svarar svá, kvað á öllu öðru meiri mein sjá en þessu, Sturlunga saga I, 468*). The narrative structure of this episode follows the same pattern as the episode dealing with Sturla: the protagonist behaves immoderately, is criticized, and responds arrogantly. The clerics’ opinion again serves as a means of evaluation. And again, there is a contrast between this evaluation and the narrator’s voice. Such a contrast implies a comparison between the ideal chieftain, portrayed in the direct characterization, and the actual chieftain’s behaviour. This means that there is not an opposition between the depiction of Sturla and Gizurr, but rather a parallel. The similarity of the pattern is too striking to be a coincidence, and it would be a

simplification to suspect the saga's writer of failing to create consistent personal portraits, or of unsuccessfully trying to conceal his personal bias. Both portraits together make sense as a narrative device for expressing certain ideas about the behaviour of chieftains. The text presents neither Sturla nor Gizurr one-sidedly as a villain, but it contrasts their occasional recklessness and brutality with the image of the ideal chieftain. This ideal is not presented as a distant illusion, however, but rather as a set of qualities that the chieftains inherently possess, but they do not fully develop them due to their stubborn greed for power.

Both Sturla and Gizurr are also contrasted to the ideal peaceful chieftain Þórðr Sturluson, who embodies the personal qualities that are praised in the direct characterizations. Like in *Njáls saga*, where the protagonist is contrasted with his own aggressive sons and closest friend, Þórðr's aggressive counterparts are not presented in the text as reprehensible villains, but rather as ambivalent characters with both good and bad qualities, who cause their own downfall by making unwise decisions, motivated by their pride and belligerence. The tragic aspect of these stories is the peaceful chieftain's inability to dissuade his kinsmen and friends from their violent intentions, but the presence of the peacemaker nevertheless emphasizes the positive moral values that hold the society together.

This example again illustrates how the narrative interprets and evaluates characters by creating parallels or contrasts between them, this time within the same story. The amount of direct narratorial commentary that would disrupt the fluency of the account is minimized by the use of this narrative device. Real historical events are fitted into the structural pattern of a specific narrative type, which makes it possible to endow an extremely complex chain of events with additional layers of meaning that transcend the events themselves. The narrative reflects the whole process of the social development in thirteenth-century Iceland with its positive and negative aspects, and it expresses the opinion that the positive elements sufficiently counterbalance the flaws and prevent chaos and disintegration, although they cannot always prevent violence.

4. 3. CONCLUSION: MEDIATORS AND PEACEFUL CHIEFTAINS, CULTURAL MEMORY, AND ICELANDIC IDENTITY

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries were a time of intense social transformation in Iceland, but development does not necessarily mean disintegration, and it is not presented as such in *Sturlunga saga* either. The evaluation of events in the compilation is realistic and balanced – it is free from excessive idealization, but it does not express a general condemnation of the society. The sagas truthfully record the social development, which involved increased intensity of conflict, but they also show that reconciliation was still a preferred solution, although it was reached by different means and under different conditions than before. In the texts, the real recent historical events are fitted into certain narrative types – in the sagas dealing with internal Icelandic relations, the dominant narrative types are the conflict story and the peaceful chieftain's story. Their structural patterns and their focus on specific character types add new layers of meaning to the depictions of real events and underline certain themes that are foregrounded in the evaluation of the social development in the narratives.

The central theme of *Sturlunga saga*'s account of internal Icelandic relations is the contrast between aggressive and peaceful chieftains or between troublemakers and mediators. *Sturlunga saga* does not avoid depictions of brutal violence, but instead of portraying the Sturlung Age as a time without moral values, it counterbalances the scenes of bloodshed with an intense focus on the presence of characters who behave moderately and aim at preventing violence – peaceful chieftains and mediators. These character types are essential for the meaning of the whole compilation because they define the personal qualities that every socially significant person should possess, and the texts show that the Sturlung Age did not lack such morally positive personalities. Another important theme is the significance of strong leaders. In the absence of royal power, the authority of powerful chieftains was essential for conflict resolution, and such chieftains are often portrayed as almost royal figures, although there was no direct connection between them and the royal court at the earlier stages of the development.

Þorgils saga ok Hafliða focuses on the contrast between the careless and violent troublemaker Már and the mediators who aim at preventing violence. Because of Már's immoderation, Hafliði 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 Hafliða*, the mediators manage to bring about a reconciliation before the decisive armed clash takes place. In their argumentation, the mediators highlight honour (*virðing*, *sómi*, *mannvirðing*, *sæmd*) as a central value, but this honour is not defined as an unconditional effort for victory, but rather as righteousness and moderation. Overall, 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. The 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 was still maintained by efficient internal mechanisms of conflict resolution. The increased focus on individual mediators, as opposed to mediation by "the people" in the typical conflict stories in the sagas of Icelanders, leaves more room for argumentation in direct speech that highlights the moral aspects of conflict and reconciliation. These moral aspects inherently shape the narrative type of the conflict story, but they are more explicitly foregrounded in the contemporary sagas.

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. Sturla is nevertheless not a sufficiently strong leader yet, and social harmony can be renewed only with the help of a more powerful chieftain, Jón Loptsson of the Oddaverjar. Due to his authority and influence, his decisions are not disputed by anybody. That gives him the power to arbitrate conflicts, mediate reconciliation,

and prevent violence. Such representatives of centralized power are of essential importance throughout *Sturlunga saga*, and the compilation generally depicts the centralization of power as a positive development, emphasizing its importance for peace. *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.

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 again 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, his decisions are still respected by honourable people, but the society lacks a central authority, so instability and violence increase. The saga thus illustrates the importance of centralized power, which strongly resembles royal rule, although there is no direct connection to the monarchy yet.

Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar returns to the narrative type of the peaceful chieftain's story and to the contrast between a peaceful and aggressive local leader. Despite some degree of difference in focus, both versions of the saga express the same central idea that a good chieftain should always value the common good more than his own power. The saga 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. In the *Sturlunga* compilation, the focus on the character type of the peaceful chieftain is also 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 *Hrafn's saga*, which draws attention to the contrast between good and evil. The overall meaning of the narrative is thus not changed by the omission of the introductory part in the *Sturlunga* version. 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.

Svínfellinga 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, *Svínfellinga 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.

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 this 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.

A significant element of continuity between the sagas about the Saga Age, the earlier contemporary sagas, and the later contemporary sagas is that the character type of the peaceful chieftain is typically presented in contrast to its negative counterpart, an excessively aggressive chieftain. This character can be the protagonist's friend or kinsman, as in *Njáls saga* or in *Íslendinga saga*, where Þórðr Sturluson is contrasted to his own aggressive brothers and nephew. In the contemporary sagas, the aggressive chieftain can also be presented as a clearly defined villain, as in *Sturlu saga* or *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*. The contrast between the peaceful and aggressive character type reflects the presence of both positive and negative values in every society; in this respect, the Icelandic society is presented as neither better nor worse than any other. Moreover, the belligerent chieftains who are not depicted as villains – Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, Njáll's sons, Sturla Sighvatsson, or Gizurr Þorvaldsson – show that good and bad qualities are also present in every individual, and that a capable man can be brought down by his own wrong decisions. The saga criticizes such decisions and individual examples of violent behaviour, and it is often the peaceful chieftain who expresses such evaluation in direct speech. His voice can replace direct narratorial commentary, which is scarce in the saga style.

A specific characteristic of the typical peaceful chieftain is also his ability to predict future events. In the sagas of Icelanders and the contemporary sagas, foreshadowing usually comes from enigmatic otherworldly beings; predictions are scarcely ascribed to living people. The peaceful chieftain, however, utters forecasts both in *Njáls saga*, where Njáll predicts the circumstances of Gunnarr's death, and in *Íslendinga saga*, where Þórðr predicts that the fall of the Sturlungs will be caused by their own immoderation. Such predictions also contribute to the moral evaluation of the events. Unlike the supernatural prophecies, omens, or dreams in the sagas, which mark the inevitability of upcoming events, predictions uttered by living persons rather work as warnings, by which the peaceful chieftains actively attempt to prevent violence. If violence is not prevented, it is because of the decisions and acts of the other protagonists.

That underlines individual responsibility for violence, as opposed to a moral downfall of the entire society.

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.

5. NARRATIVE TYPES AND ICELANDIC IDENTITY IN THE DEPICTIONS OF CONTACTS 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 subsequently led to the official acceptance of Norwegian royal rule in Iceland in 1262, which then led to an increased interest in the contact with Norway in the narratives of recent Icelandic history.

It is noteworthy that the focus of the contemporary sagas depends not only on the time that they depict, but also on the time of their origin. *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða*, *Sturlu saga*, *Guðmundar saga dýra*, and *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* probably already existed in written form in the first half of the thirteenth century.¹⁴ These texts deal with events that took place before the process of establishing the union with Norway began, and they focus on internal Icelandic politics. Their main theme is the principles of power, the desirable qualities of its representatives, and the mechanisms of internal conflict resolution and renewal of peace. Contact with Norway is, on the other hand, one of the important themes in *Elzta Guðmundar saga*, which also deals with relatively early events that are not directly connected to the process of establishing the union, but it was written around 1320–1330, when Iceland was already incorporated into the kingdom. Most of the other contemporary sagas that were originally composed after the establishment of the union also focus on the theme of contact and integration much more than the earlier contemporary sagas that were discussed in the previous chapter.¹⁵ That implies that the establishment of the political union did not automatically mean that Icelanders had become fully integrated into the Norse social space, so they needed to negotiate their position within this social space more than ever before. The protagonists of the later contemporary sagas therefore embody various aspects of the contact between Iceland and Norway, so the narrative portrayals of these identity bearers contribute to the construction of the medieval Icelanders' identity within the broader horizon of the Norse social space.

¹⁴ According to current research, *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða* was probably originally composed around 1240 at the latest, but possibly already around 1200; *Sturlu saga* in the first quarter of the thirteenth century; *Guðmundar saga dýra* shortly after 1212; *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* around 1230–1260 (Úlfar Bragason 2005, 431–32).

¹⁵ *Íslendinga saga* was probably originally composed shortly before 1284; *Þórðar saga kakala* after 1270; *Þorgils saga skarða* after 1275 (Úlfar Bragason 2005, 432–33); *Arons saga Hjörleifssonar* around 1320. An exception is *Svinfellinga saga*, which was probably composed around 1300 (Úlfar Bragason 2005, 432), but it does not deal with contact with Norway because it portrays men who were not actively involved in the political alliances with Norway at the time that is depicted in the saga.

5. 1. ARI ÞORGEIRSSON: THE JARL'S SWORD AND SHIELD

5. 1. 1. The narrative type of the royal retainer's story

The narrative type of the story of an Icelandic retainer at the Norwegian royal court is a significant part of the saga tradition, known from both the sagas of Icelanders and the kings' sagas. Royal service as a source of prestige was a well-known cultural concept, as well as a part of historical reality. The reason for the Icelanders' efforts to gain prestige at the royal court has been well formulated by Ann-Marie Long: "where their power was personal, his had a more abstract and therefore more absolute provenance" (Long 2017, 241). This historical reality became ever more important to Icelanders in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but it is also reflected as a cultural concept in stories dealing with the Saga Age.

The structural pattern of the royal retainer's story has four main stages: (1) an introduction of the protagonist as a fierce, belligerent man, whose ferocity causes trouble and threatens social harmony in Iceland; (2) the protagonist's journey to Norway, where his ferocity gets a meaningful purpose in service to a monarch; (3) the protagonist proves his worth in a quest away from the royal court; (4) the protagonist is appreciated by the monarch for completing his quest. An optional fifth stage is the protagonist's death in battle together with the monarch or in protecting the monarch's life. Even when the story has this ending, however, it should not be considered as being inherently tragic, because death by the monarch's side is presented as a glorious deed motivated by a noble purpose. The narrative type can thus be regarded as an inherently optimistic story of the protagonist's transformation from a troublemaker into a defender of the social order.

A perfect example is *Fóstbræðra saga*, which contains two interconnected stories of Icelandic royal retainers (see also Arnold 2003, 159–72). The sworn brothers Þorgeirr and Þormóðr are introduced as reckless, violent men, who are unpopular in Iceland because of their overbearing behaviour that causes unrest in their district. Þorgeirr is finally outlawed for an unjustified killing. He sails to Norway and joins the retinue of King Óláfr Haraldsson, where he learns to put his courage to a meaningful use in defending social order. He proves his worth in two quests: first a trade journey to Vinland, where the conditions for Norse merchants are difficult at the time, and then a journey to join Jarl Rögnvaldr of Orkney in fights against raiders. King Óláfr warns Þorgeirr against returning to Iceland, but he returns anyway and is soon killed in an armed clash. This implies that his position as a retainer gave him not only a purpose, but also protection by the king's luck, which he lost by leaving the retinue.

This part of the narrative is followed by the story of Þormóðr, who likewise causes trouble in Iceland by his womanizing and fierceness. After Þorgeirr's death he sails to Norway and joins King Óláfr's retinue. His quest is a journey to Greenland to avenge Þorgeirr on the king's behalf because the king feels that his retainer's death is his personal loss and a potential source of shame. When Þormóðr is pursued by his enemies in Greenland and almost dies of exhaustion and wounds, he is saved by a man who has seen King Óláfr in a dream – this implies that the king's luck protects Þormóðr even when the king is not physically present. When Þormóðr has proven his worth by avenging his sworn brother in Greenland, he returns to King Óláfr and is praised for his deed. Afterwards, Þormóðr follows the king even to exile and then to battle because "he finds it better to die with him than to outlive him" (*honum þótti betra at deyja með*

honum en lifa eftir hann). He dies together with the king in the battle of Stiklastaðir, and he is called “King Saint Óláfr’s champion” (*kappi ins helga Óláfs konungs*) at the very end of the saga. This underlines the idea that Þormóðr’s identity is defined by his loyalty to the monarch because it is this loyalty that transforms his reckless ferocity into meaningful courage. The ideal retainer does not fight for himself, but always on his lord’s behalf, whether the monarch is physically present or not. In royal service, the fighter can use his courage in a meaningful and useful manner – instead of being an aggressor and a threat to the social order, he becomes a defender of the social order represented by the monarch.

5. 1. 2. Þorvarðr and Ari Þorgeirsson as ideal royal retainers

The story of Ari Þorgeirsson and his brother Þorvarðr in *Elzta Guðmundar saga* (chs. 1–7)¹⁶ presents two individuals who may be perceived as examples of ideal royal retainers in the sense defined above. It takes place during a time of fierce civil wars in Norway, when the rulers’ position was unstable and not everybody remained faithful to one monarch, but these Icelandic brothers are portrayed as a model of genuine loyalty to King Ingi Haraldsson (1136–1161) and his allies.

The saga reveals that Þorvarðr is troublesome in his youth: he mortally wounds a royal retainer in an armed clash as soon as he first arrives in Norway (ch. 1). King Ingi nevertheless forgives Þorvarðr and accepts him into his retinue, where the young Icelander gets a chance to refine his behaviour and find useful purposes for his ferocity. The text is very brief and does not describe Þorvarðr’s activities as a retainer, but it emphasizes his loyalty to King Ingi by stating that Þorvarðr returns to Iceland after the king’s death in battle because he does not believe that any other monarch could be King Ingi’s equal (ch. 4):

[...] ok lýsti því, at hann vildi engum konungi þjóna jarðneskum eptir Inga konung, því at honum þótti sem engi mundi verða hans maki. (*Guðmundar sögur biskups*, 21)

[...] and he proclaimed that he did not wish to serve any king on earth after King Ingi, because he felt that none of them would be his equal.

Þorvarðr encourages his brother Ari to participate in the revenge for King Ingi in Norway, which he does. The saga does not describe any quest in which Ari would prove his worth away from the ruler, but this difference cannot be regarded as a deliberately created distance from the narrative type. Instead, it reflects the changes in the historical reality – during the civil war, the rulers needed their supporters to stay by their side, so there was no time for glorious quests abroad. Nevertheless, Ari proves his worth in the internal fights in Norway. He joins King Ingi’s former ally, Jarl Erlingr Ormsson, in battles against their adversary until they defeat him. Erlingr honours Ari greatly. Jarl Erlingr and his son, King Magnús Erlingsson, then defeat another enemy with the help of Ari, who gains glory and returns to Iceland as an honourable man (chs. 4–6). After his brother’s involvement in a bloody fight at the Alþingi, he returns to Jarl Erlingr (ch. 6). Later, Erlingr’s retainers reproach Ari for his intention to return to Iceland when a battle is imminent in 1166, and they accuse him of disloyalty to the jarl (ch. 7):

¹⁶ All references to *Elzta Guðmundar saga* follow the 1983 edition by Stefán Karlsson, but the spelling of the text has been normalized here. The normalization and translations are my own.

En þeir er helst váru öfundarmenn Ara með hirðinni, þá lögðu þeir honum til ámælis, er hann skyldi svá leggja fylgðina við Erling jarl at fara frá honum, er jarl þurfti helst manna við ok ófriðar var ván. (Guðmundar sögur biskups, 27)

Those who envied Ari most within the retinue reproached him for showing only such loyalty to Jarl Erlingr that he would leave him when the jarl was in greatest need of men and a fight was imminent.

Ari therefore stays in Norway. In an unexpected attack by the enemy, Ari sacrifices his life to save Erlingr, who then praises his courage and extraordinary loyalty (ch. 7):

„Þat er víst at þar fór sá er oss hefr best fylgt ok vér höfum öngvan jafn hvatan reyndan ok varð hann einn búinn til af yðr öllum at gefa sjálfviljandi sitt líf fyrir mitt líf. Nú man ek eigi hans frændum launat fá þann skaða er þeir hafa beðit fyrir mínar sakir.“ (Guðmundar sögur biskups, 30)

“It is certain that we have lost the one who has served us best, and we have never met anyone as bold as him. Out of all of you, he was the only one ready to voluntarily give his own life for mine. I will never be able to repay his kinsmen for the loss they have suffered for my sake.”

When Þorvarðr finds out about his brother’s death, he composes an *erfiflokkur*, a memorial poem, because he wishes to “express his glory in a poem that would be spread far and wide” (*láta koma frægð hans í kvæði, þat er borit væri allviða, Guðmundar sögur biskups, 30*).

The central focus of this story is courage and loyalty, which are rewarded by prestige and glory even after the fighter’s death. This narrative focus is also reflected in the text’s style – the episode in which Ari sacrifices his life to save his lord is described in detail and with a greater amount of emotion than the terse saga style usually employs. The protagonist’s glory is emphasized by Þorvarðr’s stanzas that are included in the text, and by the final remark that Þorvarðr composed a memorial poem to commemorate his brother’s deeds. Such celebratory poetry is typical for the praise of kings and jarls in the kings’ sagas, so it suggests that Ari gained some of the aristocratic glory by his alliance with the Norwegian rulers.

5. 1. 3. The royal retainer’s story, cultural memory, and Icelandic identity

The narrative type of the royal retainer’s story creates a parallel between Þorvarðr and Ari Þorgeirsson and similar characters known from stories about the Saga Age. The choice of a specific narrative type is a conscious decision that shapes the meaning of the story, making it more than an account of specific individuals’ lives. The story is integrated into the audience’s cultural memory and connected to other elements of that memory, and as such, it participates in the construction of the audience’s identity. The fierce fighter is significant as an embodiment of confidence and fearlessness, but the structural pattern of the narrative shows that such images of strength are not connected to ideas of a desire for independence and isolation. On the contrary, what distinguishes the noble fighter from a mere barbarian sword-wielder is his loyalty to a Norwegian monarch or aristocrat. 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, because defending a ruler who is regarded as rightful is an end that justifies the means. Furthermore, royal power is a source of prestige that is much more abstract and absolute than the sources of status offered by the Icelandic society; property can be lost and a victory in one dispute can be followed by a defeat in another, but glory gained abroad has a specifically permanent value.

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 Icelander's voluntary decision to enter the ruler's service, and the fact that he chooses to remain faithful when his sword is most needed. The difference between passive subordination and active loyalty is very significant in this context.

5. 2. INGIMUNDR ÞORGEIRSSON: THE TRAVELLER

5. 2. 1. The narrative type of the traveller's story

The story of a traveller who arrives at the Norwegian royal court, faces derision or a conflict, and finally proves his worth and gains social prestige, forms one of the basic cultural concepts reflected in sagas dealing with contacts between Iceland and Norway, and it plays a significant role in the Icelanders' cultural memory. The narrative type of the travel story is best known from episodes in the kings' sagas, the so-called *útanferðar þættir*, which are the most typical portrayals of relationships between Icelanders and Norwegians, so they clearly reflect a universal perception of these relationships. The travel story also forms parts of some sagas of Icelanders (see Lönnroth 1976, 71–72; Boulhosa 2005, 182–83), and it is of great significance in the contemporary sagas.

As typical examples from the kings' sagas we can name *Hreiðars þáttur heimska* or *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka*. These stories describe an inexperienced Icelander's arrival at the Norwegian royal court; they focus on the fact that the Icelander is not familiar with the courtly manners, so his behaviour is perceived as awkward or eccentric. The Norwegian courtiers ridicule him because they deem him stupid; another reason for derision can be his insufficient material resources and plain clothing. In the course of time, however, the Icelander proves that he is no less clever or capable than the courtiers. The relationship between the Icelander and the king is initially characterized by mutual alienation and distrust, and conflict can occur between them, but later the king appreciates the Icelander's abilities.

The structure of this narrative type has been formulated by Joseph Harris, who has defined six basic stages of the story: (1) an introduction of the protagonist, (2) a journey out of Iceland, (3) a conflict between the king and the Icelander – usually because of the Icelander's unconventional behaviour or his clashes with some Norwegian courtiers or aristocrats – followed by (4) a reconciliation, (5) a journey back to Iceland, and (6) a conclusion (Harris 1972, 7). As Harris has pointed out, the central elements of the travel story are alienation and reconciliation (Harris 1972, 7). Another important element is derision, but when the Norwegian courtiers ridicule Icelanders because of their provincial character and alleged ignorance, the Icelander usually proves that the joker is wrong, so in the end the conflict brings him honour instead of shame (see Mundal 1997, 22–23).

The travel story emphasizes the Icelanders' positive personal qualities, such as courage, cleverness, poetic art, or diplomatic eloquence, due to which they eventually gain the king's favour (Ármann Jakobsson 2003, 45–47; 2014, 284–86). At the same time, however, the king is also presented in the best light – as a righteous, tolerant monarch, who is always willing to protect the Icelanders when they are bullied by envious Norwegian retainers (Ármann Jakobsson 2014, 181–84). Overall, the travel story focuses on the idea that the relationships between Icelanders and Norwegian kings are mutually beneficial, despite some possible initial

alienation or distrust or some temporary disagreements (Ármann Jakobsson 2003, 48–49; 2014, 281–83). The popularity of this narrative type implies that it reflects attitudes that were widespread among thirteenth-century Icelanders, who wrote down these stories in the decades before and after the formal acceptance of royal rule.

5. 2. 2. Ingimundr Þorgeirsson's travel story

The portrayal of the Icelander as a “noble outsider” in Norway remains the most frequent depiction of contact between the two lands also in the contemporary sagas dealing with the earlier times – the time before the Sturlung Age or its earliest stage. A typical example is the story of Ingimundr Þorgeirsson, another brother of Ari and Þorvarðr. He was a priest and after Ari's death he took care of his illegitimate son Guðmundr, but *Elzta Guðmundar saga* also portrays him as a traveller. Just like his brothers, Ingimundr travels abroad – he accompanies his brother Ari on his second journey to Norway (ch. 6), and later he undertakes another journey, on which he is joined by Guðmundr (ch. 14). Instead of underlining the Icelander's loyalty to a specific monarch, the text focuses on his encounters with various Norwegian commoners or courtiers, in which he is often scorned or wronged and must prove his worth.

On his second journey, Ingimundr argues with the Norwegians on the ship, and he speaks on behalf of all the Icelanders on board, which is a clear sign of a feeling of shared regional identity. The Norwegian sailors express their opinion that Ingimundr is unworthy of being a priest because he is not knowledgeable enough, but they do not prove to know much more (ch. 14). The ship is wrecked on this voyage and Guðmundr is wounded, but Ingimundr eventually arrives in Norway some years later (ch. 23). He then proves that he is fully worthy of being a priest, as the archbishop of Niðarós honours him by offering to appoint him as the bishop of Greenland (ch. 24). Ingimundr rejects this offer out of modesty, which is a stereotype connected to saintly bishops, and thus it confirms the overall positive evaluation of Ingimundr. The narrative purpose of this scene is to counterbalance the account of the conflict by an account of positive relations that confirms the Icelander's worthiness and the potential for peaceful cooperation with the Norwegians.

Another conflict occurs when the royal officials want to confiscate Ingimundr's merchandise (chs. 28–29). His companion Ögmundr Þorvarðsson complains to King Jón kuflungr Ingason and points out that his father, King Ingi, would have protected Þorvarðr's brother, and King Magnús Erlingsson would have protected Ari's brother.¹⁷ The king replies that he also will take care of Ingimundr and his property. The officials then intend to confiscate the property of other merchants on the ship, but Ingimundr claims everything they want to take to be his. They do not believe him and take some of the goods. Later, Ingimundr recognizes his own cloth on the clothes of some courtiers, but he lets it be, because he does not want to cause disputes. Ögmundr, however, also sees these clothes, and he insists on taking action despite

¹⁷ King Ingi Haraldsson ruled Norway in 1136–1161, partly in co-rule with his brothers and other pretenders; the matter of rightful succession was disputed during the period of the civil wars. King Ingi's successor was Magnús Erlingsson (1161–1184), son of Ingi's ally, Jarl Erlingr Ormsson. Magnús Erlingsson was dethroned and killed by his rival Sverrir Sigurðarson, who then ruled Norway in 1184–1202, but the supporters of Ingi and Magnús continued to rival Sverrir in the 1180s; they were led by Jón kuflungr, whom they proclaimed an illegitimate son of King Ingi. Jón ruled the area of Vík in Eastern Norway until he was killed by King Sverrir's men in 1188.

Ingimundr's wish. He ambushes the courtiers and has four of them killed. The king deems Ögmundr's action justified, and he dismisses all those who participated in stealing the goods.

This episode shows both the Icelander and the king in a positive light. Ingimundr's chief virtue is moderation, because he wishes to avoid disputes and discourages his companion from violent retaliation. The king shows a deep sense of justice when he punishes his own courtiers for their misdeed against the guests and is willing to forgive Ögmundr and admit that his act had a just cause. The king also shows a positive attitude to Ingimundr because of his kin and his behaviour, and he acts as Ingimundr's protector. The text specifically underlines the idea that the highest Norwegian authorities – the archbishop and the king – do not make differences between Icelanders and Norwegians but assess everyone justly and objectively.

5. 2. 3. The traveller's story, cultural memory, and Icelandic identity

The choice of the narrative type of the travel story connects the narrative about Ingimundr to other travel stories, which consist of the same two main elements – the Icelander is mocked or wronged by some Norwegians, but he finally proves his personal qualities and is appreciated by the king. That way, the story expresses a belief that there is a potential for a positive relationship between Icelanders and the monarchy, even though some minor disagreements may occur. By creating a parallel between Ingimundr's story and other travel stories, the narrative connects the events in *Guðmundar saga* to those in *Morkinskinna* and other kings' sagas, so it integrates these recent events into cultural memory, and thus it constructs their meaning.

The travel story presents a less confident portrayal of the Icelander than the story of the royal retainer because it reflects some of the insecurities that troubled medieval Icelanders who approached the royal court. These insecurities were connected to the Icelanders' geographical and economic marginality and to a possible historical reality of the courtiers' prejudice against Icelandic newcomers. This prejudice was clearly based on a sense of regional, rather than national identity, in a similar manner as the inhabitants of more central regions have often tended to mock villagers from remote parts of the same land in many cultures throughout history. Significantly, the Icelander always proves that the derision is unsubstantiated and that his intellectual capacity is no worse than that of his Norwegian counterparts. The courtiers' prejudice was with all probability based on jealousy and rivalry because every individual's position at the royal court was unstable, so the courtiers used various means of defending their place. That was the reason why they ridiculed Icelanders for their provincial origin and alleged simple-mindedness in an attempt at preventing them from gaining prestigious positions. It was doubtlessly also difficult for the newcomers to adapt to all the rules of courtly conduct at once, as they were used to more straightforward behaviour. Their "otherness" could alienate them from the king at first, but in the travel stories the king always discovers and appreciates their qualities eventually. This is a significant element in the construction of the cultural memory of contact between Icelanders and monarchs.

In the construction of the medieval Icelanders' identity, the narrative type of the travel story builds on an awareness of cultural specificity, which can be perceived as both negative and positive. The travel story shows that a peripheral position can be overcome, and it reflects the idea that Icelanders preferred contact with a broader social space to isolation from it, and that they believed that such contact was possible despite some inevitable difficulties.

5. 3. ARON HJÖRLEIFSSON: THE OUTLAW

5. 3. 1. The narrative type of the outlaw's story

Arons saga Hjörleifssonar is the only contemporary saga in which the plot is dominated by an outlaw's story. Outlaws' stories are a specific part of the saga tradition, and beside the motif of outlawry they share some specific narrative principles, different from those employed in other narrative types. The narrative type of the outlaw's story is known from several sagas of Icelanders, primarily *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, and *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*; it also plays an important role in some sections of other sagas (see Ahola 2014, 105–38). The typical outlaw's story deals with the protagonist's struggle to survive while he is excluded from the society and anyone can kill him with impunity; it usually ends with his heroic last stand and violent death. The structural pattern of the outlaw's story, as defined by Joonas Ahola, consists of (1) the offense, (2) an attempt at arbitration, (3) the sentence of outlawry, (4) fleeing from pursuers, (5) death, and frequently – although not always – (6) revenge for the killing of the outlaw (Ahola 2014, 189).

A typical feature of the outlaw's story is an increased focus on one individual protagonist. Whereas other saga types usually depict a conflict between two groups and the narrative focus shifts between them, the outlaw's story has one central protagonist, with whom the audience is supposed to sympathize. There are two main narrative devices that are employed in outlaws' stories to create sympathy with the protagonist. Firstly, the outlaw's story emphasizes the protagonist's suffering, both mental and physical, unlike the heroic mode typical for the conflict story, which tends to imply that the protagonist is not affected by pain, fear, or grief. Secondly, the outlaw's story employs dreams and supernatural elements in a specific way. Whereas dreams usually serve as a means of foreshadowing in the conflict story, in the outlaw's story they are more closely connected to the protagonist's mental state. In *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, Gísli claims in his verse to be visited by two ominous dream-women, and this verse provides the audience with an insight into the protagonist's mind and into the insecurities that lurk behind his seemingly unshakeable courage (see Poilvez 2012, 126–29). Similarly, in the conflict story, accounts of sorcery or supernatural elements normally serve as explanations of events for which no natural causes can be found, but in the outlaw's story they emphasize the protagonist's tragedy. Gísli Súrsson is affected by a sorcerer's spell that prevents him from receiving aid; in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, the curse is uttered by a revenant whom the protagonist fights before he is outlawed. The spell or curse underlines the tragic aspects of the outlaw's fate and the fact that the protagonist is expelled from society despite being a courageous and capable man; the narrative device thus creates sympathy with the outlaw. These typical elements of the outlaw story underline its inherently tragic tone.

5. 3. 2. Aron Hjörleifsson's escape and journey

The expulsion from society usually has fateful consequences for the protagonist of the outlaw's story, but *Arons saga Hjörleifssonar* creates a distance from the horizon of expectations of this narrative type by combining it with the inherently optimistic travel story. The first part of *Arons saga* depicts a conflict between Bishop Guðmundr Arason and the Sturlungs, in which the bishop remains in the background and is represented by his two champions, Aron Hjörleifsson

and Eyjólfur Kársson (chs. 2–8). This part of the narrative is formed by the structural pattern of the conflict story with a focus on the description of gradually increasing enmity between the two parties. The hostilities culminate with the killing of Sighvatr Sturluson's oldest son Tumi, followed by revenge in the battle of Grímsey, in which Eyjólfur is killed and Aron is seriously wounded.

This initial section is followed by the outlaw's story (chs. 9–15); Aron is not formally outlawed yet, but after the lost battle he must flee and hide from his pursuers. A typical feature of the outlaw's story is the focus on the individual protagonist and on the courage of those who help him during his escape and hiding. The selflessness of those who give Aron aid is underlined, as opposed to the pragmatic causes that usually lead to supporting somebody in the conflict stories. Although Aron's helpers have little to gain, apart from a good conscience, in helping a young, wounded man who in their view is unjustly pursued, they do not hesitate to help him anyway, and some are even willing to face the anger of their kinsmen or chieftains as a result. When Aron is captured and imprisoned by Ormr Jónsson of Svínafell soon after the battle, Ormr's brother Þórarinn reproaches Ormr for mistreating a man who came to his farm in hope of shelter, is only a boy in age, and whose wounds have not yet healed, meaning it is a dishonourable act to capture him. Þórarinn even proclaims himself willing to defend Aron with weapons if necessary (ch. 10). The narrative expresses a positive evaluation of Þórarinn's selfless help in the formulation that Þórarinn gained lasting good reputation (*orðróm*) by this deed, as well as in three stanzas that subsequently praise his actions (ch. 10).

Aron then hides with various kinsmen and with his friends, the sons of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson (chs. 11–12). At this point he is again helped by selfless strangers, in this case two followers of Þorvaldr of Vatnsfjörðr, an enemy of Hrafn's sons. The men help Aron in a fight when he is attacked by three of Sturla Sighvatsson's followers, despite not knowing Aron and having no obligations toward him. They state that they help Aron in order to retain their honour, because it would be a shame not to assist a defenceless man (ch. 12):

Þóttist Aron þá vita, at þeir vildu ekki svikja hann. Forvitnar hann nú, hvárt þeir vildu veita honum vigsgengi eða vildu þeir fara í brott, – „en ek [mun] í stað biða.“ „Egill skal ráða,“ segir Sigurðr. „Ámæli mun til okkar falla,“ sagði Egill, „ef vit skiljumst báðir við hann svá búit.“ „Vel líka mér orð þín,“ segir Sigurðr, „en þó mun þetta meðallagi forsjáligt.“ (Sturlunga saga II, 261)

Then Aron thought he knew that they would not trick him. Now he asks whether they wanted to give him backing in the fight, or go away, “but I shall stay on this spot.” “Egil shall decide,” says Sigurd. “Reproach will fall on us,” said Egil, “if we both leave him like this.” “Your words please me,” says Sigurd, “but this is only half-prudent.” (Porter 1975, 15)

This defence is praised in stanzas included in the narrative, as Þórarinn's earlier actions were, and the men's chieftain Þorvaldr is even said later to approve of the honourable behaviour of the defenders, despite his personal enmity toward Aron's allies.

The narrative also refers to supernatural signs, which, as mentioned above, are typical for the outlaw's story. In the outlaws' sagas set in the Saga Age, such elements – curses and ominous dreams – often have negative implications, in that they underline the tragedy of the outlaw's fate. In *Arons saga*, however, the dreams and supernatural signs are positive for the protagonist, so they foreshadow the upcoming distance from the tragic elements of the narrative type. The tone is set at the beginning of the outlaw's story by a miraculous event in which Aron's wounds are treated with no medicine other than water consecrated by Bishop

Guðmundr, yet they heal quickly and well (ch. 9). This event can be perceived as a miraculous sign of the bishop protecting Aron even at a distance. The same meaning can be found in a dream, in which Bishop Guðmundr appears to Aron and makes room for him under his cloak (ch. 12). That is clearly a symbol of the bishop's protection, both in a spiritual sense and in the sense of extraordinary luck in fighting.

The most openly supernatural event occurs during one of the dramatic peaks of the outlaw's story, in which Aron is outnumbered and surrounded by Sturla and his followers (ch. 14). Aron throws away his shield and strikes a two-handed blow at a man, causing him to fall over. Aron then flees, leaping out of the ring of men surrounding him, and is saved by a snowstorm that conceals him from his pursuers. The narrator's direct comment implies that Aron freed himself due to his own courage, but suggests that the snowstorm may have been caused by a miraculous divine intervention:

Aron hleypr þegar á hann upp ok út ór mannhringinum. Ok er þat allra manna mál, at Aron þykkir manna sköruligast hafa undan komizt, við slíka garpa sem eiga var. [...] Aron veit nú ógerla, hvar hann ferr. Veðrit tekr at harðna, ok gerir á fjúk. Sér hann stundum ateins leið sína. Kennist hann við sik, at hann er kominn á heiði þá, er Flötur heita. Aron hefir nú harða útivist, vötn öll ill yfirferðar, ok kemr frost í sárit. [...] Má þat sýnast skipat með guðs miskunn, at þegar Aron komst ór mannhringinum, rak á kafahrið svá sterka, at þegar skildi með þeim. Höfðu menn þá hrið lengi í minnum. (Sturlunga saga II, 267–68)

Aron runs over him at once and out of the ring of men. And it is common opinion that Aron seemed the boldest of men to have escaped from such fierce fighters as there were to deal with there. [...] Aron does not know exactly where he is going. The weather begins to worsen, and a snowstorm comes on. He can see his way only at intervals. He realizes that he has come on to the heath called Flötur. Aron now has a hard journey; the rivers are all difficult to cross, and frost gets into his wound [...] It may seem arranged by God's grace that as soon as Aron broke out of the ring of men, such a thick and fierce storm drove down that they were immediately separated. Men remembered that storm for a long time. (Porter 1975, 19)

This scene clearly illustrates Aron's physical suffering when he wanders through the wilderness in the storm with no certainty of shelter, severely wounded and exhausted. When he finally finds shelter at a friend's farm, the narrative attention turns to his mental state. Aron entrusts his further destiny to God: he lies down, spreads his arms, and sings prayers in the manner that Guðmundr had taught him (ch. 14). This motif emphasizes Aron's mental suffering, as he is completely helpless and cannot expect any other relief than God's mercy; at the same time, however, his hope for God's mercy makes his mental suffering more bearable. At this point, the horizon of expectations created by the structural pattern of the outlaw's story leads the audience to awaiting Aron's death. Soon after this dramatic culmination of the outlaw's story, however, the narrative shifts into the structural pattern of the inherently optimistic travel story instead. The horizon of expectations is twisted, because the outlaw's story does not end with the protagonist's death, but with his journey out of Iceland in 1225 (ch. 15).

The following part of the narrative is shaped by the structural pattern of the travel story. Aron first arrives in Norway as a young man in trouble, and he lacks both property and allies. As such, he is comparable to the inexperienced newcomers in the typical *útanferðar þættir* in the kings' sagas. Another typical element is a dispute with a Norwegian aristocrat: Aron joins the retinue of Jarl Skúli Bárðarson, but a conflict soon occurs between them. Aron wishes to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but Skúli forbids it. Aron faces a dilemma between loyalty to the aristocrat he wishes to obey and the feeling of obligation to fulfil his important promise to God. He ultimately decides to make the pilgrimage despite Skúli's prohibition. The journey to Jerusalem serves as an opportunity for the young man to prove his worth. When Aron returns

to Norway, he visits King Hákon Hákonarson, who welcomes him kindly and asks Skúli to forgive Aron's disobedience, since he made the pilgrimage for the salvation of his soul, but Skúli refuses to accept Aron back. Hákon then accepts him into his own retinue, arranges a good marriage for him, and provides him with land and a source of income. The travel story thus shows not only the protagonist's actual travels, but also his "journey" from alienation to acceptance and prestige in his contact with the Norwegian rulers.

There is an obvious contrast between Jarl Skúli, who demands unconditional obedience from the young Icelander, and King Hákon, who appreciates the Icelander's firmness in his intention. In this case, Skúli represents the overbearing Norwegian aristocrat from the travel stories, whereas the king represents the ideal monarch, who shows goodwill and tolerance. That is one of the central themes of this episode, which can be perceived not only as an account of an event from Aron Hjörleifsson's life, but also as a broader social commentary. The episode expresses the idea that the relationship between Icelanders and the Norwegian monarch should not be based on blind obedience, but rather on mutual agreement and respect.

Another account of the relations at the royal court is found in a scene dealing with a horse fight (ch. 18). At first the king's horse retreats from the horse owned by Gautr of Mel, a Norwegian aristocrat and a great friend of the Sturlungs (*mikill vinr Sturlunga*), Aron's opponents. Aron recommends that the horse should be urged forward with a stick the way it is done in Iceland, and then the king's horse wins. That is another parallel with the typical travel stories, in which the king often accepts advice from clever Icelanders and supports them in their quarrels with overbearing Norwegian noblemen. Symbolically, the fight in this scene takes place between Aron and Gautr, and it can be perceived as an image of the competition for influence at the royal court, which constantly creates tension there. The king, on the other hand, represents a superior power that can bring about justice.

Apart from the travel story, this section of the text also contains an aftermath of the outlaw's story – an account of Aron Hjörleifsson's dealings with Þórðr kakali Sighvatsson, the brother of his former arch enemy Sturla Sighvatsson (chs. 19–21). Despite his previous enmity with the Sturlungs and his initial dislike of Þórðr in Norway, Aron decides to help Þórðr when news reach them of the death of Þórðr's nearest kinsmen in the battle of Örlygsstaðir in 1238. In the narrative the argumentation for this decision is the same as in the scenes from Aron's outlawry, when men helped him for no obvious reason – he wishes to show magnanimity toward a man in trouble in order to retain his honour and to show that he is "a somewhat more honourable man than most others, as many people said" (*nökkuru betri drengir en alþýða manna, svá sem margir mæltu*, ch. 21). Reconciliation and honour are thus presented as mutually connected – the protagonist gains more honour by helping his former enemy than he would by killing him. This can be regarded as the saga's final statement about honour, and it is further illustrated by the account of Þórðr's and Aron's journey to Iceland, where Þórðr repays Aron for his magnanimity by helping him reach a settlement with his former adversaries (ch. 21). The narrative emphasizes that Aron is then reconciled with everybody in Iceland (ch. 22). That is a completely different ending of an outlaw's story than the one known from the typical outlaws' sagas. The horizon of expectations is distorted again, and this distance underlines the text's central theme, the protagonist's transition from being an outcast to re-integration into the society. Significantly, Aron decides to return to Norway even when he has reached reconciliation and regained honour in Iceland, because he prefers to live at the royal court. He

undertook his first journey to Norway out of necessity, but now it is a deliberate choice. That implies that also the other Icelandic chieftains sometimes had to turn to the king out of necessity, but usually they sought his support voluntarily.

Aron is a royal retainer for almost thirty years, and he enjoys a highly prestigious position. The king visits Aron when he falls ill, which “seems to men to be the greatest honour” (*hefir mönnum þótt in mesta sæmd*, ch. 22), and when Aron dies, the king himself follows his body to the church and gives a speech at his grave, focusing on his worldly qualities, such as courage and travelling experience. The following direct commentary by the narrator then refers to Aron’s spiritual merits, including his devoted service to Bishop Guðmundr (ch. 22). The saga thus implies that Aron’s honesty, loyalty, and courage brought him both worldly honour and spiritual grace, and that he had powerful protectors in both spheres – King Hákon and Bishop Guðmundr. The bishop is of central importance to the outlaw’s story, where he acts as a mediator of divine protection, and the king represents the ideal of the righteous monarch in the travel story. If Aron’s story is interpreted as a story of the Icelandic society, this implies that institutionalized power – the Church and royal rule – can help Iceland overcome its marginality and gain a more prestigious position in the Norse social space.

5. 3. 3. The outlaw’s story, cultural memory, and Icelandic identity

Arons saga is shaped by the inherently tragic outlaw’s story, but it creates a distance from the horizon of expectations of this narrative type by combining it with the inherently optimistic travel story. The outlaw’s story takes its protagonist into a hopeless situation and focuses on his exclusion from society, and its structural pattern creates the expectation of the protagonist’s tragic end and violent death. The travel story, on the other hand, focuses on the protagonist’s interaction with the Norwegian king, who helps the Icelander regain social prestige. The two narrative types accord with the principles of tragedy and comedy as they are defined by Northrop Frye (2000, 35–52). According to Frye’s theory, the principle of tragedy is based on the protagonist being socially successful at first before being gradually distanced, and sometimes even expelled, from his society – this narrative dynamic fits well with the outlaw’s story. Frye sees the principle of comedy conversely as being based on the protagonist being isolated from society at first and gradually being integrated into it in the course of the story. This overarching dynamic is useful for describing the travel story. The combination of these narrative types endows the subject matter with meanings that transcend the story line and are not inherently present in the events themselves.

Outlawry is always associated with marginality: in the sagas of Icelanders, outlaws dwell at remote, uninhabited places, and they are often connected to supernatural worlds – to dreams, trolls, and witchcraft. At the same time, marginality was also an inseparable part of medieval Icelandic identity. Icelanders had doubtlessly been aware of their peripheral position within the European social space ever since the settlement, and in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, after the union with Norway, this issue became ever more foregrounded due to the increased contact between Iceland and other lands. The Icelanders of this time strove for overcoming their marginal position and for a deeper integration into the European social space. In this context, *Arons saga* can be understood as a story about marginality and integration. The protagonist’s outlawry represents expulsion and a peripheral position. Marginality is an

inherently tragic situation, just like the outlaw's story is inherently tragic. The combination with the travel story, on the other hand, draws attention to the unexpectedly happy ending. The physical transfer to Norway represents a mental and political integration with a centre. The pilgrimage to Jerusalem can be regarded as a completion of this effort, as it establishes contact with the centre of the whole Christian world. In the construction of Icelandic identity, the narrative functions as an optimistic allegory of overcoming a marginal position.

The saga also leaves no doubt as to who is to be credited with the protagonist's re-integration into the society. It is partly the protagonist with his personal qualities, but he could never enjoy a full re-integration without the aid of a righteous ruler. The role of the Norwegian king in Aron's story is thus definitely not arbitrary, and it can be perceived as a central element of the protagonist's transformation from an outcast into a respected man. The king is presented as an embodiment of centralized power, which can renew social cohesion when the Icelandic social system fails to do so. For the man who shows determination and ability, the monarch opens the door from the periphery to the centre. The travel story, with its long tradition from the kings' sagas, underlines the king's tolerance to the Icelander's imperfections, willingness to appreciate his skills, and tendency to protect him and further his interests. The individual Icelander can represent the whole population that enjoyed the merits of centralized rule, which ensured peace in the first decades of the union.

5. 4. SNORRI STURLUSON: THE COURT POET

Snorri Sturluson decided to sail to Norway and visit the royal court in 1218, when his ambition to gain superiority over the influential and well-established Oddaverjar could no longer be furthered within the boundaries of Iceland without direct violent attacks. He chose a time when the Oddaverjar became unpopular in Norway due to their conflicts with Norwegian merchants, and he hoped to enhance his position by establishing a direct political relationship with the Norwegian rulers. His journey was thus doubtlessly a political move, but its detailed description in *Íslendinga saga* is not primarily political – instead, it is shaped by the narrative type of the court poet's story. As we know, Snorri was not only a significant political leader, but also a poet and the author of a treatise on skaldic poetry known as *Snorra Edda*. Although this activity had very limited direct influence on his role in the competition for power, *Íslendinga saga* still creates an image of his identity as a poet. The text uses this image as a central narrative device for an indirect interpretation of the events and for their integration into cultural memory.

5. 4. 1. The narrative type of the court poet's story

The narrative type of the court poet's story was developed in the kings' sagas. In stories dealing with the ninth and early tenth centuries, it is associated with Norwegian skalds, such as Þjóðólfr of Hvinir or Eyvindr Finnsson, but in stories dealing with later events, the skalds are exclusively Icelandic. The characteristic feature of the representatives of this character type is their strikingly self-confident behaviour in their encounters with the kings. The poet is formally subordinate to the monarch, but he nevertheless often acts as the king's mentor and is almost treated as the king's equal or portrayed as being intellectually superior to him. This can be a

narrative construct, but it is a significant aspect of the narrative type of the court poet's story. In case of the Norwegian skalds, such status is perceived as given, and the narratives do not thematize the development of the skald's position at the royal court. The present chapter, however, is focused on the Icelandic skalds, in whose case the sagas pay much attention to the transformation of their social status. The typical story of the Icelandic skald is based on the structural pattern of the travel story. It portrays an Icelander who arrives at the royal court, lacking both property and appropriate courtly manners. His behaviour is usually excessively self-assured, even impudent, which irritates the courtiers and often causes alienation between the Icelander and the king. In the course of time, however, the Icelander proves his abilities – in this case his poetic art and often also diplomatic eloquence, so he gains the king's favour and a prestigious position. That means that the main element of the structural pattern is again the transition from alienation to acceptance.

The meaning of this narrative type is again based on the idea of a positive, conciliatory relationship between Icelanders and Norwegian kings that ends in mutual understanding and respect despite some degree of initial alienation or distrust. In comparison with the travel story, however, the story of the court poet presents a more self-confident image of the Icelander. Whereas the travel story aims at showing that the Icelander is the Norwegian retainers' and courtiers' equal, the skald's story implies that he is superior to them due to his unique poetic skills and eloquence, which make him nearly irreplaceable in the king's service. Furthermore, the sagas create the impression that the court poets enjoy a special position, due to which the kings tolerate their behaviour that would be unacceptable otherwise – they can for example criticize the monarch much more openly than anyone else (see Finlay 1997, 166; Ármann Jakobsson 2003, 45–47).

As a typical representative of the character type of the court poet we can name Sighvatr Þórðarson, a skald of King Óláfr helgi Haraldsson from the early eleventh century. The main sources of stories about Sighvatr are *Óláfs saga helga* and *Magnúss saga góða* in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*. These texts not only quote Sighvatr's stanzas, but also depict episodes from the poet's career in royal service. *Óláfs saga helga* shows how Sighvatr arrives at the royal court as a young man and wishes to recite a celebratory poem that he has composed for the king, but the monarch refuses to listen to the poem, saying that he does not want any verses to be composed about him. Sighvatr recites a stanza anyway, and the king rewards him for it and accepts him into his service. This episode shows the skald's active approach to forming his relationship with the king, as well as his decisiveness, which keeps him from being discouraged by the monarch's initial lack of interest.

In another episode, Sighvatr is portrayed in a diplomatic role in a negotiation between Óláfr Haraldsson and the Swedish King Óláfr Eiríksson. The two rulers are in a long-term conflict, and when Óláfr Haraldsson finds out that Óláfr Eiríksson has broken an agreement, he plans an armed attack on Sweden. Sighvatr wants to try to prevent the armed clash, and he suggests going to the Swedish jarl Rögnvaldr, who can bring about a reconciliation between the two kings. Rögnvaldr and Sighvatr arrange a marriage between Óláfr Haraldsson and Ástriðr, Óláfr Eiríksson's daughter. The kings finally hold a meeting and renew their agreement. Sighvatr describes this event in the poem *Austrfararvísur*, in which he jokingly depicts various difficulties that he had to deal with on his journey, but he does not focus much on the political significance of the journey. The saga shows, however, that Sighvatr's negotiation is important

and that it probably prevents an armed clash. The episode thus underlines the poet's active role in Scandinavian politics, in which he can use his eloquence in other ways than composing poetry, and he contributes to maintaining peace.

Sighvatr is also present at the birth of Óláfr's son and future successor Magnús. Sighvatr names the boy Magnús after Charlemagne (*Karlamagnús*), whom he deems the greatest monarch of all time. King Óláfr disapproves of the name at first, because it has not been used among his ancestors, but in the end, he likes it. Later, when Magnús Ólafsson becomes king, he punishes his father's former opponents too harshly and treats the farmers ruthlessly, so there are rumours in the land that he will end like his father – that his own people will turn against him. Sighvatr then composes the poem *Bersöglisvísur*, in which he encourages the young king to be kinder to the farmers and to follow the law. King Magnús takes his advice seriously, and he becomes a popular monarch, nicknamed Magnús the Good. This episode shows that the skald is also the king's advisor and mentor, whose words the king heeds and is willing to accept even open criticism from him.

Such a presentation of the court poet probably exaggerates the skalds' real influence at the royal court, but it may be loosely based on the historical reality of the tenth and eleventh centuries, the "golden age" of skaldic poetry. In the twelfth century, however, skaldic poetry began to lose its social significance due to the rise of written historiography in prose and the increasing influence of Christianity on royal ideologies. The extent to which skaldic poetry could possibly have remained socially significant in the thirteenth century¹⁸ has been a subject of debate. Some scholars support the idea of a renewal of its significance – Kari Ellen Gade, for example, argues that the thirteenth-century stories of skalds may consequently have rekindled an awareness of skaldic poetry as a tool of power (Gade 2000, 69–70). Kevin J. Wanner takes a more moderate approach when he suggests that the narratives of skalds probably formed certain expectations of how Icelanders should behave at the royal court, so Icelanders still approached the kings as skalds, but they understood that it was only a formal code of behaviour that had no real influence. Following developments in the Scandinavian political and cultural sphere, poetic production no longer actually shaped political relations, but it may have served as a discourse of their explanation. Instead of openly admitting the political nature of their dealings, both sides could refer to the traditional elements of the court poet's story, or the writers of the contemporary sagas may have used it to idealize the relations and to push their political aspects to the background (Wanner 2008, 72–73).

As will be shown in the following, the contemporary sagas can use the narrative type of the court poet's story as a means of justifying or concealing some of the political aspects of the relations between Icelanders and Norwegian rulers. First and foremost, however, the structural pattern of the court poet's story serves as a means of interpretation and evaluation, creating deeper layers of meaning beneath the basic story line, and transforming individual stories into narratives with a more universal meaning. In the contemporary sagas, this narrative type creates a connection between recent events and the distant past, using elements of the medieval

¹⁸ A new phenomenon in the thirteenth century was that some of the powerful Icelandic magnates, such as Sturla Sighvatsson, Þórðr Sighvatsson, or Brandr Kolbeinsson, had skalds as members of their households, who composed poetry for them in the same manner as skalds had traditionally done for the kings (see Nordal 1991). The narrative type of the court poet's story, however, applies only to accounts of contacts between Icelanders and the Norwegian royal court.

Icelanders' cultural memory and integrating the new stories into this memory. It allows the texts to reflect contemporary attitudes to Icelandic identity and to the process of establishing Iceland's union with the Norwegian kingdom. In this context, the most significant aspect of the narrative type of the court poet's story is that it focuses on the Icelanders' active role in establishing their contacts with the kings, on their assertive behaviour at the royal court, and on their diplomatic skills and active participation in Scandinavian politics.

5. 4. 2. Snorri Sturluson's journey to Norway and the narrative type of the court poet's story

The account of Snorri Sturluson's early contacts with the Norwegian rulers in *Íslendinga saga* is clearly shaped by the narrative type of the court poet's story. At first, still in Iceland, Snorri is said to have used poetry to gain the friendship of Jarl Hákon galinn (ch. 34):

Hann orti kvæði um Hákon galin, ok sendi jarlinn gjafir út á mót, sverð ok skjöld ok brynju. [...] Jarlinn ritaði til Snorra, at hann skyldi fara útan, ok lézt til hans gera mundu miklar sæmðir. Ok mjök var þat í skapi Snorra. En jarlinn andaðist í þann tíma, ok brá þat útanferð hans um nökkurra vetra sakir. En þó hafði hann ráðit för sína, þegar tími væri til. (Sturlunga saga I, 269)

He composed a poem about Hákon the Furious, and the jarl sent him gifts in return, a sword, a shield, and a coat of mail. [...] The jarl wrote to Snorri and asked him to come to Norway, promising that he would enhance his esteem. Snorri liked the idea a lot, but the jarl died at that time, so Snorri's journey was delayed by several winters. He had nevertheless decided to undertake the journey as soon as the time was right.

According to this account, poetry alone seems to have won Snorri a promise of esteem in Norway. In line with this initial focus on Snorri's role as a poet, the account of Snorri's first visit to Jarl Skúli, Hákon galinn's successor in office, continues to focus on Snorri's poetic art (ch. 35):

Þá er Snorri kom til Nóregs, váru höfðingjar orðnir Hákon konungr ok Skúli jarl. Tók jarl forkunnar vel við Snorra, ok fór hann til jarls. [...] Snorri var um vetrinn með jarli. En um sumarit eftir fór hann austr á Gautland á fund Áskels lögmans ok frú Kristínar, er átt hafði áðr Hákon galinn. Snorri hafði ort um hana kvæði þat, ar Andvaka heitir, fyrir Hákon jarl at bæn hans. Ok tók hon sæmiliga við Snorra ok veitti honum margar gjafir sæmiligar. Hon gaf honum merki þat, er átt hafði Eiríkr Sviakonungr Knútsson. Þat hafði hann, þá er hann felldi Sörkvi konung á Gestilreini. Snorri fór um haustit aftr til Skúla jarls ok var þar annan vetr í allgóðu yfirlæti. (Sturlunga saga I, 271–72)

When Snorri arrived in Norway, King Hákon and Jarl Skúli had become the rulers of Norway. The jarl gave Snorri an extremely warm welcome, and Snorri stayed with him. [...] Snorri spent the winter with Skúli, and the following summer he went east to Gautland to visit the lawman Áskell and Lady Kristín, who had been married to Jarl Hákon the Furious. Snorri had composed a poem named *Andvaka* about her for Jarl Hákon at his request. She gave Snorri an honourable welcome and many honourable gifts. She gave him the banner that had belonged to the Swedish King Eiríkr Knútsson, who had carried it when he defeated King Sörkvir at Gestilrein. In the autumn Snorri returned to Jarl Skúli and spent another winter with him and was extremely well treated.

The account underlines the poem that Snorri composes for Lady Kristín, and the reward that he receives for it. The saga also emphasizes the fact that Jarl Skúli is extremely friendly to Snorri, but it still avoids mentioning any political relations between Snorri and the Norwegian rulers. In reality, however, Snorri's major aim clearly was gaining the Norwegian rulers' political support – this idea is supported by the focus on the Sturlungs' political ambition in the preceding chapters of *Íslendinga saga*. At this time, Skúli probably wielded more real power than the underage King Hákon. It is therefore not surprising that Snorri focused on gaining Skúli's

favour in the first place and believed that his support would be decisive in the power struggle in Iceland.

Political relations are directly mentioned a few chapters later, but they are already framed by the account of Snorri's poetry, which works as a reference to the cultural concepts that were associated with the court poets' stories. Only after having created this frame, the saga moves to the political negotiations (ch. 38). Jarl Skúli uses the violent clashes between the Oddaverjar and the Norwegian merchants as a pretext for suggesting a military expedition to Iceland, but the real reason is doubtlessly Skúli's effort to strengthen his influence on the Icelandic chieftains and to incorporate Iceland into his power base in his power struggle with King Hákon. Snorri Sturluson manages to prevent the expedition by convincing the rulers that a military attack is not the right solution, but he does not oppose Norwegian rule in Iceland, and he even promises to bring Iceland under the crown's reign with the help of his brothers. The formulation in the saga implies that he does not perceive it as an inevitable concession, but rather as a welcome opportunity to finally secure the Sturlungs' position in Icelandic politics. In the saga Snorri speaks about Sæmundr Jónsson as the only Icelander who is more powerful than the Sturlungs; that way, he implies that the situation could change if the Sturlungs gained the Norwegian rulers' support:

En þó váru Nóreghsmenn miklir óvinir Íslendinga ok mestir Oddaverja – af ránum þeim, er urðu á Eyrum. Kom því svá, at ráðit var, at herja skyldi til Íslands um sumarit. [...] Snorri latti mjök ferðarinnar ok kallaði þat ráð at gera sér at vinum ina beztu menn á Íslandi ok kallaðist skjótt mega svá koma sínum orðum, at mönnum myndi sýnast at snúast til hlýðni við Nóreghshöfðingja. Hann sagði ok svá, at þá váru aðrir eigi meiri menn á Íslandi en bræðr hans, en Sæmundr leið, en kallaði þá mundu mjök eftir sínum orðum víkja, þá er hann kæmi til. En við slíkar fortölur slævaðist heldr skap jarlsins, ok lagði hann þat ráð til, at Íslendingar skyldi biðja Hákon konung, at hann bæði fyrir þeim, at eigi yrði herferðin. Konungrinn var þá ungr, en Dagfinnr lögmaðr, er þá var ráðgjafi hans, var inn mesti vinr Íslendinga. Ok var þat af gert, at konungr réð, at eigi varð herförin. En þeir Hákon konungr ok Skúli jarl gerðu Snorra lendan mann sinn, var þat mest ráð þeira jarls ok Snorra. En Snorri skyldi leita við Íslendinga, at þeir snerist til hlýðni við Nóreghshöfðingja. (Sturlunga saga I, 277–78)

But the Norwegians were fierce opponents of Icelanders and mainly of the Oddaverjar – because of the confiscation that had taken place at Eyrar. It thus happened that an armed attack on Iceland was planned for the summer. [...] Snorri dissuaded the rulers from the expedition and recommended them instead to establish friendship with Iceland's most influential men. He said that his words could soon persuade the people to willingly turn to obeying the Norwegian rulers. He also said that with the exception of Sæmundr, nobody was more influential in Iceland than his brothers. He promised that they would follow his advice when he returned. The jarl's mind was calmed by his intercessions, and he gave such advice that the Icelanders should ask King Hákon to intercede on their behalf, so the expedition would be revoked. The king was young at that time, and the lawman Dagfinnr, his counsellor, was a great friend of Icelanders. And it turned out that the king decided to cancel the expedition. King Hákon and Jarl Skúli made Snorri their vassal, and this was mainly the jarl's and Snorri's initiative. Snorri should convince Icelanders to turn to obeying the Norwegian rulers.

Significantly, Snorri uses his verbal skills to avert the armed conflict – this is another reference to the typical story of the court poet, in which the protagonist excels not only in poetry as such, but also in eloquence and diplomatic negotiations. This section of *Íslendinga saga*, however, no longer conceals the political cooperation between Snorri and the Norwegian rulers, and it shows that the negotiations took place mainly between Snorri and Skúli, while the king stayed in the background and his role was largely formal. According to the text, the oath by which Snorri pledged allegiance to both rulers “was mainly the jarl's and Snorri's initiative” (*var þat mest ráð þeira jarls ok Snorra, Sturlunga saga I, 278*). Similarly, the text of *Hákonar saga* states that “Snorri and the jarl talked much about matters concerning Icelanders” (*töluðu þeir [Snorri ok] jarl mart um mál Íslendinga, Hákonar saga I, 230*). This again implies that Snorri

put his trust in Skúli, probably hoping that their power would grow simultaneously. The texts focus on the agreement between the jarl and Snorri, as well as on Snorri's own active approach to the matter. They thus show that far from being passively subdued or even oppressed by the Norwegian rulers, the influential Icelanders were willing to negotiate with the monarchs and agree on compromises that could be beneficial for both parties.

If we further compare *Íslendinga saga's* account to the depiction of the same events in *Hákonar saga*, we see that both texts connect the planned military expedition to the previous conflict between the merchants and the Oddaverjar, and both present the events in the best possible light and with a focus on the peaceful solution, although they use different narrative devices for this purpose. *Hákonar saga*, understandably, pays little attention to the power struggles in Iceland, nor does it focus on the court poet's story with its emphasis on the Icelander. Instead, it generally focuses on the image of Hákon as a peaceful king, and that is the case also in this episode. The text (ch. 62) states that the initiative to the military campaign to Iceland came specifically from Jarl Skúli.¹⁹ *Hákonar saga* thus assures its audience that the king never supported the idea of aggression against Iceland, which fits well into the saga's general image of the king as a guardian of peace:

Þá gerði jarl orð á því at hann mundi gera her til Íslands. Þá hafði Björn, son Þorvalds Gizurarsonar, dregit mann norrænan ór kirkju í Miðfirði ok látit drepa. Þóttisk hann þat láta gera í hefnd Orms Jónssonar, því at hann átti Hallveigu dóttur hans. Jarl ætlaði mörg skip til ferðarinnar, en menn váru mjök ófúsir til ferðarinnar. (Hákonar saga I, 229)

Then the jarl spoke about sending an army to Iceland. Björn, a son of Þorvaldr Gizurarson, had dragged a Norwegian man out of the church in Miðfirðir and had him killed. He felt that he did it as a revenge for Ormr Jónsson, for he was married to his daughter Hallveig. The jarl intended to send many ships on this expedition, but men were very reluctant to participate in it.

Hákonar saga also emphasizes the king's role as a mediator by quoting his speech, in which he promotes peaceful relations:

„[...] En land þat hefir heðan byggzk, ok várir frændr ok forellrar hafa kristnat landit ok veitt landsmönnum mikil hlunnendi. Eru þar ok flestir menn saklausir fyrir oss, þó at sumir hafi illa gert til várara þegna. En þat mun verða allra skaði ef landit er herjat. Nú vil ek biðja yðr, herra, at þér látið niðr falla þessa ættan fyrir sakir flutnings þessa.“ (Hákonar saga I, 230)

“[...] That land was settled from here, and our kinsmen and ancestors Christianized the land and provided its inhabitants with great benefits. Most of the inhabitants are also innocent of any offence against us, although some have hurt our subjects, but everybody would suffer if the land was attacked. I want to ask you, lord, to revoke this intention due to my intercession.”

The speech underlines the king's justice and magnanimity when he does not want to punish innocent people, but at the same time it also points out the historical connection between Iceland and Norway,²⁰ so it presents the forming of a political relationship between Icelandic chieftains and Norwegian rulers as a natural development. That is a good example of the narrative using a reference to the past to interpret the present.

¹⁹ *Íslendinga saga*, on the other hand, uses a passive verb to avoid naming a particular person.

²⁰ This can be compared to some scenes from kings' sagas about older times, such as an utterance by King Haraldr harðráði in *Morkinskinna*, when he mediates in a conflict between the Icelander Halldórr Snorrason and the Norwegian retainer Sveinn of Lyrgja: “His kin is not worse in Iceland than yours is here in Norway, and it was not so long ago that those who now inhabit Iceland were Norwegians” (*Hans ætt er eigi verri á Íslandi en þín hér í Nóregi, ok eigi hefir enn allangt síðan liðit er þeir voru norrænir er nú byggja Ísland*; see Ármann Jakobsson 2003, 43–44; 2014, 282–83, 344–45).

Hákonar saga also partly covers up the problem of the power struggle by focusing on the peace for Norwegian traders:

*Sem konungr hafði þetta mælt þá fluttu þetta margir með honum. Gaf þá jarl upp þessar ráðagerðir. Var þar þat ráð gert at Snorri Sturluson var út sendr at friða fyrir Austmönnum. Gaf Hákon konungr honum lends manns nafn. Töluðu þeir jarl mart um mál Íslendinga. Var þá fyrsta sinni rætt um þat af jarli at Snorri skyldi koma landinu undir konung. [...] En engu kom Snorri áleiðis við landsmenn, flutti hann ok lítt. En frið höfðu kaupmenn góðan þann tíma á Íslandi. (*Hákonar saga I*, 230–31)*

When the king had finished his speech, many men supported him. The jarl then gave up his intention. It was decided that Snorri Sturluson would be sent to Iceland to make peace for the Norwegians. King Hákon gave him the title of royal vassal. Snorri and the jarl talked much about matters concerning Icelanders. That was the first time the jarl mentioned to Snorri that he should bring the land under royal rule. [...] But Snorri did not convince the Icelanders, and he did not try too hard either. But the merchants enjoyed good peace in Iceland at the time.

Such a direct focus on peace is typical for *Hákonar saga*. The difference between the two sagas is, however, less than it may appear at the first sight. *Íslendinga saga* presents the king's participation in the final stage of the conflict between the Oddaverjar and the merchants, which finally culminates at the Norwegian royal court (ch. 41), with a similar focus on the king's role as the protector of peace and justice. In the summer of 1221, Sæmundr Jónsson's son Haraldr is in Norway and stays at the royal court. One day, he is unexpectedly attacked by a man whose brother is one of the merchants whose property Sæmundr confiscated. The attacker deals Haraldr a serious, though not mortal wound, and runs away. The king then orders his men to pursue the attacker and kill him, which they do. This episode implies that the king values his duty to protect peace and justice higher than any personal grudges against the Oddaverjar, and that his priority is to rightfully punish the wrongdoer and prevent further violence.

It seems that it was not necessary for the writer of *Hákonar saga* to cover up the king's role in the initial plan to bring Iceland under Norwegian rule, but that it really was Skúli who came up with the whole idea and attempted to enforce it. *Íslendinga saga* seems to present it largely as Snorri's idea (*Snorri latti mjök ferðarinnar ok kallaði þat ráð at gera sér at vinum ina beztu menn á Íslandi ok kallaðist skjótt mega svá koma sínum orðum, at mönnum myndi sýnast at snúast til hlýðni við Nóregshöfðingja, Sturlunga saga I*, 277), but it also states that Snorri mostly stayed with Skúli, not with Hákon, while he was in Norway, so the idea was probably at least strongly inspired by his previous debates with Skúli. The Norwegian merchants' conflicts with the Oddaverjar – and possibly also the idea of a military expedition to Iceland, which Skúli does not seem to have been very serious about, since he was so easily dissuaded from it – most probably served as a pretext for starting the whole negotiation. It is also noteworthy that Snorri, according to *Íslendinga saga*, did not promise to bring Iceland under the king's reign, but rather under the reign of Norway's rulers (*Nóregshöfðingja*). This word implies that it was not necessarily King Hákon he meant, but maybe rather Skúli. What is significant for the court poet's story in *Íslendinga saga* is that the text presents Snorri as the one who prevents the imminent military expedition by his diplomatic eloquence, which is a typical quality ascribed to the character type of the skald.

The aftermath of this episode in *Íslendinga saga* (ch. 38) depicts Snorri's return to Iceland, with a focus on the dislike that Snorri's dealings with Skúli cause among the Oddaverjar and their allies:

Jarlinn hafði gefit honum skipit, þat er hann fór á, ok fimmtán stórgjafir. Snorri hafði ort um jarl tvau kvæði. [...] En er Snorri kom í Vestmannaeyjar, þá spurðist brátt inn á land útkváma hans ok svá með hverjum sæmðum hann var út kominn. Ýfðust Sunnlendingar þá mjök við honum ok mest tengðamenn Orms Jónssonar. Þótti þeim sem hann myndi vera settir til af Noregsmönnum at standa á móti, svá at þeir mætti engu eftirmáli fram koma um víg Orms. Var mest fyrir því Björn Þorvaldsson, er þá bjó á Breiðabólstað ok þótti vænn til höfðingja. Sunnlendingar drógu spott mikit at kvæðum þeim, er Snorri hafði ort um jarlinn, ok sneru afleiðis. (Sturlunga saga I, 278)

The jarl had given him the ship that he sailed on and fifteen valuable gifts. Snorri had composed two poems about the jarl. [...] And when Snorri arrived in Vestmannaeyjar, the news of his arrival and of the honour he had received soon spread across the land. The southerners, especially Ormr Jónsson's kinsmen, became very angry with him. They believed that the Norwegians had commissioned him to prevent them from successfully prosecuting Ormr's killer. This idea was most supported by Björn Þorvaldsson, who then lived at Breiðabólstaðr and seemed to be a promising chieftain. The southerners ridiculed the poems that Snorri had composed about the jarl, and they twisted them.

Here the text turns back to the dispute between the Jónssons and the Norwegian merchants, but the narrative is once again shaped by a focus on poetry, in this case on the poetic parody that Snorri's opponents use to ridicule him, and attention thus turns from the political negotiations back to Snorri's poetic activity. The narrative suggests, implicitly but rather convincingly, that the gifts are a reward for Snorri's poetry. In reality, however, it is much more likely that the gifts were intended to strengthen Snorri's loyalty to Skúli, not only in the establishment of Norwegian rule in Iceland, but also in the internal Norwegian political struggles, in which the support of powerful Icelanders could enhance Skúli's position. By ridiculing the poem, Snorri's opponents also discredited his political alliance with the Norwegian rulers.²¹

The traditional interpretation of this episode is based on the assumption that Snorri's support of the Norwegian monarchy was a deceitful betrayal of the whole Icelandic nation, against which *all* Icelanders rightfully protested. The text implies, however, that it was mainly the Oddaverjar and their allies who opposed Snorri's political contacts in Norway. At the same time, it is unlikely that the direct aim of Snorri's political dealings would have been to prevent Ormr's family from receiving compensation; his intention was to gain political superiority over the Oddaverjar in a much broader sense. It is then understandable that his cooperation with Skúli and with the king did not appeal to the Oddaverjar and the Haukdælir. Nevertheless, the reason was not their opposition to the Norwegian monarchy, but rather the competition for power within Iceland. The Oddaverjar and the Haukdælir, as the traditionally most powerful Icelandic clans, resented having missed the opportunity to enhance their power by such a direct contact with the monarchy, just because they were stuck in petty conflicts with some individual Norwegians at the time. They surely felt that they might lose the power game due to this single unlucky move. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the whole preceding section of *Íslendinga saga* deals with the power struggle between the Sturlungs and the Oddaverjar; the Norwegian episode is a continuation of this theme.

As has been shown here, the narrative account of Snorri's first journey to Norway follows the structural pattern of the court poet's story. In the introduction Snorri is presented first and foremost as a poet, while we know from the saga's preceding section that he is also a powerful and ambitious chieftain. His arrival in Norway is also depicted with a focus on poems that he composes for various Scandinavian aristocrats. The Icelander's alienation from the monarchs

²¹ This element is also present in the court poets' stories in the kings' sagas. As an example, we can name the episode in *Sneglu-Halla þátr*, where Halli and his rival Þjóðólfr ridicule each other's poems composed in their youth back in Iceland. Also here, the real purpose of ridiculing the poems is to discredit one's rival and to challenge his social position, rather than just his poetic abilities.

occurs when they start planning the military expedition to Iceland, but it is followed by a reconciliation when Snorri prevents the expedition by his eloquence and clever negotiation. The gifts received by Snorri are presented as a reward for his poetic activity, at least on the surface level of the narrative. At the end of the episode the text again emphasizes Snorri's poem and its parody, which also foregrounds the character type of the court poet. This structural pattern partly draws the audience's attention away from the political aspects of Snorri's journey, although the saga does not completely conceal these aspects – the middle section of the episode, which does not focus on the character type of court poet, deals with the political negotiations between Snorri and Skúli quite openly.

The possibility that the Icelander and the rulers formally followed the tradition of the skaldic culture in real life is not unlikely, but that alone would not have been a sufficient motivation for the writer of *Íslendinga saga* to employ the narrative type of the court poet's story if the purpose of the saga had been to depict the events as neutrally as possible. And if the saga writer had even intended to reproach his kinsman Snorri for his dealings with the monarchy, he would not have used a narrative type that inherently expresses a positive attitude to the monarchy. The only aspect that the narrative may be intended to cover up is the extent to which Snorri supported Skúli, rather than King Hákon, because Snorri chose the losing side, which is always a politically embarrassing matter. Even within the structural pattern of the court poet's story it is not possible to entirely conceal this aspect and still present a truthful account of the events, but the episode shows a good balance between truthfulness and narrative modification.

First and foremost, however, the construction of the whole episode of Snorri Sturluson's first journey to Norway within the structural pattern of the court poet's story has an interpretative and evaluative function. This narrative type portrays the Icelander as a self-confident, active participant in building up the relationship between Iceland and the Norwegian monarchy, rejecting any idea of passive subordination. *Íslendinga saga* admits that the Norwegian rulers, at this time mainly the jarl, intended to involve Icelanders in their own power struggle, but the Icelandic chieftains are not presented as passively tolerating Norway's expansive politics. On the contrary, the text implies that the chieftains actively initiated the connection between Icelandic and Norwegian politics, because they perceived it as an opportunity to increase their influence and strengthen their position.

5. 4. 3. Snorri Sturluson's alliance with Skúli Bárðarson and the narrative type of the jarl's story

When Snorri Sturluson travelled to Norway for the second time in 1237, the situation in both lands had changed significantly since his previous journey twenty years before. In Iceland, the power struggle had become openly violent, the Sturlungs had been weakened by rivalry among each other, and Snorri had been overpowered by his own nephew. In Norway, open conflict had broken out between King Hákon and Skúli Bárðarson, and everyone who became involved in this conflict had to choose a side. Snorri had chosen a side twenty years ago, and he now relied on Skúli more than ever. If Skúli conquered the throne, Snorri would get a solid chance of regaining an influential position in Iceland or even of formally ruling all Iceland on Skúli's

behalf. If Skúli was defeated, Snorri would share his defeat. Choosing Skúli's side was his own voluntary decision and he alone bore responsibility for it.

This part of the account of Snorri's life is no longer shaped by the narrative type of the court poet's story. Snorri's story becomes so closely intertwined with Skúli's that it follows its structural pattern, which can be defined as the narrative type of the jarl's story. This narrative type portrays a jarl who is too ambitious to be content with co-rulership with a king, so he attempts to dethrone the king and seize the crown. Its structure resembles the conflict story: it begins with an introduction of the circumstances that lead to the rivalry between the two opponents, it continues with the development of a power struggle, and it culminates when the power struggle becomes openly violent, leading to a decisive fight. The social cohesion is then renewed after the defeat of the jarl, when the internal stability of the kingdom is no longer threatened by the power struggle and the king's power is consolidated.

Unlike the conflict story, however, the jarl's story does not focus on reconciliation. When the conflict takes place on the highest level of the society and the king is one of its participants, there is no authority strong enough to mediate an agreement. And when the conflict reaches a certain degree of violence, there is hardly room for personal forgiveness, because the conflict is not only a private matter between two private persons, and the king cannot simply forgive someone who threatens the stability of the whole kingdom by causing internal disunity. The jarl's defeat and death are therefore presented as necessary preconditions of the renewal of social stability. For this reason, the jarl's story can be regarded as the most tragic of all the narrative types.

The jarl's story is dominant in the account of the power relations between Skúli and Hákon in *Hákonar saga*. It is not told in its entirety in *Íslendinga saga*, but it is alluded to, and the text makes it clear that Snorri's story has become intertwined with Skúli's story. On the level of cultural memory, the stories are connected – not within one text, but in the minds of the implied audience. That is how the process of narrativization adds new layers of meaning to past events by connecting the individual stories together. As a player in the Norwegian game of thrones, Snorri shares Skúli's fate. After Skúli's defeat, there is still a chance of a reconciliation between Snorri and the king, but the circumstances do not allow it. The narrative admits that Snorri made a mistake when he chose to support Skúli, who was destined to lose the power game, instead of choosing to support the victorious King Hákon. The text also openly shows that it was not King Hákon who betrayed Snorri – on the contrary, it was Snorri who quite obviously betrayed the king, whose vassal he formally became, and yet he supported the king's political rival. Most importantly, however, Snorri is never presented as a victim. The narrative makes it clear that he was aware of the risk he was taking when he chose Skúli's side. When he decided to enter high politics, he knew that there was a price to be paid for it, but the prospect of the potential gain was worth it. It was time for Icelanders to cross the border of their land and enter a broader political space.

5. 4. 4. The court poet's story, cultural memory, and Icelandic identity

Of all the narrative types, the court poet's story is the most self-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 skills, his special privileges at the royal court, his freedom in deciding to enter a monarch's service, and his ability to negotiate the conditions of the mutual relationship with the monarch. The court poet's story thus expresses the idea that Icelanders decided to obey a king of their own free will, and that their relationship with the king was not based on passive acceptance of the king's decisions, but rather on open discussion.

In the story of Snorri Sturluson, this narrative type partly conceals some of Snorri's political failures, especially the extent and seriousness of his political alliance with Skúli, the defeated party in the Norwegian power struggle. The main function of the narrative type, however, is evaluative. When the events are fitted into the structural pattern of the court poet's story, it draws attention to Snorri's voluntary decision to enter the Norwegian game of thrones, in which he freely chooses one of the competing parties and accepts the inevitable risk. Furthermore, the story of Snorri Sturluson's first journey to Norway presents an even more confident image of the Icelander than the typical court poet's story. Whereas the skalds in the kings' sagas of older times usually arrive at the royal court with little property and little social significance, Snorri is a wealthy and influential chieftain already before his arrival in Norway. This removes the initial contrast between the poet's sharp intellect and his low social position, which is otherwise typical for the court poet's story. In this case, however, the distance from the narrative type does not modify its central idea – instead, it strengthens and highlights it.

A more significant distance from the horizon of expectations of the court poet's story is created by its combination with the contrasting narrative type of the jarl's story. The structural pattern of the court poet's story shapes only the account of Snorri'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. The gloomy ending of Snorri Sturluson's story could have given Icelanders an opportunity to create a narrative of opposition to Norway if such a narrative had been desirable for the construction of Icelandic identity. The existing narrative about Snorri, however, proves that it was not the case. Instead, the writing of *Íslendinga saga* was motivated by the interest in creating a narrative of the Icelanders' active approach to their integration into a broader social space.

5. 5. ÞÓRÐR KAKALI SIGHVATSSON: THE FIGHTER

After both Sturla Sighvatsson and Snorri Sturluson had been killed, one of the Sturlungs still held an important position in the power struggle – Þórðr kakali Sighvatsson, Snorri's nephew and Sturla's brother. His life is described in detail in another part of *Sturlunga saga*, known as *Þórðar saga kakala*. Unlike Snorri, who is presented as a politician and a poet, Þórðr is depicted first and foremost as a fighter who lets his sword speak in the power struggle more than his words. At the end of the saga, however, his character undergoes a transformation.

Þórðar saga consists of two subsequent conflict stories, each of them depicting the protagonist's dispute with one major opponent. Both conflicts occurred after the battle of Örlygsstaðir, which weakened the Sturlungs' position in Iceland. At the time of the battle, Þórðr was in Norway, which was a lucky circumstance that probably saved his life. The Norwegian king then helped Þórðr again when the power struggle in Iceland became intractable. The main theme of this chapter is the development of the political relationship between Þórðr, his opponents, and the king.

5. 5. 1. The conflict story and the character types of the fighter and the mediator

The structure of *Þórðar saga* is shaped by the most common narrative type known from the sagas of Icelanders, the conflict story. This narrative type is essential both for the composition of the story line and for the construction of meaning in *Þórðar saga*: the historical reality of the events is fitted into a specific structural pattern, which has an interpretative and evaluative function. It defines the protagonist as the character type of the fighter, and it draws attention to the character type of the mediator, who terminates the conflict in which the fighter is involved. The structural pattern of the conflict story creates a horizon of expectations, which is partly fulfilled and partly disrupted in the narrative. New layers of meaning are constructed that way.

The character type of the fighter was a significant element of the medieval Icelanders' cultural memory because armed clashes were a common aspect of life in a non-centralized society. The typical fighter is not presented as a reprehensible, ruthless aggressor, or as an unambiguously negative character. The sagas highlight the fighter's positive qualities, such as courage, determination, and battle skills, but they also point out his main fault, which is a lack of moderation and an excessive tendency to violence in conflicts. As a typical example of the fighter from the sagas of Icelanders we can name Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi in *Njáls saga*. As has been mentioned here, the belligerent Gunnarr is contrasted to the peaceful Njáll, but he is nevertheless not presented as a negative character. His portrayal in the text rather illustrates how violent behaviour brings about the downfall of an otherwise exceptionally capable man. The same is true of the typical representative of this character type in the contemporary sagas, Sturla Sighvatsson. The structure of the conflict story creates an equal focus on both competing parties; there is no hero and villain, only several groups furthering their interests. There is no clearly defined aggressor either – the opponents' roles as the attacker and the defender usually alternate.

In the narrative portrayal of Þórðr Sighvatsson, the character type of the Icelandic fighter is combined with another type, known from the kings' sagas – the warrior-aristocrat. This has been pointed out by Costel Coroban, who has noticed a similarity in the portrayal of Þórðr in

Þórðar saga and of King Sverrir Sigurðarson in *Sverris saga* (Coroban 2018, 173–76). I do not, however, agree with Coroban’s interpretation of this narrative parallel. He states that “these attempts to award ‘kingly’ qualities to Icelandic magnates could not exist without a diminution of the Norwegian kings’ roles. If we accept that the contemporary sagas attempted an augmentation of the status of the Icelandic chieftains, then logically this construction must come with a de-construction of the role of Kings” (Coroban 2018, 177, see also 189). Such conclusions are not supported by the overall meaning of *Þórðar saga*, which rather implies that the Icelandic aristocrats’ desire to model themselves on kings signals their admiration and approval of royal power. The following discussion of *Þórðar saga* will, among other things, aim at illustrating this.

Another highly significant character type in the conflict story is the mediator, who intervenes in the dispute as a neutral third party. That is true especially in the contemporary sagas; in stories about the Saga Age, an agreement is often reached on one or both of the conflicting parties’ initiative, or it is mediated by “the people”. In some sagas of Icelanders, there can be an individual mediator, typically an influential and popular chieftain, whose authority is acknowledged by both parties. The contemporary sagas are characterized by an increased focus on the individual mediator; this character type can be represented either by a powerful chieftain or by a cleric. During the Sturlung Age, local disputes could still be solved internally, as we saw in *Svínfellinga saga*. There was, however, no authority strong enough to solve conflicts over the control of whole domains. It became impossible for the most powerful chieftains to resolve their conflicts without external intervention, so they turned to the Norwegian king, hoping that his authority would help them establish peace. *Þórðar saga* therefore portrays the king as a mediator.

5. 5. 2. The conflict story and Þórðr Sighvatsson’s fight for power

Around 1240, the most influential Icelandic chieftains had already become powerful leaders of large, territorially defined domains. The first all-quarter domain was established in the Eastern Quarter by the Svínfellings around 1220, but the family was divided and there was never one individual controlling the whole quarter. The second all-quarter domain was the result of the expansive politics of Snorri Sturluson in the years 1220–1232 and Sturla Sighvatsson after 1235, when the Sturlungs controlled almost all the Western Quarter, besides also controlling a part of the Northern Quarter. After the battle of Örylgsstaðir in 1238, Kolbeinn Arnórsson of the Ásbirnings gained all the Northern Quarter, which became the third all-quarter domain (see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 71–75). After his defeat of Órækja Snorrason in 1242, Kolbeinn also gained power over most of the Western Quarter, which led to his disputes with Þórðr Sighvatsson. This conflict forms the first part of *Þórðar saga* in the *Sturlunga* compilation.²² It follows the typical structural pattern of the conflict story: it begins with gradually increasing tension between the two opponents, the next stage is a series of violent clashes, and the

²² The original separate *Þórðar saga*, which is not extant, probably also described the preceding decades of the protagonist’s life. The compiler of *Sturlunga saga* left out this part, probably because the same events are depicted in *Íslendinga saga*.

culmination of the conflict is a battle. It is followed by a failed attempt at revenge and then finally by a reconciliation.

When Þórðr returns from Norway in 1242, his father's and brothers' domain is governed by their opponent Kolbeinn Arnórsson, who has received forced oaths of loyalty from the local farmers. Kolbeinn's men pursue Þórðr with the intention of capturing and subduing him, while Þórðr attempts to gain support and gradually gathers some followers (chs. 1–11). Violent clashes and occasional killings occur, as well as preparations for larger armed attacks, and both sides gather numerous forces (chs. 13–25). Ever more important men get killed, including Þórðr's brother Tumi Sighvatsson the younger (ch. 24). The violent culmination of the conflict is the battle of Húnaflói on June 25, 1244, in which Þórðr is successful at first but then is forced to flee, and Kolbeinn pursues him (chs. 26–34). The battle does not bring any decisive result. Þórðr attempts to attack Kolbeinn in revenge, but he fails (ch. 35). The conflict then reaches the stage of reconciliation when Kolbeinn, who has become seriously ill by the time, negotiates with Þórðr. When the negotiation proves impossible without a sufficiently powerful arbitrator, both chieftains agree to travel to Norway and accept the king's judgement (ch. 35).

The king represents a higher authority, which alone can terminate the ongoing power struggle by peaceful means. The general respect for the king's authority is reflected in both opponents' willingness to accept his judgement. The journey does not take place in the end, however, because Kolbeinn is unable to travel due to his illness. Before his death in 1245, Kolbeinn promises to give Þórðr his inheritance from the Sturlungs, but he gives the rest of his domain to his kinsman Brandr Kolbeinsson, who cooperates with Gizurr Þorvaldsson. It is of interest that when Kolbeinn discusses his promise to Þórðr with the farmers, they reject it at first, because they are afraid that Þórðr will mistreat them. There is nothing in the saga to suggest that Þórðr tends to mistreat those who have accepted his leadership, so this is not a depiction of Þórðr's character, but rather of the general mistrust in the society. The dispute does not end with Kolbeinn's death, and the following conflict is not a revenge for Kolbeinn, whose death was not violent, but rather a direct continuation of the power struggle (chs. 35–36).

The narrative account of these events in *Þórðar saga* is a well-formed conflict story, but it creates a distance from the horizon of expectations of the narrative type. When the conflict culminates with a battle, the structural pattern leads to an expectation of a defeat and death of one of the leaders, but both leaders survive the battle in the saga. The text implies, however, that a lasting reconciliation would not have been possible without external intervention. Although the mediation does not take place in the end, the structure of the narrative nevertheless emphasizes its importance by showing that the conflict continues even after the death of one of the opponents. This continuation of violence may have been prevented if the mediation had taken place.

5. 5. 3. The king as a mediator

The second conflict again follows the structural pattern of the conflict story, this time with an even stronger focus on the king's role as a mediator. Þórðr's dispute with Brandr Kolbeinsson develops due to competition for power, and preparations for an armed clash take place (chs. 40–41). The violent culmination of the conflict is the battle of Haugsnes on April 19, 1246, in which Brandr is killed and Þórðr gains his domain, which consists of all the Northern Quarter

and the Westfjords (chs. 42–43). In an attempt at revenge, Gizurr Þorvaldsson intends to reunite Brandr's supporters and attack Þórðr (ch. 44), but the situation turns into a reconciliation when both chieftains agree to travel to Norway and accept the king's judgement (chs. 44–47).

This part of the saga fulfils the expectation of the defeat and death of one of the opponents when Brandr is killed in the battle. The distance from the horizon of expectations of the conflict story is created only at the stage of the revenge: the structural pattern leads to an expectation of a violent vengeance, and the mediation is anticipated to take place only after that, but the bloody vengeance is averted by the agreement and subsequent mediation instead. The story thus shows that external mediation can terminate the cycle of violence even when a leader has already been killed.

When Þórðr and Gizurr arrive at the royal court in 1246, the king discusses the case with them but does not make any final decision yet. Nevertheless, *Þórðar saga* gives an account of what people think about the king's preferences (ch. 45):

En þat þóttust menn skilja, at konungrinn myndi heldr áleiðis víkja fyrir Gizuri allt þat, er honum þótti svá mega. Ok höfðu menn þat fyrir satt, at þat myndi mjök vera fyrir sakir mála Snorra Sturlusonar, er lát hans hafði nökkut af konunginum leitt. [...] En er Þórðr kærði á um málit Snorra Sturlusonar, svaraði konungurinn þar fyrir ok sagði, at hann átti þat at bæta, en bað Gizur svara öðrum málum. Þótti mönnum þá sem Hákon konungr myndi liðsinna Gizuri um allt þat, er honum þætti sér sóma eftir honum at mæla. (Sturlunga saga II, 82)

People believed that the king would prefer to decide in favour of Gizurr in everything, as long as he found it possible. And they assumed that it was so mainly due to the matters concerning Snorri Sturluson, as his death had to some extent been caused by the king. [...] When Þórðr prosecuted Snorri Sturluson's case, the king answered that it was his responsibility to pay compensation, but he asked Gizurr to answer to the other matters. People believed that King Hákon would support Gizurr in everything, as long as he deemed it honourable to speak up for him.

This implies that the relations between the king and the Icelanders were still rather personal because the king was expected to base his judgement on his relationship to specific individuals, rather than on abstract principles of justice. This was not dissimilar to conflict resolution in Iceland, in which the allies and supporters that the participants could rely on were often decisive. The acceptance of the king's authority should thus not be regarded as a breakdown of the Icelandic social system; instead, it can be regarded as its higher level. The only difference was that nobody in Iceland was powerful enough to judge the chieftains, so they needed to turn to the king to have their disputes judged and to be appointed to positions of power.

Both *Þórðar saga kakala* (ch. 45) and *Þorgils saga skarða* (ch. 6) emphasize the chieftains' truthfulness and honesty when they present their case to the king:

Ok þann orðróm fengu þeir báðir, at menn kváðust eigi heyrt hafa einarðligar flutt en hvárr flutti sitt mál, svá margt sem í hefði orðit. Mælti ok hvárgi öðrum í mót eða ósannandi annars sögn. (Sturlunga saga II, 82)

And they both gained such a reputation that people said they had never heard a more sincere speech than when each of them presented his case, although so much had happened between them. They did not oppose each other or call each other's speech untrue.

Sögðu þá svá einarðliga fram sín málaefni fyrir konungi, at þá greindi ekki á. (Sturlunga saga II, 114)

They presented their case to the king so sincerely that they never contradicted each other.

This shows the Icelanders in a positive light as honest men who fight for the king's favour by fair means, although some other parts of *Þórðar saga* and *Hákonar saga* show that calumny also was an inevitable part of the power game. The idealization here may serve the purpose of

illustrating the Icelanders' positive relationship to the Norwegian crown, because by a fair approach to the king they show that they expect the king to treat them fairly as well. And that is what he does – despite his initial dislike of Þórðr, he does not immediately decide in favour of Gizurr, but instead he takes time to carefully consider the matter.

A change in the negotiations between Þórðr, Gizurr, and the king occurs when Cardinal Vilhelm arrives in Norway in 1247 and is asked to judge the case. He supports Þórðr, which is explained by Þórðr's friendship with the newly consecrated Bishop Heinrekr of Hólar (ch. 47):

Vildi hann þat eitt heyra, at Þórðr færi þá til Íslands, en Gizurr væri þar eftir, – kvað þat ok ráð, at einn maðr væri skipaðr yfir landit, ef friðr skyldi vera. Þá var ok vígðr Heinrekr biskup til Íslands til Hólastaðar, ok dró hann mjök fram hlut Þórðar við kardinálann ok svá við konunginn. Var þá ok allkært með þeim biskupi ok Þórði. [...] Þá var þat ráðit, at Þórðr skyldi út, ok var hann þá skipaðr yfir allt landit til forráða. En Gizurr var þá eftir, ok þótti honum þat allþungt. Var honum þá skipuð sýsla norðr í Þrándheimi. Þorgils, frændi Þórðar, var þá eftir með konungi svá sem í nökkurri gíslingu fyrir Þórð til trúnaðar við konung. (Sturlunga saga II, 83–84)

[Cardinal Vilhelm] wanted to hear nothing else than that Þórðr would go to Iceland and Gizurr would stay in Norway. He also recommended appointing one man to govern the land and establish peace. Bishop Heinrekr was then consecrated for Hólar in Iceland, and he interceded much on Þórðr's behalf with the cardinal and with the king. The bishop and Þórðr were very friendly to each other at the time. [...] It was then decided that Þórðr should go to Iceland, and he was appointed to govern the whole land. Gizurr stayed in Norway, and he was very displeased with it. He was then appointed to govern a district in Þrándheimr in the north of Norway. Þórðr's kinsman Þorgils stayed with the king as a kind of hostage for Þórðr to guarantee his loyalty to the king.

Hákonar saga (ch. 301) adds the cardinal's renowned praise of monarchy, as well as a more detailed specification of Þórðr's tasks as a royal representative:

Þá var ok sú skipan ger til Íslands með ráði kardinála at sú þjóð er þar byggði þjónaði til Hákonar konungs, því at hann kallaði þat ósannligt at land þat þjónaði eigi undir einhvern konung sem öll önnur í veröldinni. Var þá sendr út Þórðr kakali með Heinreki byskupi. Skyldu þeir flytja þat erendi við landsfólkit at allir játtaðisk undir ríki Hákonar konungs ok slíkar skattgjafir sem þeim semði. [...] Gizurr Þorvaldsson var eftir í Nórøgi. (Hákonar saga II, 136)

With the cardinal's contribution, the decision was made concerning Iceland that the people who lived there should serve King Hákon, because the cardinal found it inappropriate that this land did not serve any king like all other lands in the world. Þórðr Sighvatsson was then sent to Iceland together with Bishop Heinrekr to persuade the people of the land to accept King Hákon's rule and to agree to such tax as they saw fit. [...] Gizurr Þorvaldsson stayed in Norway.

Whether this speech is authentic or not, it clearly reflects one of the central ideas of *Hákonar saga* – that royal rule is an important sign of civilized societies because it creates order. There is nothing in the text of *Hákonar saga* or *Þórðar saga* to suggest that Icelanders would have opposed this idea.

Þórðr is sent to Iceland as a royal representative in 1247, and he gains control of the Borgarfjörðr region, the Westfjords, and the Northern Quarter without opposition. He has influential adherents in these regions, including Hrafn Oddsson, Sturla Þórðarson, Eyjólfur Þorsteinsson, Einarr Þorvaldsson, Nikulás Oddsson, Svarthöfði Dufgusson, and Þorleifr Þórðarson of Garðar. The chieftains in the Eastern Quarter, Þorvarðr and Oddr Þórarinsson and Sæmundr Ormsson, have disagreements among themselves, but they are all Þórðr's allies (see Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 217–18). These men's support is of essential importance for Þórðr because the position of a royal representative is in itself not sufficient for gaining and retaining power in Iceland. It is due to his existing power base that Þórðr firmly establishes his leadership and succeeds in expelling some of his opponents to Norway. Everybody follows his will at the Alþingi of 1248, except for the men from the Southern Quarter, who are Gizurr's adherents.

Þórðr threatens them but refrains from using violence. When Gizurr does not return in the autumn, Þórðr rides south and forces the farmers to accept him as their leader. They are reluctant, but they do not actively oppose him, and no armed clashes are involved. The experienced fighter refrains from violent means because he no longer needs them; his authority has grown to such an extent that nobody dares to directly oppose him.

In 1249, Þórðr gets into a dispute with Bishop Heinrekr, who complains to the king, claiming that Þórðr is not keeping his agreement with the king (ch. 48):

En biskup flutti ekki mjök mál Þórðar ok kvað hann eigi efna þat, er hann hefði heitit, kvað konungs vilja aldri mundu við ganga á Íslandi, meðan Þórðr réði svá miklu. Biskup var með konungi um vetrinn, ok hlýddi konungr allmjök á hans sagnir. En þá var fátt þeira manna í Nóregi, er mjök drægi fram hlut Þórðar, nema nökkurir lögumautar hans. (Sturlunga saga II, 86)

But the bishop did not support Þórðr much, and he said that Þórðr did not keep the promises he had made. He said that the king's will would never be accepted in Iceland as long as Þórðr was in charge. The bishop spent the winter with the king, who often listened to his speech. There were, on the other hand, few men in Norway who supported Þórðr, except for some of his fellow retainers.

The bishop accuses Þórðr of misusing the king's support for strengthening his own position in Iceland. The text also shows that the relations at the royal court are still surprisingly personal – it is the number of supporters that is described as one of the crucial factors in the king's decision. In this case, the king decides to summon Þórðr to Norway.²³

Hákonar saga (ch. 301) explains the reasons for the bishop's sudden enmity towards Þórðr, and it then returns to an account of how strongly the king is influenced by Bishop Heinrekr's utterances when Þórðr arrives at the royal court in 1250 (ch. 317):

Ok er Þórðr kom norðr um vetrinn þá höfðu þeir menn er helzt váru óvinir Þórðar kært sín mál fyrir byskupi, ok hafði hann tekit þeira mál á sinn varnað. Ok af þessu tók at spillast vinátta þeira byskups ok Þórðar, þar til er þeir urðu á engan hlut sáttir. Var byskup tvá vetr á Íslandi ok fór eftir þat útan á fund Hákonar konungs ok var hinn mesti óvin Þórðar jafnan síðan. En þeir slógu sér þá saman í vináttu, Heinrekr byskup ok Gizurr, ok fluttu þat fyrir konungi at hans mál mundi betr fara á Íslandi ef þeir væri til sendir. (Hákonar saga II, 136–37)

When Þórðr came to the north of Iceland that winter, his worst enemies had complained to the bishop about their situation, and the bishop had taken their case into his hands. For this reason, the friendship between the bishop and Þórðr started to decline, and in the end, they never agreed on anything. The bishop spent two winters in Iceland, and after that he went to Norway to visit King Hákon, and he was Þórðr's worst enemy ever since. But he formed an alliance with Gizurr, and they said to the king that his interests would be better furthered in Iceland if they were sent there.

Þetta haust kómu þeir útan af Íslandi, Sigvarðr byskup ok Þórðr kakali, ok fundu konung í Þrándheimi. Var þar þá mart íslenzkra manna, Heinrekr byskup, Gizurr Þorvaldsson, Þorgils skarði, Jón Sturluson, Finnbjörn Helgason, Sæmundarsynir Philippus ok Haraldr, ok var með þeim mikill sveitardráttir, því at hvurr vildi sitt mál flytja, til þess at næði út at fara. En Heinrekr byskup flutti þat mest at Gizurr skyldi út fara, því at hann stóð mest í móti Þórði ok kallaði þat ónýtt er Þórðr hafði sýslat. Sagði byskup at Þórðr hafði í öllu sinn hlut fram dregit en ekki sæmd konungs, ok var því meirr trúat at sinni. (Hákonar saga II, 153)

That autumn, Bishop Sigvarðr and Þórðr kakali came from Iceland and visited the king in Þrándheimr. There were many Icelanders there at the time, Bishop Heinrekr, Gizurr Þorvaldsson, Þorgils Böðvarsson, Jón Sturluson, Finnbjörn Helgason, Sæmundr's sons Philippus and Haraldr, and there was a fierce competition among them, because each wanted to further his own interests and be sent to Iceland [on the king's behalf]. Bishop Heinrekr recommended most that Gizurr should be sent to Iceland, because he strongly opposed Þórðr and called everything

²³ In the standard modern edition (*Sturlunga saga* 1946), *Þórðar saga* ends here, soon after the king's decision to summon Þórðr back to Norway. In the *Sturlunga* compilation, however, the rest of Þórðr's life, described in *Íslendinga saga*, is logically connected to this part of his story, although it is separated from it by accounts of other events.

that Þórðr had done useless. He said that Þórðr had furthered his own interests instead of the king's esteem in all matters, and this time the king largely believed him.

The conflict originated in Iceland, where the powerful men, both secular and ecclesiastical, furthered the interests of their supporters as well as their own, just like they had always done. The difference was that they now turned to the king when any serious disputes occurred among them. The king's decision, however, far from being based on impersonal, absolute principles, was formed by what Hans Jacob Orning has called a dual contextual foundation – the king was influenced by those who were physically close to him, and these men in turn had highly personal grounds for their assessment of the situation (Orning 2008, 252). In this respect, the difference between the king and the Icelandic chieftains was much less in practice than in theory.

King Hákon had a recent personal experience with treason, as he had been betrayed by his co-ruler and father-in-law Skúli Bárðarson, and this doubtlessly made him more sensitive to any potential disloyalty. The saga shows, however, that Þórðr was not actually disloyal to the king, he was only unable to gain the support of his opponent's followers, and these started to spread calumny about Þórðr at the royal court, notably in his absence. It is of interest here that a very similar situation is described in *Hákonar saga's* account of the king's conflict with Skúli – the saga repeatedly emphasizes that the two got along when they spent time together, but as soon as one of them travelled away, dishonest men started spreading mistrust and suspicion between them (ch. 213 and elsewhere). Skúli was in fact disloyal to the king, and blaming others is a narrative strategy used in the saga to idealize the relationship between the king and Skúli, but such a narrative strategy could be effective only if it was credible – if it reflected the real political principles of the time. This parallel should therefore be taken into consideration in the evaluation of Þórðr's case, as it shows that his situation was not based on a specific approach to Icelanders, but rather on the common practice in Norway. *Þórðar saga* also directly mentions the king's conflict with Snorri Sturluson as the reason for his initial mistrust toward Snorri's kinsman Þórðr, and it is likely that this mistrust was still not forgotten, although the king had already given Þórðr a chance. Both Snorri and Skúli had been dead for some years, but the king's opinions were probably still formed by the recent Norwegian power struggle.

The king sends Gizurr Þorvaldsson to Iceland in 1252 together with Þorgils Böðvarsson, Bishop Heinrekr, and others; Gizurr receives power over almost all the Northern Quarter, and Þorgils over Borgarfjörðr (*Íslendinga saga*, ch. 164). Þórðr Sighvatsson stays in Norway, but the king gives him an office in local administration in Norway (*sýsla*) (*Hákonar saga II*, 162); thereby he shows him respect and provides him with a source of income. *Hákonar saga* also shows that Bishop Heinrekr's support of Gizurr is as unsteady as his support of Þórðr (ch. 327):

Höfðu þeir ok eigi lengi verit á Íslandi, Heinrekr byskup ok Gizurr, áðr byskupi þótti Gizurr eigi enda þat er hann hafði konungi heitit. Kom þá svá brátt at byskup vendi sinni vináttu til þeira manna er mestir vǫru óvinir Gizurar. Sagði byskup svá at engi var fullkonnari í en Gizurr at rjúfa alla þá hluti er konungi vǫru til sǣmðar ok hann hafði heitit. (Hákonar saga II, 161)

Bishop Heinrekr and Gizurr had not been in Iceland a long time before the bishop felt that Gizurr was not keeping the promises he had given to the king. The bishop then suddenly turned his friendship to those who most opposed Gizurr. The bishop said that nobody was more accomplished than Gizurr in breaking all the promises to further the king's honour.

That is, however, not the biggest problem that Gizurr is facing. Þórðr's supporters in Iceland do not give up easily even in his absence, and they gather forces to attack Gizurr and Þorgils (*Íslendinga saga*, ch. 165). Þórðr's chief supporter Eyjólfur Þorsteinsson unsuccessfully attempts to kill Gizurr by burning his farm in the autumn of 1253. Gizurr loses his wife and sons in the attack and leaves for Norway in the summer of 1254 because he wishes to regain his social prestige by visiting the royal court (*Íslendinga saga*, chs. 170–182), and because the king has summoned him (*Hákonar saga II*, 169). Gizurr and Þórðr are then both in Norway, while the power struggle in Iceland is taken over by other men, as will be discussed in the section about Þorgils Böðvarsson. These violent conflicts are beyond the king's control.

Despite the renewed mistrust, the king continues to treat Þórðr with respect. The relationship between Þórðr and Gizurr, on the other hand, remains cold when they both meet in Norway in 1254, as can be seen in *Íslendinga saga* (ch. 192):

Litlu síðar fór Þórðr kakali austr til Túnsbergs, ok tók konungr honum eigi margliga. Gizurr var þar fyrir. Ok er Þórðr hafði þar skamma hríð verit, biðr hann konung, at hann léti Gizur í brott fara, ok segir eigi örvænt, at vandræði aukist af, ef þeir væri í einum kaupstað báðir. Konungr svarar: „Hver ván er þér þess, at ek reka Gizur, frænda minn, frá mér fyrir þessi ummæli þín, – eða myndir þú eigi vilja vera í himinríki, ef Gizurr væri þar fyrir?“ „Vera gjarna, herra,“ segir Þórðr, „ok væri þó langt í milli okkar.“ Konungr brosti at, en þó gerði konungr þat, at hann fekk hvarum tveggja þeira sýslu. Hafði Þórðr sýslu í Skíðunni. Þeir fóru báðir til Hallands með konungi. Er þar mikil saga frá Þórði. Þórðr var vinsæll í sýslu sinni, ok þykkir þeim sem fáir íslenzkir menn hafi slíkir verit af sjálfum sér sem Þórðr. (Sturlunga saga I, 523–24)

After some time, Þórðr went east to Túnsberg, but the king did not give him a warm welcome. Gizurr was also there. And when Þórðr had been there a short time, he asked the king to send Gizurr away, and he said that it was not unlikely that it would lead to trouble if they were both in the same town. The king answered: “How likely is it that I will send my kinsman Gizurr away just because you ask for it? Or would you not wish to be in heaven if Gizurr was there?” “I would wish to be there, lord,” Þórðr replied, “but I would keep a distance from him.” The king smiled, and yet he made an arrangement to appoint each of them to govern a district in Norway. Þórðr governed the district of Skíða. They both accompanied the king to Halland,²⁴ and there is much to tell of Þórðr's deeds there. He was also popular in the district that he governed, and people felt that few Icelanders had been as capable as Þórðr.

This humorous dialogue can be regarded as an evaluation of the king's attitude to disputes among Icelanders. Far from wishing to weaken the chieftains by increasing their mutual strife, he wishes to establish peace. That is confirmed by the practical solution to Þórðr's enmity with Gizurr, when the king sends them to different parts of Norway. That way, he also shows them trust and respect, as he grants them high positions within the Norwegian administration. It is also emphasized in the text that Þórðr lives up to all the expectations and becomes a popular local leader in Norway.

It may be this success in Norwegian regional politics that convinces the king to give Þórðr a second chance in Iceland. *Íslendinga saga* does not explain the king's motivation for his decision, but it informs us that the king intends to send Þórðr to Iceland as a royal representative again in 1256. The text also pauses on Þórðr's reaction to the news (ch. 192):

Svá segir Kolfinna Þorvaldsdóttir, ok var hon þá með Þórði, at bréf Hákonar konungs kómu til hans síð um kveld, er hann sat við drykk, þat er Þórðr váttaði, at konungr hafði gefit honum orlof til Íslands ok gera hann þar mestan mann. Varð hann svá glaðr við, at hann kvað engan hlut þann til bera, at honum þætti þá betri. Þakkaði hann konunginum mikilliga. Drukku menn þá ok váru allkátir. Litlu síðar talaði Þórðr, sagðist ok eigi fara skyldu af

²⁴ King Hákon undertook a military expedition to Halland – now a district in Sweden, then a part of Denmark – in the summer of 1256 because of an ongoing conflict with the Danish king (see *Hákonar saga*, chs. 339–341).

Íslandi, ef honum yrði auðit út at koma. Litlu síðar segir Þórðr, at svifi yfir hann. Var honum þá fylgt til hvílu sinnar. Tók hann þá sóttin svá fast, at hann lá skamma stund, ok leiddi hann til bana. (Sturlunga saga I, 524) Kolfinna Þorvaldsdóttir,²⁵ who stayed with Þórðr at the time, says that he received letters from King Hákon late one evening when he was sitting and drinking. Þórðr then affirmed that the king had given him permission to return to Iceland and intended to make him the most powerful man there. He was so happy about it that he said that nothing else could have happened that he would have deemed better. He thanked the king very much. Men drank then and were extremely joyful. After a while Þórðr said that if he was fortunate enough to get to Iceland, he would never leave again. A little later he said that he was feeling dizzy. He was then led to his bed. The disease affected him so fiercely that he lay only a short while before it caused his death.

This brief scene is both emotionally strong and significant for the interpretation of Þórðr's life in the narrative. The old fighter, who never gained firm and lasting rule over Iceland by the sword, now finally sees his dream fulfilled by non-violent political means. His sudden death, however, thwarts his hope once and for all. The warrior-aristocrat is not destined to govern Iceland because belligerent chieftains are meant to be replaced by centralized rule. The time of fighters is over.

5. 5. 4. The fighter's story, cultural memory, and Icelandic identity

Þórðr Sighvatsson is presented as an ambiguous character – as a fierce fighter who learns to show moderation, a man who lives by the sword and dies in bed. The saga mostly depicts him with sympathy, although he is not portrayed as an ideal peaceful chieftain, and his faults and failures are not covered up. Like every other conflict story, the saga criticizes unnecessary brutality and advocates reconciliation. The difference is that *Þórðar saga* places a much stronger emphasis on the king's role as a mediator, showing that the king is the only authority whose decision can be respected by the most influential Icelandic chieftains of the Sturlung Age. The text expresses the idea that in the given situation, bloodshed cannot be prevented without the monarch's intervention. That way, the saga propagates monarchy as a political system that establishes peace, order, and stability.

The motif of an old fighter's non-violent death in the moment of victory underlines Þórðr's ambiguity and creates a distance from the horizon of expectations of the conflict story. *Sturlunga saga* depicts real historical events, and the death has not been invented for a narrative effect, but the structure of the text influences the recipients' perception of the events and invites a particular interpretation. The narrative type of the conflict story draws attention to the character type of the fighter, but then the text creates a distance from the narrative type by showing that one of the best fighters of the Sturlung Age never achieves his goal by wielding weapons, only by turning to peaceful negotiations, and then he is deprived of his final victory by a sudden death. This distance from the horizon of expectations of the conflict story reflects the idea that the time of fighters is over and will not come back because the warrior-aristocrats have been replaced by representatives of centralized royal rule.

The character type of the fighter retained its place in the cultural memory, and it remained a popular literary motif that was accepted with admiration and nostalgia, but now its place was on parchment, rather than in real political relations. An awareness of social transformation did not, however, necessarily bring about a feeling of discontinuity or loss of identity, as the change concerned only some specific aspects and allowed for strong elements of continuity in many

²⁵ Probably a granddaughter of Snorri Sturluson, daughter of Þorvaldr of Vatnsfjörðr and Snorri's daughter Þórdís.

spheres of the cultural and political life. *Þórðar saga* shows that the political relations within the monarchy were in fact not as impersonal as the official royal ideology suggested. Continuity consisted in the lasting significance of constant discussion between the monarch, the local aristocrats, and the ecclesiastical dignitaries, the purpose of which was finding compromises that were beneficial for everyone. Increased centralization of power strengthened the executive power, which was essential for solving conflicts that would otherwise cause lengthy armed clashes, which were not beneficial for anyone.

5. 6. ÞORGILS SKARÐI BÖÐVARSSON: THE ROYAL RETAINER

Before we get to the final consolidation of power in Iceland, we need to turn our attention to another important figure, Þorgils skarði Böðvarsson. He was Þórðr Sighvatsson's kinsman and their stories mostly take place simultaneously, but there is a considerable difference in their portrayal in *Sturlunga saga*. Þórðr is presented as the warrior-chieftain of the old type, although aristocratic manners are not unknown to him, whereas Þorgils is described as a royal retainer, who truly values social cohesion higher than his personal ambition.

It has been suggested that *Þorgils saga skarða*, which is only preserved in the *Reykjarfjarðarbók* redaction of *Sturlunga saga*, focuses on the Icelanders' opposition to royal power more than other contemporary sagas (Helgi Þorláksson 2012, 82–84). I do not, however, agree with this view. In the following I aim to show that while *Þorgils saga* openly depicts some conflicts between the supporters of different royal representatives in Iceland around 1250, its overall presentation of the relationship between the Icelandic magnates and the monarchy is even more positive than in the other parts of *Sturlunga saga*. In *Íslendinga saga*, for example, both Sturla Sighvatsson and Gizurr Þorvaldsson are formally the king's representatives, but they hardly ever really put the king's interests before their own. Þorgils Böðvarsson, on the other hand, is presented as a character who gradually develops into an almost ideal royal retainer and a highly loyal representative of royal power. Opposition to him is not depicted as opposition to the monarchy, however, but rather as a power struggle in which the supporters of other chieftains refuse to accept Þorgils because they wish to remain faithful to their leaders.

The narrative type of the royal retainer's story has already been presented here. It has been shown that its structural pattern emphasizes the protagonist's transformation from a troublemaker who threatens the social order by his belligerence into a noble fighter whose ferocity gets a meaningful purpose in service to a monarch. The decisive step toward this transformation is the protagonist's journey from Iceland to Norway, and typically also a quest in which he proves his worth away from the royal court. The chief aspect of the character type of the royal retainer is a combination of bravery and loyalty – the protagonist is not afraid to fight when necessary, but instead of disrupting social stability by excessive greed for power, he uses his courage to defend the social order represented by the monarch. *Þorgils saga* modifies this narrative type by combining it with another, the peaceful chieftain's story. Unlike the typical royal retainer's story, in which the protagonist fights on behalf of the monarch, *Þorgils saga* focuses on the development of the protagonist from a fighter to a royal representative who aims at non-violent conflict resolution when it is possible. This development draws attention to

the difference between the traditional Icelandic warrior-chieftains, such as Þórðr Sighvatsson, and the new type of the peaceful representatives of centralized rule.

5. 6. 1. The royal retainer's story and Þorgils at the royal court

Þorgils saga begins with an extensive and detailed account of the protagonist's youth (chs. 1–10), which highlights Þorgils' fierce, aggressive personality. This is first shown at the very beginning of the saga, when Þorgils gets into a dispute with another boy over a game and stubbornly refuses to compromise or apologize (ch. 1). This scene is not significant for the further development of the action, but it is essential as a key scene in the characterization of the protagonist and as the introduction of the royal retainer's story.

Þorgils sails to Norway in his youth, and although he is still ferocious by nature, he learns to show moderation and use his bravery for useful purposes during his stay among the aristocrats. At the beginning of his stay in Norway, Þorgils is still unable to control his fierceness, and he takes part in a brawl at a feast, followed by a hefty discussion about vengeance and honour (ch. 2). The scene shows the contrast between the overall lack of dignity in drunken brawls on the one hand, and the necessity of claiming compensation for individual insults and wounds received on such an occasion on the other hand:

Eiríkr mælti til Brynjólfs: „Geymið til bóndi, at hark þetta semist, ok er þat yður sæmð ok allra þeira, er hér eigu hlut at.“ Brynjólfr mælti: „Litill vani hefir þat hér verit, at menn væri barðir í hýbýlum mínum.“ [...] Björn mælti: „Þat kann ek þér segja, Árne, þótt yðr þykki mín skömm lítills verð, at vera skal annat hvárt, at ek skal hafa fyrir fulla sæmð eða hefna mín sjálf.“ Þorgils segir: „Ef þú heitist við, Björn, mjök at gera mér eina skömm, þá skal ek gera þér tvær skammir, þat er þú skalt mega báðar hendr á festa.“ (Sturlunga saga II, 108–09)

Eiríkr said to Brynjólfr: “Householder, take care of calming down this uproar, for it is a matter of your honour and the honour of all those who are involved.” Brynjólfr said: “It has not been usual here that men would get beaten up in my house.” [...] Björn said: “I can tell you, Árne, that although you deem my shame insignificant, it will either be so that I shall receive a full compensation, or I will take revenge.” Þorgils said: “If you, Björn, threaten to cause me some shame, I will cause you a double shame that you will be able to hold with both hands.”

Although the brawl is petty, the debate features the key concepts of the Norse social norms, such as honour, shame, and revenge (*sæmð*, *skömm*, *hefnð*). The discussion has a more universal meaning and concerns disputes in general, both petty and serious. It is therefore quite significant that the whole episode ends with an agreement, the harm suffered by both parties is deemed equal, and everyone is satisfied with the reconciliation:

En þeir lögðu þar bezt til hirðmennirnir, Árne ok Ketill, ok Eiríkr ok Bergr. Báðu þeir Þorgils vægja til fyrir Brynjólfi bónda ok ráði þeira manna, er þar vóru mest virðir. En Þorgils þagði, sem hann var vanr, ef hann reiddist. Allmisjafnt lögðu menn til, en þessi varð lykt á með atkvæði Brynjólfs bónda ok ráði þeira manna, er þar vóru mest virðir í hjá ok bezt vildu til leggja, at mál þessi féllust í faðma ok skyldi enginn öðrum fé bæta. Seldi þá hverr öðrum grið, en síðan settust þeir niðr ok drukku. Var bóndi þá allkáttr ok hverr við annan. Drukku nú af jólin. (Sturlunga saga II, 109)

The best suggestions came from the retainers Árne and Ketill, Eiríkr and Bergr. They asked Þorgils to yield to the householder Brynjólfr and to follow the advice of the men who were most respected there. But Þorgils was silent, as was his habit when he was angry. Men came up with various suggestions, but by Brynjólfr's decision and on the initiative of those who were most respected among the present men and wished to give the best advice, the end was that the complaints were proclaimed equal, and nobody needed to pay compensation. Everybody then promised each other truce, and after that they sat down to drink. The householder was then very cheerful, and so were all the others together. They continued with the Christmas feast.

The conciliatory solution is praised in the narrative through a characterization of those who bring it about as “those who were most respected among the present men and wished to give the best advice”. The scene shows that unity and accord among the royal retainers are worth giving up some personal pride for, because real honour is gained by respecting this unity and keeping peace. Everyone therefore feels obliged to put the group’s interests before his own, and Þorgils must learn this. Þorgils comes from the Icelandic aristocratic environment, where the concept of unity within groups beyond the family seems to have been weak, because Iceland lacked a monarch and an ideology that would form such clearly defined groups. The alliances between chieftains and families were often unstable because everyone minded their personal interests in the first place, and action was motivated by individuals’ reactions to situations that threatened their social position – whether they concerned property, local power, or other aspects (see Nordal 1998, 147–48). In Norway, political relations were also still partly based on individual trust and mutual obligations, but the monarch did not represent just an individual on top of the social hierarchy, but rather an institution that transcended individuality. Loyalty to the king and to the royal retinue was therefore also a value that transcended individuality. Icelanders who entered royal service as retainers had to adapt to this concept of group unity.

When Þorgils learns to understand the value of unity, he seeks a position in the royal retinue, and he is helped by the highly respected Icelandic retainer Aron Hjörleifsson, who feels obliged to assist the young man because Þorgils’ father Böðvarr helped him during his outlawry in Iceland. The Norwegian retainer Brynjólfr offers to help Þorgils at the royal court as well. Both praise him greatly, and Þorgils probably gains the position mainly due to their intercession (ch. 4). This shows the importance of personal-political relationships for the career at the royal court. The same relationships were also essential in Icelandic politics, so both social systems were based on the same principles; the only significant difference was the importance of the concept of group unity in Norway.

The king treats Þorgils with respect, but he holds him in Norway and does not give him permission to return to Iceland. This, however, cannot be perceived as oppression, because Þorgils entered the king’s service voluntarily and agreed to enter into a relationship of obligation. It must rather be regarded as one of the signs of the typical duality of the relations between retainers and kings. Social prestige could be gained at the royal court, but the king rightfully required loyalty and cooperation in return. The relationship was mutually beneficial as long as both parties followed the rules. These conditions were the same for Norwegian and Icelandic retainers without difference.

At this point, Þorgils’ personality is still rather troublesome, but the upcoming change is foreshadowed when the queen excuses his ferocity with young age (ch. 5). In this context, the saga also points out that the queen is friendly toward the Sturlungs specifically:

Drottning var inn mesti vinr Sturlunga, svá sem verit hafði Skúli, faðir hennar. Hon bað Þorgils setjast niðr hjá sér, en hann settist á fótsemil hjá fótum hennar. (Sturlunga saga II, 112)

The queen was the Sturlungs’ best friend, just like her father Skúli had been. She asked Þorgils to sit down beside her, but he sat down on a stool by her feet.

This comment alludes to Skúli Bárðarson’s alliance with Snorri Sturluson, and thus to the Icelanders’ role in the internal power struggle in Norway. This power struggle was over by Þorgils’ time, but the allusions to it show that it was not forgotten.

Þorgils' position at the royal court is improved when he is accepted into the king's retinue, but he still needs to prove his worth and show that he deserves the prestige he has received. That happens when he shows great courage in extinguishing a fire in Björgyn, gaining glory and the king's special favour (ch. 6):

Konungr kvað á, hvar Þorgils skyldi standa, en hann vildi fram ganga miklu lengra. Fekk hann svá mikinn háska við þat, at þat þótti með ólíkindum, er hann helt lífi meiðingarlaust. Um síðir lét konungr taka langsskipssegl ok gera alvátt ok bera at eldinum. Varð þat þá um síðir, at eldrinn slokknaði með guðs miskunn ok hamingju konungs. En Þorgils fekk þann orðróm af konungi sjálfum ok öllum öðrum, er vissu, at engi maðr hefði þar jafnvel borit ok borgizt sem hann – í jafnmiklum háska, svá sem Sturla Þórðarson hefir kveðit í erfíðrápu þeiri, er hann orti um Þorgils. Ok þessa naut Þorgils jafnan síðan hjá konungi, svá at hann þolði honum betr en flestum öðrum jafnar tilgerðir. (Sturlunga saga II, 113–14).

The king decided where Þorgils should stand, but he wanted to go much further. He put himself in so much danger that it seemed unlikely that he would stay alive and unhurt. The king eventually let his men take a sail from a longship, make it all wet and throw it over the fire. Then the fire was finally quenched with God's mercy and due to the king's luck. The king himself and all others who knew about it said that no other man had performed greater deeds there or held his ground better than Þorgils in such a great danger, as Sturla Þórðarson says in the funeral poem that he composed about Þorgils. Afterwards, this always served Þorgils well when he was with the king, who was more tolerant of his misdeeds than other men's.

This is typical for the narrative type of the royal retainer's story: the retainer risks his own life bravely and selflessly, and the monarch praises his extraordinary prowess. It is a parallel to the scene from *Guðmundar saga* that has been mentioned in the discussion of Ari Þorgeirsson, where the Icelander saves a Norwegian aristocrat's life. In both cases, the account is accompanied by stanzas in the style of traditional praise poetry, which allude to the narrative conventions of the kings' sagas, thus emphasizing the Icelander's aristocratic qualities.

This episode, in which the protagonist proves his worth for the first time, is followed by another typical element of the royal retainer's story: a quest in which the retainer shows his abilities away from the royal court. In this case, the quest does not take place abroad, but it nevertheless takes place in the king's absence. Þorgils is staying in Niðarós, which is managed by Jarl Knútr Hákonarson.²⁶ Knútr insults the Sturlungs at a feast, and an argument breaks out between him and Þorgils (ch. 8). It is of interest that this episode is a parallel to the scene of Þorgils' first dispute at a feast. The difference is that in the first case, all the participants are royal retainers, so their mutual loyalty prevents them from continuing the conflict. Here, the situation is different – although Knútr is the king's vassal, he partly represents an independent power unit; the king's retainers are not bound by any oaths of loyalty to Knútr, and they tend to compete with his men.

The text also implies that besides this competition between the king's and the jarl's followers, the conflict has another, more important reason: the memory of the recent power struggle in Norway. Significantly, this episode again alludes to the Sturlungs' role in this power struggle, and although some of the Sturlungs loyally supported the king, the one whom the contemporaries remember best is clearly Snorri Sturluson, who supported the king's opponent. It is highlighted in the text that Knútr specifically ridicules Snorri Sturluson and other Icelanders who were Skúli Bárðarson's allies in his rivalry with King Hákon:

Mælti Knútr jarl heldr háðuliga til Íslendinga, talaði til Snorra Sturasonar ok annarra íslenzkra manna, er verit höfðu með Skúla hertoga. Tók jarl á þeim öllum heldr lítilmannliga. En Þorgils svarar svá á móti, at þeir frændr

²⁶ Ca. 1208–1261, son of Jarl Hákon galinn.

hans myndi verit hafa, et eigi myndi sik allmikitt vanta þykkja á við hann fyrir útan nafnbót. Þetta líkaði jarli stórrilla, urðu af þessu mjök sundrorða. (Sturlunga saga II, 115)

Jarl Knútr spoke quite mockingly about Icelanders, meaning Snorri Sturluson and other Icelandic men who had supported Duke Skúli. He pointed out that they all were rather unworthy. Þorgils replied that some of his kinsmen may have felt that they lacked nothing but the title in comparison with Knútr. The jarl disliked this greatly, and they got into a fierce argument because of it.

The cause of the derision may be the fact that these Icelanders were on the losing side together with Skúli, but the scene also implies that these conflicts were not forgotten even after Skúli's defeat. From other sources, mainly *Hákonar saga*, we know that Knútr participated actively in the Norwegian power struggle. At first, in 1226–1227, he was the leader of the Ribbungs, a revolt group against King Hákon, but after their defeat he was reconciled with the king (*Hákonar saga I*, 313–29). He rejected Skúli's offers of alliance, including the offer of a jarl's title (*Hákonar saga II*, 58, 66). Subsequently, he received this title from King Hákon, and in the conflict between the king and Skúli he was among the king's foremost supporters, and he even personally participated in battles (*Hákonar saga II*, 67–93, 106). It is therefore understandable that he remembered these events well, as he had personally experienced them, and he clearly felt no reason to keep quiet about them. The fact that he mentioned them in connection with Icelanders implies that he deemed their role in the Norwegian power struggle quite substantial.

The memory of the conflict between Hákon and Skúli is probably the main reason why Jarl Knútr and Þorgils do not hesitate to draw their weapons. A violent clash is nevertheless prevented by others, and Þorgils is then personally reconciled with the jarl. Later, however, the conflict continues on a more collective level (ch. 9). A royal retainer wounds one of the jarl's followers in an armed clash and is imprisoned by the jarl's men. The royal retainers, led by Þorgils, set him free and wound several guards. The jarl then summons a force against the king's men, who intend to defend themselves, again led by Þorgils. Although this conflict is more collective, Þorgils reminds the jarl of their previous personal disagreement. He also speaks on behalf of all Icelanders, which suggests that a double dichotomy can be perceived in the dispute: on the one hand between the king's and the jarl's men, and on the other hand between Icelanders and Norwegians (ch. 9):

„[...] Er nú vel, at þú reynir þat í dag, hvárt Íslendingar eru svá linir ok lítills háttar sem þér sögðuð í vetr. “ Jarl mælti: „Slikt er mikit ofbeldi ótignum mönnum at halda til jafns við oss eða meir. “ Taldi hann nú margar sakar við Þorgils ok eggjaði þá menn sína til atsóknar. (Sturlunga saga II, 117)

“[...] It is good that you can try today whether Icelanders are as weak and insignificant as you said last winter.” The jarl said: “It is very overbearing behaviour when low-born men regard themselves as our equals or superiors.” He enumerated many accusations against Þorgils and encouraged his men to attack.

This double dichotomy suggests that Þorgils feels that it is his duty to defend the king's and the Icelanders' honour, as well as his own. Icelanders are, however, defined as a group in the sense of regional, rather than national identity. They are mentioned by Jarl Knútr as active participants in Norwegian politics, which implies that they are regarded as members of a unified social space that includes both Iceland and Norway. Their reputation can nevertheless be stained by some past failures, so Þorgils probably feels the need to improve it by his fearlessness, and to show that noble Icelanders are not as low-born as the jarl suggests.

The attack is slow to begin, however, because there are kinsmen and friends in both groups. When negotiations begin, Þorgils refuses to give the jarl self-judgement, but he finally decides to accept the king's judgement. This shows that he has learnt to control his ferocity and is willing to choose a peaceful solution. Þorgils is praised for his peaceful decision in the narrative, and it is underlined that his reputation is improved by this: "people thought that Þorgils had dealt well with this, and he gained a good reputation for it" (*bótti Þorgils þessu hafa vel fylgt, ok fekk hann sér fyrir gott orð, Sturlunga saga II*, 118). He is appreciated for having found the right balance between moderation and decisiveness – he does not insist on violence, but at the same time he refuses to submit the decision to his opponent. By such behaviour he protects his own honour, as well as the king's and the Icelanders' honour, more than he would have done by victory in a fight.

Here the narrative creates a distance from the horizon of expectations of the royal retainer's story. In the typical structural pattern of this narrative type, the protagonist improves his reputation by fighting on behalf of the king, but in *Þorgils saga*, the protagonist is praised for preventing a violent clash and turning to the king for arbitration instead. That way, he improves his own reputation by showing moderation and averting bloodshed with the help of the king's authority. As Hans Jacob Orning has pointed out, retaining esteem and a good reputation was in this case crucial not just for Þorgils, but also for the king. Even the monarch, according to Orning, was not too concerned about the legal aspects of the matter, as he expressed approval of how the case ended, and he did not reproach Þorgils for having broken the law. That means that the king's primary interest was not in resolving conflicts in accordance with the absolute principles of law, but rather in maintaining his own esteem and that of his men, because it was difficult for the king to maintain authority in the Norwegian regions where he was not physically present (Orning 2008, 340–41). To achieve this, he depended on the sense of honour displayed by Þorgils when he wanted to "let the king know that he has brave men here and not idle cowards" (*látum konung þat spyrja, at hann hefir hér drengjum skipat, en eigi dáðleysingjum, Sturlunga saga II*, 117). Þorgils' decision to turn to the king for arbitration is also a sign of his acknowledgment of the king's authority, which is probably another reason why the king does not reproach Þorgils for his behaviour.

Concerning Þorgils' personality, we see that his ferocity still shines through anytime he is involved in a conflict, but he has learnt to show moderation. His impulsiveness, which caused only strife at first, has been refined into useful, controlled bravery and has found direction and purpose in royal service, whether in fighting a dangerous fire or in protecting the royal retainers' honour in disputes. Þorgils is not presented as a chieftain, but rather as a royal retainer who is primarily interested in royal service and does not aim at being appointed to a position of power in Iceland. Paradoxically, that may have been the reason why the king chose him as his representative in Iceland, because he needed a devoted man who was not greedy for power and whose personal ambition was not higher than his loyalty to the monarch.

5. 6. 2. The peaceful chieftain's story and Þorgils as a royal representative in Iceland

Þorgils was sent to Iceland in 1252 to claim Snorri Sturluson's heritage on behalf of the king (ch. 10). Þórðr Sighvatsson was held back in Norway and was dissatisfied because he had claimed this region and appointed five of his supporters to govern it for him before his departure

to Norway in 1249. It does not seem, however, that the king's aim was to increase the strife among Icelanders; he only wished to choose a representative who had the best chance of success and who seemed most loyal and reliable at the given time. The king promoted centralized power in Iceland, but that was not contradictory to the Icelanders' own interests – the Icelandic chieftains aimed at the same, and stable government was beneficial for the common people as well. If the king wanted to achieve this goal, he could not support all the chieftains at once. When he realized that he had entrusted the wrong man with this difficult task, he had to change his decision and choose another Icelandic royal representative. By holding Þórðr back in Norway, the king probably wanted to prevent further escalation of conflict in Iceland. The narrative emphasizes that the king insisted on cooperation among his representatives in Iceland. This concerned especially Þorgils and Gizurr Þorvaldsson, who had no reason for mutual friendship due to the prolonged competition for power between their families, but the obligation toward the king was meant to at least prevent them from continuing their open enmity:

Gizurr hafði ríki sitt fyrir sunnan land, ok skyldi hvárr þeira veita öðrum, Gizurr ok Þorgils. It sama var Finnbjörn skyldaðr at veita þeim ok svá þeir honum. Hét Heinrekr biskup konungi ok öllum þeim sínu trausti (Sturlunga saga II, 118).

Gizurr had his domain in the south of the land, and Gizurr and Þorgils should both support each other. In the same way, Finnbjörn was also obliged to support them, and they were obliged to support him. Bishop Heinrekr promised his support to the king and to all of them.

Þorgils was likely to gain support in Iceland due to his ancestry and his decisiveness, but the saga nevertheless shows that his rise to power was not easy. Þórðr Sighvatsson's allies refused to acknowledge Þorgils' authority as a royal representative because they still regarded Þórðr as their only rightful leader when Þorgils claimed Borgarfjörðr on the king's behalf (ch. 13). The chapter is full of dialogues about royal rule, which sum up the Icelanders' ambivalent attitude to the monarchy that is reflected throughout the latter part of *Sturlunga saga*. The Icelanders were not generally opposed to royal power, and they practically already acknowledged King Hákon's rule, although they had not formally accepted it yet, but they were not willing to accept the king's decisions unconditionally and insisted on open discussion and negotiation.

This part of the saga is shaped by the narrative type of the peaceful chieftain's story. Þorgils embodies the ideal balance between decisiveness and avoiding violence, whereas his opponents are often presented as excessively violent. Þorgils is determined to fulfil his task as a royal representative, so he is uncompromising in his opposition to Þórðr Sighvatsson's adherents. He is, however, not in the role of the aggressor in the violent clashes with his adversaries, but always in the role of the defender. His opponents Hrafn Oddsson and Sturla Þórðarson attack him at night, threaten him with death, and force him to promise to participate in an assault on Gizurr Þorvaldsson (chs. 17–18). Þorgils is personally not a friend of Gizurr, who has been his rival in the power struggle and has killed many of his kinsmen, but he is bound by an oath to the king not to turn against his fellow royal representative (ch. 18). The narrative emphasizes the idea that a promise to the king, the supreme authority, is generally acknowledged as being binding:

„Meiri nauðsyn þykkir mér,“ segir Þórðr, „at þú haldir þann eið, er þú svarðir konungi til sæmðar þér, heldr en þann, er þú vannst nauðigr til lífs þér.“ (Sturlunga saga II, 136)

“I deem it more necessary,” Þórðr said, “that you keep the oath that you swore to the king to increase your honour, than the one that you swore involuntarily to save your life.”

Þorgils finally breaks the forced promise and refuses to attack Gizurr, showing loyalty to his fellow royal retainer, who would otherwise be his enemy. That is one of the results of the king's peace efforts. Although Þorgils has left the royal court and returned to Iceland, he has fully accepted the identity of a royal retainer, which makes him value his obligations to the king more than his conflicts with his personal enemies. That makes him different, for example, from Sturla Sighvatsson, who also entered the king's service but whose personal ambition remained stronger than his identity of a royal retainer.

Peace is also promoted by two strong mediators, the ecclesiastical dignitaries Bishop Heinrekr and Abbot Brandr. Together they put effort into reaching a reconciliation between the two parties, although only with partial success. The relationship between Þorgils and his adversaries is burdened by mutual mistrust, constant minor disputes, and failed negotiations, but Þorgils actively seeks an agreement, which is typical for the peaceful chieftain (chs. 20–43). He negotiates and reconciles with Sturla Þórðarson, and they promise each other friendship (ch. 31); Hrafn Oddsson later accepts the same agreement after a personal discussion with Þorgils (ch. 34). Þorgils clearly shows goodwill to forgive his opponents for their attack. His motivation is doubtlessly both moral and political, as it is beneficial for him to have these influential chieftains on his side.

At this point, Þorgils forms an alliance with Þorvarðr Þórarinnsson, whose aggressive and treacherous behaviour contrasts with Þorgils' ever improving personality. Þorvarðr asks Þorgils for help in the prosecution of Hrafn Oddsson and Eyjólfur Þorsteinsson for the killing of his brother Oddr (chs. 39, 44), which leads to a renewal of Þorgils' conflict with Hrafn. Þorvarðr's case is justified in itself, but his methods are morally dubious: he refuses reconciliation and prefers a violent solution. Abbot Brandr also predicts Þorvarðr's betrayal long before it occurs (ch. 45); such foreshadowing underlines the moral structure of the story and draws attention to the contrast between Þorgils and Þorvarðr:

Vilda ek nú, at guð væri yör fyrir vápn ok vörð ok hyljanarmaðr Tómas erkibiskup. En treystið lítt á drengskap Þorvarðs, því at mér segir eigi mjök hugr um, hversu til enda ganga skipti þeira Þorgils ok Þorvarðs, ok ætla ek Þorvarðr valdi afbrigðum. (Sturlunga saga II, 177)

I hope that God will be your weapon and shield and Archbishop Tómas will be your protector. But put little trust in Þorvarðr's honour because I have a premonition of how the dealings between Þorgils and Þorvarðr will end, and I believe that Þorvarðr will commit a transgression.

This is the first reference to Thomas of Canterbury, who has a specific meaning later in the saga. *Þorgils saga* focuses on the development of the protagonist's personality; it is first shown how he turns from a reckless youth into a refined courtier, and then how the royal retainer is forced by the circumstances to become a chieftain, but due to the previous development, he becomes a peaceful chieftain. The allusions to the saintly archbishop underline the moral aspect of the transformation.

Since Þorvarðr refuses peaceful solutions, he and Þorgils prepare for an armed clash with their adversaries (chs. 44–49). Þorgils does not wish to act as an aggressor, but he cannot leave Þorvarðr, whom he has promised loyalty and support. The battle takes place on July 19, 1255, on the banks of the river Þverá, and Eyjólfur Þorsteinsson is killed in the fight (chs. 50–52). After his victory, Þorvarðr aims at becoming the new chieftain of Eyjólfur's domain, but the farmers refuse to accept him because of his violent tendencies (ch. 54):

Þorvarðr ór Saurbæ svarar fyrst – lézt eigi ráð eiga meir en eins manns, – „má ek vel sæma við þann, sem er, en beztr, at engi sé.“ Þeir Hallr sögðu, at þeir myndi ekki taka ráð þessi fyrir hendr bóndum. Gengu bændr þá á eintal. En er þeir höfðu talat um hrið, gengu þeir aftir á fundinn, – sögðu Þorvarði, at þat var samþykki bænda, at þeir vildi eigi taka við honum í herað – „er oss Þorvarðr sagðr inn mesti ofsamaðr, en févani mjök, en eiga þó at svara stórum vandræðum. Viljum vér biða þess, er Hákon konungr ok Þórðr Sighvatsson gera ráð fyrir.“ (Sturlunga saga II, 192)

Þorvarðr of Saurbær answered first – but he said that he could not decide for anyone but himself: “I may accept the [chieftain] that there is, but it would be best if there was none.” Hallr and the others said that they would not make any decision on behalf of the other farmers. The farmers then talked together in private. When they had talked a while, they returned to the meeting and said to Þorvarðr that they had all agreed on the decision that they did not want to accept him as the chieftain of their district – “it has been said to us that Þorvarðr is a very violent man, and that he lacks property, and that he is responsible for serious conflicts. We wish to ask King Hákon and Þórðr Sighvatsson to decide.”

When the farmers state that they would prefer having no chieftain at all, the meaning of the statement must be assessed in context of the given situation, when the Icelandic society is torn by relentless fights among the chieftains. Furthermore, the very same scene shows that the farmers agree to accept King Hákon’s and the royal representative Þórðr Sighvatsson’s decision, which means that they do not oppose centralized power as such, they are only tired of the prolonged power struggles because they want stable rule and peace. The king later assigns Eyjólf’s district to Þorgils, and the farmers accept Þorgils gladly (ch. 65):

Þat sumar, er Þorgils bjó í Ási, kom til Íslands Ívarr Arnljótsson. Segir hann, at Hákon konungr hefði spurt dráp Eyjólf’s Þorsteinssonar. Fór Ívarr með konungs boðskap. Hafði hann út konungsbréf til Þorgils. Var þat þar á, at hann hefði skipat Þorgils Eyjafjörð til fyrirvistar ok allar sveitir norðr þaðan til fjórðungamóts, því at Þórðr Sighvatsson var þá andaðr. Gengu þá allir bændr undir Þorgils ok játtu honum til yfirmanns (Sturlunga saga II, 208–09).

Ívarr Arnljótsson arrived in Iceland the summer when Þorgils dwelled at Ás.²⁷ Ívarr said that King Hákon had been informed about the killing of Eyjólf Þorsteinsson. Ívarr brought the king’s message and a royal letter to Þorgils. It was written there that the king had assigned Eyjafjörð and all the districts north of there to the boundary of the quarters to Þorgils, because Þórðr Sighvatsson was already dead.²⁸ All the farmers agreed to obey Þorgils and accepted him as their chieftain.

This episode shows that the farmers did not oppose the king’s decisions in general, and they willingly accepted them as long as they were beneficial. In this case, the decision was beneficial because the king appointed a royal representative whom the locals regarded as a peaceful and righteous chieftain.

Hákonar saga reveals important details of how far Þorgils went in furthering the king’s requests, and even here, we find no sign of any general opposition to such provisions among the Icelanders (ch. 336):

Um sumarit er Hákon konungr sat í Björgyn [1255] sendi hann til Íslands Ívarr Englason at flytja sitt erendi á Íslandi með atveizlu byskupanna, því at konungr trúði þeim báðum vel. [...] Fór Ívarr um vart norðr til Skagafjarðar of fann þar Heinrek byskup ok Þorgils skarða, er þá var fyrir Skagafirði, ok flutti konungs mál fyrir þeim. Tóku þeir báðir vel undir ok stefndu saman öllum bóndum í Skagafirði ok fluttu konungs mál með Ívari. Kom þá svá at allir Skagfirðingar ok Eyfirðingar ok mestr þorri bónda í Norðlendingafjórðungi játtuðu at gjalda

²⁷ This is incorrect information in the text – it was in fact Ívarr Englason, as is written in chapter 336 of *Hákonar saga*; he also arrived in Iceland already in 1255, although he did not meet Þorgils until the following spring.

²⁸ This is another mistake – Þórðr Sighvatsson died only on October 11, 1256, so he was still alive when Ívarr left Norway.

konungi skatt, þvílíkan sem þeir urðu ásáttir við Ívar. Ívarr fór útan um sumarit, ok þótti honum sitt erendi minna hafa orðit en hann ætlaði, ok kenndi hann þat mest vinum Gizurar ok fóstbræðrum ok enn sumum frændum Þórðar ok vinum. (Hákonar saga II, 170–71)

[1255] In the spring, when King Hákon dwelled in Björgyn, he sent Ívarr Englason to Iceland to present his message there with the help of the bishop, because he trusted them both. [...] In the spring, Ívarr rode north to Skagafjörðr to meet Bishop Heinrekr and Þorgils Böðvarsson, who was the chieftain of Skagafjörðr at the time, and he presented the king's requests to them. They both willingly supported them and assembled all the farmers from Skagafjörðr and presented the king's requests to them together with Ívarr. And in the end, all the men of Skagafjörðr and Eyjafjörðr and most of the farmers from the Northern Quarter agreed to pay such a tax to the king as they would agree upon with Ívarr. Ívarr left Iceland that summer, and he felt that he had achieved less than he had intended, and he blamed it mainly on Gizurr's allies and supporters, but also on some of Þórðr's kinsmen and allies.

Ívarr's dissatisfaction with the result of his journey seems surprising, as he clearly achieved a considerable success, but he had probably expected to convince the inhabitants of a larger part of Iceland, mainly the southern regions. The Southern Quarter was mainly controlled by Gizurr Þorvaldsson, who was of course reluctant to let Þorgils gain any influence in his district. It is hard to tell whether Þorgils would have succeeded in bringing Iceland into a union with Norway if it had not been for his inevitable competition with his political rivals. Nevertheless, the text clearly implies that it was the power struggle among the chieftains, not any general opposition to the monarchy, that hindered the union with Norway at this point.

In this power struggle, Þorvarðr is unwilling to provide Þorgils with the support that he has promised him in return for his alliance. He finds various excuses and repeats his promises, but it becomes ever more obvious that he is not to be trusted. In the meantime, Þorgils' peacefulness becomes ever more decisive in his behaviour. He agrees to accept a reconciliation with Hrafn, although he is not forced to it by the circumstances, as was on the winning side in the battle. Hrafn, however, breaks the settlement by attacking Sturla Þórðarson, who has now become Þorgils' faithful adherent. Þorgils feels obliged to defend his ally (chs. 68–69), but violence is prevented by mediation, and a new agreement terminates the conflict (ch. 70).

Another conflict begins, however, when an open competition for power breaks out between Þorgils and his former ally Þorvarðr Þórarinsson. Þorvarðr claims Þorgils' domain in Eyjafjörðr, based on inheritance rights after Þórðr Sighvatsson that he has received from Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir. Þorgils refuses to give up the domain because he rules it according to the king's decision and with the farmers' approval. He is repeatedly warned against Þorvarðr by his allies, but he continues to trust him due to the promises and obligations from before (chs. 73–74). On January 22, 1258, he is violently attacked at night by Þorvarðr and his followers; he is not given a chance to defend himself, his wish for mercy and reconciliation is rejected, and he is killed (chs. 75–76). This ending fulfils the horizon of expectations of the peaceful chieftain's story. Another standard element of this narrative type is the contrast between the peaceful defender and the aggressive attacker, which is stronger in the death scene than ever before. Þorvarðr's action is criticized in the narrative even by his own men (ch. 75):

Þá mælti Jörundr gestr: „Þat kann ek frá mér at segja, at fyrir sakir míns herra, Hákonar konungs, ok lögúneytis við Þorgils þá mun ek frá riða ok kalla þetta it mesta niðingsverk ok óráð, sem þér hafið með höndum.“ (Sturlunga saga II, 219)

Jörundr the Retainer said: “I can say for myself that for the sake of my lord King Hákon and due to my companionship with Þorgils, I will ride away and call this thing that you intend to do the worst villainy and an ill-advised decision.”

It is noteworthy that the former royal retainer mentions King Hákon in his argumentation, calling him his lord even after leaving the retinue and returning to Iceland. This implies that the narrative presents loyalty to the monarch as a natural aspect of life in Iceland even before the official establishment of the union. The unity and loyalty among the royal retainers are also presented in contrast to the reckless violence committed by some of the chieftains who have not accepted this concept. In this case, Þorvarðr represents the old type of the immoderate warrior-chieftain, to whom his personal ambition matters more than the community's interests.

This is the political framework of the death scene, while its moral framework is marked in the text by foreshadowing and by allusions to the story of Thomas of Canterbury. The first foreshadowing is a dream, in which a man and a woman talk in verse about a chair that is missing a leg and is falling over; the stanzas mention fire and violence, and blood seems to appear on the chair (ch. 67). The dream resembles the foreshadowing of the battle of Örlygsstaðir, and it underlines the tragic inevitability of bloodshed when one of the parties refuses a reconciliation. The second foreshadowing is a scene in which Þorgils sees a drop of blood on bread at a feast, but nobody knows where it comes from (ch. 72):

Þat varð til nýlundu í veizlunni, at þar sem brauð var kastat á borð fyrir þá Þorgils ok Óláf, sáu þeir blóðdropa nýblæddan á einum hleifinum. Þótti þeim þetta undarligt. Var þá leitit, ef nokkurr væri sárr nær, sá er blæddi, eða hvaðan þat blóð væri komit, ok fundust til þess engi líkindi. (Sturlunga saga II, 215)

At the feast it happened that when bread was brought to the table for Þorgils and Óláfr, they saw a drop of fresh blood on one of the loaves. It seemed strange to them. They looked around to see if there was someone wounded and bleeding nearby, or where that blood had come from, but they found nothing that seemed likely.

This vision further emphasizes the inequity of betrayal. The image of blood on food served to a friend marks the fact that Þorgils will be killed by a man whom he trusts.

References to the death of Thomas of Canterbury are placed in the text immediately before and after the killing, and they are unusually detailed within the otherwise terse saga style. It is of interest that Þorgils' personal feelings about the saint are expressed, as well as his indirect wish to die in a similar way (ch. 75):

Þorgils reið til Hrafnagils. Var honum þar vel fagnat. Skipaði hann mönnum sínum þar á bæi. Honum var kostr á boðinn, hvat til gamans skyldi hafa, sögur eða dans, um kveldit. Hann spurði, hverjar sögur í vali væri. Honum var sagt, at til væri saga Tómass erkibiskups, ok kaus hann hana, því at hann elskaði hann frammar en aðra helga menn. Var þá lesin sagan ok allt þar til, er unnit var á erkibiskupi í kirkjunni ok höggvin af honum krúnan. Segja menn, at Þorgils hætti þá ok mælti: „Þat myndi vera allfagr dauði.“ Litlu síðar sofnaði hann. Var þá hætt sögunni ok búizt til borða. (Sturlunga saga II, 218)

Þorgils rode to Hrafnagil and was warmly welcomed there. He sent his companions to other nearby farms. He was offered to choose what kind of entertainment they should have in the evening, either sagas or dance. He asked which sagas there were to choose from. He was told that there was the saga of Archbishop Tómas, and he chose it, because he loved Tómas more than any other saint. The saga was then read out, up to the scene when the archbishop was attacked in the church and the crown of his head was hewed off. People say that Þorgils stopped reading then and said: "That would be a beautiful death." He fell asleep shortly after, so they stopped reading the saga and prepared a meal.

Þorgils' words offer themselves to various interpretations. They may suggest that Þorgils expects his death, although he publicly claims that he trusts Þorvarðr. On a deeper moral level, they may imply that Þorgils has reached the stage of his personal development when spiritual values matter more to him than worldly power, he is reconciled with all his former enemies, and he is ready to die with a clear conscience.

The parallel with the saint is highlighted by a detailed description of Þorgils' dead body and of his wounds (ch. 76):

Nú hafa þeir svá sagt, er þar stóðu yfir, at Þorgils hafði tuttugu ok tvau sár ok sjau ein af þeim höfðu blætt. Eitt af þessum var þat á hjarnskálinni, er af var höggvin hausinum. Veittist Þorgils þat, at hann hafði þvílíkt sár, sem sagt var um kveldit, at inn heilagi Tómas erkibiskup hafði særðr verit í kirkjunni í Cantia, ok Þorgils þótti um kveldit fagrligast vera mundu at taka slíkan dauða. Lét ábóti þá sveipa líkit ok segir svá, sem margir hafa heyrt, at hann kvaðst engis manns líkama hafa sét þekkiligra en Þorgils, þar sem sjá mátti fyrir sárum. (Sturlunga saga II, 220–21)

Those who were present there have said that Þorgils had twenty-two wounds, but only seven of them had been bleeding. One of these was the wound on his skull, where the crown of his head had been hewed off. It had been granted to Þorgils that he received the same wound as had been told that evening that Saint Archbishop Tómas had received in his church in Cantia, and Þorgils had felt that evening that it would be most beautiful to die in the same manner. The abbot then had Þorgils' body wrapped in cloth and said what many people have now heard: that he had never seen any dead body as good-looking as Þorgils', as far as he could see it for all the wounds.

The extensive parallel with Thomas of Canterbury, together with the emphasis on the unusual beauty of the body, gives Þorgils' portrayal a strong religious undertone and creates the impression that his killing resembles a martyr's death. Þorgils was a secular chieftain, but the narrative emphasizes the idea that his violent death was not caused by his behaviour, because he strove for peace. This idea is further highlighted by a reference to public opinion, which serves as a narrative voice that provides an unequivocal evaluation of the killing. Both grief for Þorgils and a condemnation of Þorvarðr are included, and it is underlined that Þorvarðr is criticized even by those who have not been Þorgils' supporters (ch. 76):

Lét ábóti þá aka líkinu upp til Munka-Þverár ok jarða þar sæmiliga. Stóð þar margr maðr yfir með harmi miklum. Þorvarðr var mjök óþokkaðr af verki þessu um öll þau heruð, sem Þorgils hafði yfirsókn haft. Mæltist þetta verk illa fyrir. Tala flestir menn, er vissu, at eigi vissi nökkurn mann hafa launat verr ok ómannligar en Þorvarðr slíka liðveizlu, sem Þorgils hafði veitt honum. Er nú lokit at segja frá Þorgils. Riðu fylgdarmenn Þorgils þá vestr til Skagafjarðar, ok spurðust tíðindi þessi um allt land. Létu menn illa yfir þessum tíðindum, hvárt sem verit höfðu menn Þorgils eða eigi. Víg Þorgils var, þá er liðit var frá holdgan várs herra Jesu Christi þúsund ára ok tvau hundruð fimmtíu ok átta ár, ellifta kal. Febrúarii, Vincentíusmessudag djákns. Þorvarðr brauzt nú til heraðs af nýju ok fekk ekki af heraði. Vildu bændr nú því síðr játast undir hann, sem öllum þótti hann nú verri maðr en áðr af verki þessu. (Sturlunga saga II, 221)

The abbot had the dead body moved to Munka-Þverá and buried there with honour. Many people were present and grieved deeply. Þorvarðr was much hated for this misdeed in all the regions that Þorgils had controlled. The misdeed was condemned by everyone, and the majority of those who knew about it said that nobody had ever repaid such help as Þorgils had provided in a worse and more unmanly manner than Þorvarðr. This is the end of Þorgils' story. Þorgils' companions rode west to Skagafjörðr and the news spread across the whole land. People disliked the news, whether they had been Þorgils' adherents or not. The killing of Þorgils took place when a thousand two hundred and fifty-eight years had passed since the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, eleventh *calendas februarii*,²⁹ on the mass of Deacon Vincentius. Þorvarðr now made another attempt at claiming the district, but he did not gain any part of it. The farmers were now even less willing to accept him, because everybody deemed him a worse man than before due to his misdeed.

The exact dating, which is otherwise not frequent in *Sturlunga saga*, underlines the importance of the event and points out that Þorgils' death is more than one of the many killings of the Sturlung Age. It is a death of a man who is not only politically important, but also significant for the moral message of the narrative. Together with the parallel to a saint, such a focus on the moral meaning of the protagonist's death underlines the idea that he represents the character type of the peaceful chieftain.

²⁹ January 22.

Like another ideal peaceful chieftain, Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, Þorgils becomes a victim of violence despite his efforts for peace, which is the typical ending of the peaceful chieftain's story. There are also striking similarities between the narrative account of Þorgils' death and the death of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson in both versions of *Hrafn's saga*. Both deaths are predicted by foreshadowing, including blood being seen in places where nobody knows where it comes from and dreams of ominous figures reciting stanzas. While stanzas are often used as predictions in the contemporary sagas, the blood is a motif that is not found elsewhere in *Sturlunga saga*. Furthermore, both Þorgils and Hrafn read or listen to a saga or poem about their favourite saint the evening before the killing, and they comment on the saint's martyrdom. Finally, both death scenes are followed by an exact dating, which is otherwise quite rare in the contemporary sagas. The similarities are so extensive that they are likely to be a deliberately created parallel. It is not unlikely that the writer of *Þorgils saga* knew some version of *Hrafn's saga*, and that he wished to compare Þorgils to this well-known representative of the ideal of the peaceful chieftain. That means that Hrafn's story had already become a well-integrated part of cultural memory, and as such, it could shape the perception of more recent events or contribute to their interpretation in a narrative discourse.

Unlike *Hrafn's saga*, however, *Þorgils saga* draws more attention to the development of the protagonist's personality. Whereas Hrafn is portrayed as an unusually peaceful man from the beginning, Þorgils gradually changes from a ferocious youth to a wise chieftain, who puts all his effort into finding peaceful solutions. This cannot protect him from a violent death, but it guarantees him a good reputation both in life and after death. Beyond the level of personal characterization, the focus on this development illustrates the general direction of Iceland's social transformation. Belligerent chieftains are gradually replaced by peaceful aristocrats and royal officials, who can retain peace due to the increased centralization of power and due to the unifying role of the monarch. This image of a positive social development creates a distance from the inherent tragedy of the peaceful chieftain's story.

Despite the protagonist's violent death, the saga ends with a reconciliation. A revenge is attempted by Þorgils' brothers and Sturla Þórðarson, but it fails (ch. 77). Soon after, a reconciliation is offered by Þorvarðr (ch. 77), who then accepts the judgement unreservedly (ch. 80). Although the saga illustrates how unstable some chieftains' loyalty to each other was during the last years of the Sturlung Age, the narrative underlines the internal mechanisms that restore social order. Moreover, it is surely not a coincidence that the very end of the saga focuses on Þorgils' brother Sighvatr Böðvarsson and his genuine loyalty to King Hákon (ch. 81). Sighvatr forms a parallel to the royal retainer Þorgils because he also enters the king's service of his own free will, motivated by his interest in a courtly career, rather than by ambition in the power struggle in Iceland. This ending again underlines the saga's central message, which is optimistic despite the protagonist's tragic death – Icelanders have managed to overcome their marginality and have been integrated into the Scandinavian social space. The door to the royal court is open to them, so they can gain social prestige as well as the long-term benefit of the social stabilization provided by royal rule.

5. 6. 3. The royal retainer's story and the peaceful chieftain's story, cultural memory, and Icelandic identity

The combination of two narrative types – the royal retainer's story and the peaceful chieftain's story – enables an increased focus on development and transformation in *Þorgils saga*. The first part of the saga follows the structural pattern 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. Þorgils first proves his worth by fighting fire instead of fighting men, and although some armed clashes occur in his conflict with Jarl Knútr, he uses the king's authority to reach a peaceful solution in the end. This distance from the original narrative type shows the importance of centralized rule for the reduction of violence. In the distant past described in the royal retainers' stories in the sagas of Icelanders and the kings' sagas, the monarchy was not truly centralized, but great progress had been made in this process at the time of King Hákon Hákonarson, although it was not fully completed yet. *Þorgils saga* not only reflects this historical reality but also emphasizes the significance of unity within the kingdom on a more universal level.

The distance from the narrative type is further developed by the combination of the royal retainer's story with the peaceful chieftain's story. *Þorgils saga* underlines the idea that it is not only the protagonist's social position that undergoes a considerable development, but also his personality. Þorgils, who has lost his ferocity by fully adopting the concept of unity and loyalty as a member of the royal retinue, 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 an embodiment 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. He refrains from violence against his fellow retainer Gizurr Þorvaldsson because his loyalty to the royal retinue is stronger than his personal hatred of his former enemy, and he willingly forgives Hrafn Oddsson and Sturla Þórðarson for their attack on him because social stability matters to him more than personal grudges. Þorgils' death is a tragic event, but the saga continues with a more optimistic ending, and the tragedy is also counterbalanced by the generally positive depiction of the social development in the saga.

If we read Þorgils' story as a reflection of Iceland's story, the development of Þorgils' personality reflects the development of the entire Icelandic society from reckless ferocity to loyalty to the community. The royal retinue and the whole Norwegian society are united by the monarch, who is perceived as an embodiment of the society's shared interests. The Icelandic society lacks such a unifying figure, so it lacks a force that could prevent the constant power struggle among the chieftains. Nevertheless, the political development in Iceland naturally leads to gradual and at first informal acceptance of royal rule. The saga indirectly expresses the idea that only loyalty to a monarch can teach individual influential Icelanders to value the society's interests more than their own ambition and greed for power. Only the factual – not necessarily

formal – acceptance of royal power can create a sufficiently strong collective identity that can convince former opponents to cooperate with each other for the common good.

Such a transformation, however, is not presented as a loss of the original identity. Icelanders retain all the layers of identity that they have been aware of before: geographical, Christian, linguistic, historical, legal, cultural, regional, social, and kin identity. Þorgils Böðvarsson represents all these layers of identity – he is presented as a Christian, a Norseman, an Icelander bound by the law of his land, and a member of the aristocracy and of the Sturlung clan with its connection to a particular region. New elements of identity are now added: Þorgils is also a royal retainer and a royal representative. These new layers of identity, however, do not suppress or contradict the original ones, they only broaden the spectrum and add a new unifying element – loyalty to a monarch. This loyalty is based on a voluntary decision, and it strengthens mutual loyalty among Icelanders, as well as their sense of belonging within the Norse and European social space.

5. 7. GIZURR ÞORVALDSSON: THE JARL

Gizurr Þorvaldsson is a central character in two sections of *Íslendinga saga* – in the account of the fall of the Sturlungs, and in the final part of the saga that deals with Gizurr's conflicts with Þórðr Sighvatsson and his allies and ends with the account of Gizurr's years as the jarl of Iceland. Gizurr represents a different character type in each of these sections. In the story of the fall of the Sturlungs, he is portrayed as a typical warrior-chieftain, who ruthlessly enforces his claim to power and does not hesitate to turn to violent means. In the second part of the saga, on the other hand, Gizurr is presented as the highest representative of royal power in Iceland; as a jarl, he embodies qualities that reflect the current royal ideology. This part of the saga follows the structural pattern of the narrative type of the jarl's story, but it creates a distance from its horizon of expectations.

5. 7. 1. The jarl's story and the ideal of *rex iustus*

The structure of the jarl's story has already been presented here; the best example of this narrative type is the story of Skúli Bárðarson in *Hákonar saga*. The jarl's story has a similar structure as the conflict story, beginning with gradually developing rivalry and continuing with an open armed conflict between the jarl and the king. Unlike the conflict story, however, it does not focus on mediation and reconciliation, but presents the jarl's defeat and violent death as the only possible means of re-establishing social stability in the kingdom. It can therefore be regarded as the most tragic narrative type.

The narrative type of the jarl's story was established in texts dealing with the thirteenth century, when the typological difference between kings and jarls was formed. In the kings' sagas dealing with the distant past, the power relations between jarls and kings vary considerably. Sometimes the jarls cooperate with the kings, sometimes they compete against them for power, and sometimes a jarl receives power over the whole realm, taking the king's place. In the thirteenth century, on the other hand, the focus on the concept of loyalty to the monarch and on centralized royal rule increased. There was no longer a place for jarls who would control their territories with a great degree of independence from the king, which is why

the title of jarl disappeared in Norway in the early fourteenth century. This was preceded by a transitional period when the jarl was supposed to act as the monarch's loyal ally, but the reality of the relationship between Jarl Skúli Bárðarson and King Hákon Hákonarson was different. The discrepancy between ideal and reality, and the conflict between the king and the jarl in historical reality, motivated the construction of a new narrative type, the jarl's story, which focuses on the contrast between the character type of the king and the jarl much more than the kings' sagas about older times (see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2011, 84–85).

In the kings' sagas dealing with the distant past, both kings and jarls are typically portrayed as the character type of the traditional Norse ruler, who is a military leader in the first place and is characterized by his battle prowess, strategic skills, and extraordinary eloquence that allows him to motivate his warriors (see Bagge 1996, 20–33, 65, 86–88; Coroban 2018, 108). *Hákonar saga*, on the other hand, creates a contrast between this Norse ruler and the ideal of *rex iustus*, which represents the new royal ideology, introduced in Norway during the reign of Hákon Hákonarson. In *Hákonar saga*, Jarl Skúli Bárðarson is depicted as the traditional Norse warrior-aristocrat, and the text presents an ambivalent image of this character type. It highlights his personal qualities, such as courage, decisiveness, battle prowess, cleverness in politics, and diplomatic skills. Nevertheless, it also shows his excessive greed for power, which makes him compete for power with the king, and this rivalry poses a threat to social stability in the whole realm. Hákon Hákonarson, on the other hand, embodies the newly introduced ideal of *rex iustus*: the monarch as a representative of divine will on earth, a guardian of justice and peace, and a protector of the weak and powerless (Bagge 1996, 118–19, 147–55; Coroban 2018, 108–09). In the saga, the conflict between Hákon and Skúli reflects the contrast between the two types of ruler. Skúli's defeat expresses the idea that the old ideology has been replaced with the new one. That reflects the transformation of the society that no longer needs warrior-aristocrats, but rather peaceful representatives of centralized power.

The portrayal of Jarl Gizurr Þorvaldsson in *Íslendinga saga*, on the other hand, combines elements of both types without creating a striking contrast between them. Elements of the ideal of *rex iustus* are found in the descriptions of the relationship between Gizurr and the common people in Iceland. Gizurr is presented as the supreme representative of royal power, who is determined to efficiently end his conflicts with individual opponents because he wants to prevent long-term disputes that would negatively affect the whole society. The text focuses on his popularity among the farmers and commoners, and it emphasizes the royal luck and God's mercy that protect his life and make him the protector of the whole land. The accounts of Gizurr's relations with King Hákon, on the other hand, are dominated by elements of the character type of the jarl who is greedy for power and aims at a greater influence than he is rightfully entitled to. The two basic types that are contrasted to each other in *Hákonar saga* are thus intertwined in the portrayal of Gizurr. This combination of the character types enables a distance from the tragic horizon of expectations of the jarl's story: Jarl Gizurr's secret rivalry with the king begins to develop, but it never leads to an armed conflict because the jarl finally tames his greed for power and accepts the position that he has. His choice of moderation averts the tragic ending that is anticipated in the jarl's story.

5. 7. 2. The end of the Sturlung Age and the character type of *rex iustus*

As has already been shown here, Gizurr Þorvaldsson of the Haukdælir entered the Icelandic power struggle as the Sturlungs' opponent. *Íslendinga saga* does not conceal the fact that he behaved violently, selfishly, and sometimes treacherously in his dealings with Sturla Sighvatsson, Snorri Sturluson, and Órækja Snorrason. In the next section of the saga, however, he is depicted in a more positive light and mostly with sympathy. In the power struggle with Þórðr Sighvatsson, he refrained from violence and agreed to accept the king's arbitration, albeit probably mainly due to his belief that the king would favour him over the Sturlung, whose kin the king had reasons to mistrust. Gizurr was therefore certainly bitterly disappointed when the king chose Þórðr as his representative after all, but he showed moderation and waited patiently for the situation to change. That did eventually happen – Þórðr lost the king's trust, and in 1252, Gizurr was appointed to the position of royal representative together with Þorgils Böðvarsson. The text already emphasizes Gizurr's popularity, gradually building up his image as the new type of aristocrat with elements of the ideal of *rex iustus* (ch. 164):

Brátt riðu þeir allir fjölmennir vestr til Skagafjarðar. Var þá fundr stefndr fjölmennr at Hestapingshamri. Váru þar upp lesin konungsbréf, ok játtu allir fúsliga at taka við Gizuri at höfðingja yfir sik. (Sturlunga saga I, 477)
Soon they all rode west to Skagafjörður with a large following. They arranged a meeting with many men at Hestapingshamarr. The king's letters were read aloud there, and everybody eagerly agreed to accept Gizurr as their chieftain.

Understandably, this applies to the farmers and commoners in the regions that Gizurr is appointed to govern and where he already has a strong power base from before, but not to his rivals in the power struggle. Þórðr Sighvatsson is retained in Norway at the time, but his adherents Eyjólfur Þorsteinsson, Hrafn Oddsson, and Sturla Þórðarson prove to be difficult opponents for Gizurr, and they do not hesitate to turn to violent means. In this section of the saga, Gizurr is portrayed as a chieftain who strives for peace but becomes a victim of violence – just like Þorgils Böðvarsson in the final section of his saga.

In 1253, Gizurr is reconciled with Hrafn and Sturla, and they wish to strengthen the peace by a marriage between Gizurr's son Hallr and Sturla's daughter Ingibjörg (ch. 167). Gizurr hosts the wedding at his farm Flugumýri, and Eyjólfur Þorsteinsson decides to use the feast as an opportunity to attack Gizurr and his kinsmen and allies (ch. 170). Since the wedding is supposed to seal a reconciliation between Gizurr and his former opponents and to mark a new era of peace, the brutality of the attack is sharply contrasted to the ideal of peace. This contrast is emphasized by Gizurr's long speech about peace at the wedding feast:

„Guð sé með oss nú ok jafnan. Hér er gott mannval saman komit, þess er kostr er á landi vóru. Kunnigt er flestum mönnum, þeim er hér eru, um málaferli þau, er orðit hafa milli manna hér á landi, þat er nú berr oss næst. Nú er þeim málum, er betr er, til góðra lykta snúit með öllum þeim beztum mönnum, er hér eru nú saman komnir, Sturlu bónda ok Hrafn Oddssyni. Vil ek vænta nú með guðs miskunn, at várar sættir fari vel af hendi. Ætla ek at þessi samkundu skulim vér binda með fullu góðu várn félagsskap með mágsemð þeiri, er til er hugat. En til varhygðar vil ek grið setja allra manna í milli, þeira er hér eru saman komnir, at hverr sé í góðum huga til annars í orði ok verki.“ Síðan mælti Gizurr fyrir griðum ok talaði þá enn vel ok sköruliga ok lauk vel sínu máli. (Sturlunga saga I, 483)

“May God be with us now and always. A great selection of people is gathered here, as great as can be in our land. Most of you who are here know about the disputes that have taken place among the men of this land, as they concern us greatly. Now those matters have fortunately turned to a good end due to the most significant men who are present here, Sturla and Hrafn Oddsson. I want to expect that our reconciliation will now go well with God's

mercy. I assume that at this meeting we shall sincerely bind our alliance by the intended marriage. But since I wish to be cautious, I want to proclaim a truce among everyone who is gathered here, so that each and every one of you will treat the others well in word and deed.” He then recited the truce formula and continued to speak eloquently and resolutely and ended his speech well.

The references to God in the speech underline the moral framework of the scene in a similar manner as the references to a saint in *Þorgils saga*. The text leaves no doubt of Gizurr’s honest intention to establish peace, but his efforts are thwarted by the treacherous attack that interrupts the peaceful feast.

The fight scene is narrated from the defenders’ point of view, which again creates a moral perspective. The defenders are repeatedly praised in the text for fighting bravely (chs. 171–172), which, unlike the aggression of the attackers, is presented as true heroism. When the attackers see that they cannot enter the houses, they decide to set them on fire. Gizurr prays ardently to God, while his family’s despair and fear for each other are depicted in an unusually emotional tone (chs. 172–173):

Þá kom þar til Gróu í anddyrit Ingibjörg Sturludóttir ok var í náttserk einum ok berfætt. Hon var þá þrettán vetra gömul ok var bæði mikil vexti ok skörulig at sjá. [...] Gróa varð fegin henni mjök ok segir, at eitt skyldi yfir þær ganga báðar. [...] Gizurr gíkk at henni Gróu ok tók fingurgull tvau ór brókabeltis pungu sínum ok fekk henni í hönd, því at hann ætlaði henni líf, en sér dauða. [...] Gizurr fann þá á Gróu, at henni fannst mikit um skilnaðinn þeira. (Sturlunga saga I, 490)

Ingibjörg Sturludóttir came to Gróa to the porch, she was wearing nothing but a nightgown and was barefoot. She was thirteen years old and was well-grown and looked strong. [...] Gróa was very glad to see her and said that they would both share the same fate. [...] Gizurr stepped towards Gróa and took two rings out of the pouch on his belt and gave them to her, for he believed that she would survive, but he would die. [...] Gizurr felt that Gróa was deeply affected by their parting.

Gizurr’s misery is underlined, but without casting a shadow on his endurance and bravery. He hides in a tub full of sour milk; he freezes and shivers, but when men come to look for him there, he stops shivering. They stab into the tub with weapons and Gizurr receives many small wounds, but he is not found (ch. 174). He survives, but loses his wife and all sons, and after the burning he is depicted as a broken and grieving man:

Þá var borinn út á skildi Ísleifr Gizurarson, ok var hans ekki eftir nema búkrinn steiktr innan í brynjunni. Þá fundust ok brjóstin af Gróu, ok var þat borit út á skildi at Gizuri. Þá mælti Gizurr: „Páll frændi,“ segir hann, „hér máttu nú sjá Ísleif, son minn, ok Gróu, konu mína.“ Ok fann Páll, at hann leit frá, ok stökk ór andlittinu sem haglkorn væri. (Sturlunga saga I, 494)

Ísleifr Gizurarson was brought outside on a shield, and there was nothing left of his body but his torso, scorched in the coat of mail. They also found Gróa’s breasts, and they brought everything on a shield to Gizurr. Then he said: “Páll, my kinsman, here you can see Ísleifr, my son, and Gróa, my wife.” And Páll noticed that Gizurr looked away and tears ran down his face like hail.

Later, Gizurr expresses his grief in a stanza, but at the same time, the stanza also expresses a desire for revenge (ch. 175). As Torfi Tulinius has pointed out, revenge here works as a means of relieving the mental suffering, rather than being depicted as a social mechanism connected to honour. After achieving retribution by killing some of the arsonists (ch. 176), Gizurr can finally recover from the trauma (Tulinius 2017, 83–86). Þorgils can forgive his opponents for a violent attack on him, but Gizurr can never forgive the loss of his family. Vengeance helps him overcome his grief and enables him to refocus on his public life – on being a leader.

As a leader, Gizurr is harsh towards his opponents, but enjoys general popularity among the people. This popularity is the main element of the ideal of *rex iustus* that shapes the narrative portrayal of Gizurr even before his formal appointment to the position of jarl. Gizurr's popularity is reflected in the farmers' willingness to help him with his vengeance and to compensate the material loss that he has suffered (ch. 175):

Gizurr safnar nú mönnum at sér. Verðr honum þá gott til liðs. [...] Ok er liðit kom saman, myndi vera fimm hundruð manna. Váru þat inir beztu bændr ór heraðinu [...] Gizurr tók þá við búi í Ási í Hegranesi þeira Árna Bjarnasonar ok Steinunnar Eiríksdóttur, ok var hann þar um vetrinn ok hafði fjölmenn. Bændr um heraðit efldu þá kost hans um búiit. (Sturlunga saga I, 494–96)

Gizurr gathered men, and it went easily. [...] And when the troop was gathered, there were about five hundred men, and they were the most influential farmers in the district. [...] Gizurr received the farm Ás on Hegranes from Árni Bjarnarson and Steinunn Eiríksdóttir, and he spent the winter there with a large following. The farmers in the district contributed to his household.

The strife between Eyjólfur and Gizurr continues after this, and enmity between Gizurr and Hrafn is renewed as well (ch. 177). Gizurr decides to travel to Norway to regain his prestige (*sæmðir*) by visiting the king (ch. 178); he rides to the harbour and thus avoids an intended attack by Eyjólfur and Hrafn (ch. 181). In Gizurr's absence, the conflicts between his enemies and his ally Oddr Þórarinsson continue (chs. 182–187) until Oddr is finally killed by Eyjólfur and Hrafn (ch. 188). As a revenge for Oddr, Eyjólfur is killed by Þorvaldr Þórarinsson and Þorgils Böðvarsson in the battle of Þverá (ch. 189), which has already been discussed here.

Not long after this, in January 1258, Þorgils is killed by Þorvarðr Þórarinsson, and since Þórðr Sighvatsson is already dead as well, and neither Þorvarðr Þórarinsson nor Hrafn Oddsson are royal retainers at this point, Gizurr is the only remaining serious candidate to the position of the king's representative in Iceland. He therefore receives the title of jarl in 1258 and is sent to Iceland to unite the land and bring it under royal rule. *Íslendinga saga* emphasizes Gizurr's aristocratic position, not least by pointing out that his household is luxurious and that he has *hirðmenn* and *gestir* (ch. 193). This implies that the royal style was accepted in Iceland together with the institutionalization of power. Even more importantly, the text highlights the idea that the public accepts the newly appointed jarl gladly (ch. 194):

Um várit eftir fór Gizurr jarl sunnan ok hafði nær þrjá tigu manna. Hann kom til Skagafljórdar. Tóku menn vel við honum. Hann reið norðr til Eyjafjarðar, ok gerði Eyjólfur ábóti veizlu á móti honum. Gengu menn vel í móti honum í Eyjafirði ok gáfu honum gjafir. (Sturlunga saga I, 525)

The following spring, Jarl Gizurr left the south with almost thirty men. He arrived in Skagafljórd. People gave him a warm welcome. He rode north to Eyjafjörðr, and Abbot Eyjólfur hosted a feast for him. The people of Eyjafjörðr accepted him gladly and gave him gifts.

Gizurr's popularity probably originates from his established power base in Iceland, so his title is only an institutionalization of existing relations. He also gains some new allies among the chieftains, such as Sturla Þórðarson, but Hrafn Oddsson in the Westfjords and Þorvarðr Þórarinsson in the Eastfjords are not his adherents. The Oddaverjar, Þórðr Andréasson and his brothers, grandsons of Sæmundr Jónsson, are also reluctant to accept Gizurr, although he has formally received all the Southern Quarter from the king. The likely reason for their opposition to Gizurr is that they still feel that they, as the descendants of chieftains who were Iceland's most powerful men at their time, have the right to rule the land. In fact, however, the Oddaverjar

lost their privileged position long before, and since Sæmundr's death in 1222 their power constantly decreased.

Þórðr Andréasson instigates his kinsmen, sons of Brandr Kolbeinsson, against the jarl. In his argumentation, Þórðr refers to the loss of hereditary land (ch. 195). However, the argumentation does not have the desired effect because Þórðr's kinsmen are firm in their allegiance to Jarl Gizurr and do not wish to betray him:

En þat var ummál í bréfinu, ef þeir vildi vera í þeim ráðum með Þórði, frænda sínum, at ráða af Gizur jarl eða riða í móti honum með þá menn, er þeir fengi, upp í Mælifelldal ok sitja eigi skammir Gizuri jarli, er hann sat á föðurleifð þeira, en unni þeim engis sóma fyrir. [...] Þessi sending þótti þeim ill, en móður þeira verri. Segir hon svá, þegar er hon vissi, at þeir skyldi í engum þeim ráðum vera, er til svika mætti virðast við Gizur jarl. Þeir játtu því, en þótti þó eigi gott til órráða, þar er nánir frændr þeira áttu hlut at. (Sturlunga saga I, 526)

The content of the letter was whether they wanted to participate in their kinsman Þórðr's plan to dispose of Jarl Gizurr or to attack him in Mælifelldalr with the men they managed to gather, rather than suffer disgrace from Jarl Gizurr, who occupied their father's hereditary land and had not offered them any compensation for it. [...] They disliked this message, and their mother disliked it even more. When she found out about it, she told them not to participate in any plans that could be perceived as a betrayal of Jarl Gizurr. They agreed to it, but they did not find it easy to deal with the situation, because their close kinsmen were involved.

This formulation again alludes to the problem of conflicting loyalties: to a personal ally and kinsman on the one hand, and to a political leader on the other. The dilemma is, however, easily solved, as the men in question feel that their loyalty to the jarl is stronger. They clearly do not regard Gizurr's rule as a loss of their hereditary land because they believe that the jarl rules their district rightfully and to everyone's benefit. There is nothing in the text to suggest that their loyalty is forced – it seems to be voluntary and genuine.

When Þórðr Andréasson's intentions have been revealed and thwarted, a formal reconciliation is arranged between him and Gizurr. Þórðr then accompanies Gizurr to the Oddaverjar's original domain in Rangárþing and probably encourages his followers to swear allegiance to Gizurr (ch. 196):

Var þá fundr stefndr at Þingskálum með Gizuri jarli ok Rangæingum. Var Björn Sæmundarson fyrir þeim ok Loftr Hálfðanarson. Sóru Rangæingar þá trúnaðareyða Gizuri jarli ok Hákonu konungi at upphafi. Þórðr Andréasson var þá í liði með jarli, ok reið hann norðr með honum til Skagafljóðar ok var með jarli um vetrinn. (Sturlunga saga I, 527)

They arranged a meeting at Þingskálur between Jarl Gizurr and the men of Rangárþing, who were led by Björn Sæmundarson and Loftr Hálfðanarson. The men of Rangárþing then swore allegiance to Jarl Gizurr and King Hákon for the first time. Þórðr Andréasson was among the jarl's followers at the time, and he rode with him north to Skagafljóðr and spent the winter with him.

The formulation suggests that the jarl represents the king directly, as the same oath is sworn to both. Otherwise, the narrative gives little information about the character of the oaths. Instead of providing a detailed depiction of the formal aspects, it focuses on a symbolic approval of Gizurr, the king's representative, as the protector of the land. The text states that during the unusually hard winter of the same year, Gizurr makes a promise to God that the whole population will fast on a given day if the weather changes. The message is brought to many people, and they all agree to it, and then the weather improves (ch. 196). Such semi-miraculous occurrences are not frequent in *Sturlunga saga*, so the episode attracts increased attention as a confirmation of Jarl Gizurr's positive role in Iceland. It is another reflection of the ideal of *rex iustus*, as it is presented in *Hákonar saga*, where some similar references to divine intervention confirm the king's role as the protector of the land.

Despite the formal reconciliation, Gizurr is finally attacked by Þórðr Andréasson's brothers. The scene is narrated from the defenders' perspective, and their bravery is praised (ch. 199). Apart from bravery, it is also Gizurr's luck that saves him this time, when the attackers' weapons simply fail to hurt him. Extraordinary luck or God's mercy protecting the king and other representatives of royal power is another typical element of the ideal of *rex iustus*, although it is a concept known also from the kings' sagas dealing with the distant past (see Ármann Jakobsson 1994b, 31–33; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2011, 69–70; Coroban 2018, 108). These concepts are clearly alluded to in this episode when Gizurr, the highest royal representative in Iceland, is presented as being practically invincible.

Gizurr is also protected by the general support of the public. When he reaches the church at the nearest farm and the attackers surround it, the people's support of the jarl is represented by the farmer and his wife, who even happens to be the attackers' sister:

Nú kómu Andréassynir at kirkjunni ok hljópu af baki. Ásta húsfreyja Andréasdóttir hljóp at Eyjólfri, bróður sínum, ok laust hann með tré miklu, ok kom þat á stálhúfubarðit, ok varð því höggit minna, at hon var tekin af förunauti þeira bræðra hennar. Klængur bað þá mága sína vel fyrir sjá ok gera Gizuri jarli ekki grand, þar sem hann var þá kominn. (Sturlunga saga I, 531)

Now the sons of Andréas arrived at the church and dismounted. The mistress of the house, Ásta Andréasdóttir, ran at her brother Eyjólfur and hit him with a large stick. The blow caught the rim of his helmet, but it was lighter than she intended, because one of her brothers' companions had grabbed her. Klængur asked his brothers-in-law to be careful and do Jarl Gizurr no harm in the church where he was.

Gizurr seems willing to agree to a reconciliation, but as soon as more men come to his aid, he becomes reluctant to accept any conditions, so Andréas' sons must ride away. Gizurr gathers men under the threat of accusation of high treason (*landráðasök*); the reference to high treason makes it clear that the jarl holds a special position of power and all Icelanders are obliged to follow him when needed. There is, however, nothing to suggest that many people apart from Þórðr Andréasson's supporters wish to oppose the jarl.

Gizurr gathers a large force, and his men stay at farms, where all the cattle are slaughtered for them. Both sides behave violently, and the text shows that the situation disadvantages the common people (ch. 199):

Gizurr jarl safnar nú liði at sér. Hann sendir menn sína norðr um land til Skagafjarðar ok Eyjafjarðar at kveðja lið upp ok gaf landráðasök þeim, er eigi fóru. Ok fór margt manna norðan ok kom suðr yfir heiði. Gizurr jarl var þá riðinn austr um ár, er Norðlendingar kómu suðr. Fundu þeir jarl á Rangárvöllum. Hafði hann þá eigi minna lið en sex hundruð manna. Var þá enn víða drepit fé á Rangárvöllum, ok galt margr óverðr þessa ófriðar ok ófagnaðar. (Sturlunga saga I, 532)

Now Gizurr gathered troops. He sent his men north to Skagafjörður and Eyjafjörður to assemble troops and accused those who did not come of high treason. Many men came from the north and arrived south of the plain. Jarl Gizurr had already reached the east banks of the rivers when the northerners arrived. They joined him at Rangárvellir. He then had a force no smaller than six hundred men. Cattle was again slaughtered at many places at Rangárvellir, and many innocent people were affected by this struggle and trouble.

This is a less idealized account of Jarl Gizurr, but the mention of the innocent victims of the conflict does not imply that the people are oppressed by the increased royal power. The violence is caused by a personal conflict between the jarl and one individual chieftain, and the reference to the victims is likely to be a general criticism of violence, as is the case throughout the *Sturlunga* compilation. The narrative implies that strong centralized power, with its ability to terminate such bloody conflicts, is a welcome alternative for the common people. Scholars have

pointed out that if Icelanders had not accepted royal rule to terminate the strife among the chieftains, Iceland would probably have drifted into a period of devastating civil war and social upheaval (see Byock 1986, 38–40).

Since the disputes between the brothers and Gizurr disadvantage everyone, a solution is attempted, and mediators arrange a meeting. Gizurr promises a truce, but then he asks the brothers to follow him with no weapons and few men (ch. 200). The next morning, September 27, 1264, Gizurr revokes the truce and announces that he intends to have all the brothers killed. Men ask for mercy for them, and Gizurr gives mercy to all except Þórðr, who is executed:

Þá var Þórðr út leiddr. Hann var í treyju. Þeir leiddu hann út á hlaðit. Þórðr mælti þá: „Þess vil ek biðja þik, Gizurr jarl, at þú fyrirgefir mér þat, er ek hafí afgert við þik.“ Gizurr jarl svarar: „Þat vil ek gera, þegar þú ert dauðr.“ Sigurðr jarlmaðr helt á treyjublaði Þórðar. Þórðr drap hendi hans af sér ok varð lauss ok ætlaði at taka á rás. Þá tók hann Andréas Gjafvaldsson, ok fellu þeir báðir. Þá lagðist Þórðr niðr annars staðar ok rétti hendr frá sér í kross. Geirmundr þjófr hjó á hals Þórði með öxi þeiri, er Gylta var kölluð. Gizurr jarl þreifaði í sárit ok bað hann höggva annat, ok svá gerði hann. Lét Þórðr þar líf sitt tveim nóttum fyrir Mikjálsmessu. (Sturlunga saga I, 534)

Þórðr was then led outside. He was dressed in a jerkin. They brought him to the yard. Then Þórðr said: “I want to ask you, Gizurr, to forgive me for what I have done against you.” Jarl Gizurr replied: “I will do that when you are dead.” The jarl’s companion Sigurðr held the flap of Þórðr’s jerkin. Þórðr pushed his hand away, freed himself, and intended to flee. He was grabbed by Andréas Gjafvaldsson, and they both fell over. Then Þórðr lay down elsewhere and formed a cross with his arms. Geirmundr the Thief hewed at his neck with an axe named Gylta. Gizurr touched the wound and asked him to hew again, which he did. Þórðr died there two nights before Saint Michael’s Day.

Gizurr does not avoid violence in his conflict with Þórðr, but in comparison with the bloody battles of the Sturlung Age, this scene seems much closer to the image of a righteous ruler who defeats individual opponents in order to maintain peace and stability within the land; a comparable scene is King Hákon’s defeat of Duke Skúli in *Hákonar saga*. And indeed, this was the last violent conflict between the thirteenth-century chieftains, the last bloodshed in the Icelandic power struggle. The dramatic process of power concentration was completed. The Sturlung Age was over.

5. 7. 3. The union with Norway and the character type of the jarl

Already in 1235, the king said to Sturla Sighvatsson that there would be better peace in Iceland if most matters there were in the hands of one man. Nevertheless, the difficult circumstances of the power struggle did not allow this to happen until over twenty years later. The king did not, however, intentionally divide the Icelanders by granting power to several different men. He chose the most suitable candidates at any given time, and the fact that none of them kept the position very long was caused by circumstances that the king could not influence. In 1258, Gizurr Þorvaldsson became the only Icelander known to have received the title of jarl from a legitimate Norwegian king.³⁰ At the same time, Gizurr received control over about half of Iceland, that is to say all the parts of Iceland that the king had a rightful claim to at the time: the Southern Quarter, the Northern Quarter, and Borgarfjörðr (see Jón Jóhannesson 1956, 321–22).

³⁰ According to *Skálholtsannáll*, a certain Auðunn Hugleiksson was appointed jarl of Iceland in 1286, but no other sources imply that it is true (Jón Jóhannesson 1958, 251).

This happened after the death of Þórðr Sighvatsson, to whom the king had intended to give the position before (*Íslendinga saga*, ch. 192):

Tók hann [Þórðr Sighvatsson] þá sóttin svá fast, at hann lá skamma stund, ok leiddi hann til bana. Er frá honum mikil saga. Hafði Gizurr síðan meiri metorð eftir en áðr af Hákonu konungi. Ok þat sumar, er nú var frá sagt, gaf Hákon konungr Gizuri jarls nafn ok skipaði honum allan Sunnlendingafjórðung ok Norðlendingafjórðung ok allan Borgarfjörð. Hákon konungr gaf Gizuri jarli stórgjafir, áðr hann fór út um sumarit. Hákon konungr fekk Gizuri jarli merki ok lúðr ok setti hann í háseti hjá sér ok lét skutilsveina skenkja honum sem sjálfum sér. Gizurr jarl var mjök heitbundinn við Hákon konung, at skattr skyldi við gangast á Íslandi. (Sturlunga saga I, 524)

[Þórðr Sighvatsson] was affected by this illness so severely that little time passed before it led to his death. There is a long saga about him. After that, Gizurr was more respected by King Hákon than before. And this summer that has now been told about, King Hákon gave Gizurr the title of jarl and appointed him to govern all the Southern Quarter and the Northern Quarter and Borgarfjörðr. King Hákon gave Jarl Gizurr valuable gifts before he left that summer. King Hákon gave Jarl Gizurr a banner and a trumpet and seated him in the place of honour by his side and let his pages serve drinks to Gizurr just like to himself. Jarl Gizurr was strongly obliged to the king by oaths, as he had sworn that tax would be agreed to in Iceland.

This account openly shows the duality of the relationship between the king and the jarl. On the one hand, Gizurr receives a title, prestige, and status symbols that no chieftain could possibly have gained in Iceland. On the other hand, the narrative does not conceal the fact that this prestige is connected to duties and obligations. Furthermore, *Hákonar saga* reveals that the king puts little trust in Gizurr, probably not entirely without reason (chs. 356–357):

Konungrinn gerði þá skipan til Íslands at hann sendi Gizur út til Íslands ok gaf honum jarlsnafn. Hét Gizurr því í mót at friða landit ok láta alla bændr gjalda skatt konungi, svá sem hann hafði áðr beitt. Bar Gizurr þar mikil mál á at hann mundi því auðveldliga á leið koma. Konungr gaf honum með jarlsnafninu margar sæmiligar gjafir ok leysti hann vel ok sæmiliga sér afhendi. Hann sendi út með honum Þóralda hvíta, hirðmann sinn, at skynja hversu jarl færi með konungs trúnaði. Margir trúnaðarmenn konungsins fóru út á öðrum skipum þat sumar at skynja konungs erendi, hvárt jarl færi með þeim eftir því er hann hafði heitit. En er Gizurr kom til Íslands þá helt hann því vel upp sem vera ætti, er Hákon konungr hafði gert meiri sæmð hans en nökkurs manns annars á Íslandi í þeirri nafnbót er hann hafði gefit honum ok mörgum öðrum sæmðum. Þat lét hann ok fylgja at Hákon konungr hafði svá gefit honum þessa nafnbót at hann skyldi þat engan penning kosta, ok engi skattr skyldi við þat leggjask á landit. Sagði hann ok um þá menn er honum gerðusk handgengnir, hirðmenn eða skutilsveinar, at þeir skyldu þvílíkar nafnbætr hafa í Nóregi af Hákonu konungi. Urðu við þetta margir góðir menn til at gerask honum handgengnir ok sóru honum eið en Hákonu konungi trúnað. Brátt urðu menn þess varir at þat var fals er hann sagði frá orðum konungsins. En allt at einu heldu menn trúnað við hann ok Hákon konung. (Hákonar saga II, 203–04)

The king made the decision concerning Iceland that he sent Gizurr to Iceland and gave him the title of jarl. Gizurr promised in return to establish peace in the land and to make the farmers pay tax to the king, as he had requested before. Gizurr eagerly assured the king that he would achieve that easily. Together with the title, the king gave him many honourable gifts, and he sent him on his journey with respect and honour. He sent his retainer Þóraldi the White to Iceland with him, so that he would check how loyal Gizurr was to the king. Many of the king's confidants sailed to Iceland on other ships that summer in order to supervise the king's matters and make sure that the jarl took care of them as he had promised. But when Gizurr arrived in Iceland, he made a big deal, and rightfully so, of the fact that King Hákon had honoured him more than any other Icelander by giving him the title and many other signs of honour. He also added that King Hákon had given him the title in such a way that it would not cost him anything and no tax would be imposed on the land. He also said that men who would become his vassals, retainers, or pages, would have the same titles in Norway at King Hákon's court. This made many influential men become his vassals and swear oaths to him and allegiance to King Hákon. Soon, people realized that what he said about the king's words was a lie. But they nevertheless remained loyal to him and to King Hákon.

The fact that the king sends several emissaries to Iceland to check on Gizurr implies that he is far from certain about Gizurr's loyalty. And indeed, *Hákonar saga* openly indicates that Gizurr lies to the Icelanders about his obligations to the king and lies to the king about being ready to propagate the tax in Iceland. It has been suggested that the author of *Hákonar saga*, Sturla Þórðarson, deliberately depicted Gizurr as negatively as he could, because he held a personal

grudge against him (Ármann Jakobsson 2017, 196–97; Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 250), but such argumentation is not convincing. It is true that Sturla felt deceived by Gizurr at certain points (*Íslendinga saga* ch. 197, *Sturlu þáttr* ch. 1), and his own stanzas are quoted in these scenes to illustrate his exasperation, but otherwise, his narratives show extremely little personal bias. Instead, *Hákonar saga* is formed by the official royal ideology furthered by the king, which presents a change in the approach to loyalty. Before Hákon Hákonarson's time, loyalty to the king was contextual and not based on absolute principles (Orning 2008, 5–6, 33, 321–22), but during Hákon's reign, the concepts of obedience, absolute loyalty, and high treason were introduced, at least in theory (Orning 2008, 231–36; Magnús Stefánsson 1988, 162–75). *Hákonar saga* is a narrative manifest of this new ideology, and it evaluates Gizurr's behaviour in light of this ideology. The purpose of the saga is not to idealize the king's representatives, but to underline the idea that absolute loyalty is expected of them. Gizurr deceives the king, which is unacceptable according to *Hákonar saga*'s ideology.

There is nothing to imply, however, that Gizurr's aim was to protect Iceland's freedom and independence from foreign rule. As has been shown here, some recent research suggests that such notions did not even exist at the time, at least not in the same form as they are known from post-medieval times. If they existed in some form, they probably did not concern the relationship between Icelanders and the Norwegian king, because the king never regarded Icelanders as foreigners, but rather as inhabitants of the same social space, as both lands shared the same history, culture, and language, and they were also firmly connected in the economic and ecclesiastical sphere.

The reason why Gizurr was not entirely loyal to the king was that he became too ambitious. The jarl's title did not give him power over all Iceland, only over about half of it, and the king most probably did not intend to ever give Gizurr more territory (Jón Samsonarson 1958, 338–40). Furthermore, the tax was a significant sign of the jarl's subordination to the king. We know from the sagas that Gizurr was extremely ambitious, and it makes sense to assume that he wished to rule all Iceland, and to rule it alone – not because of any opposition to foreign rule, but simply because he desired more power. We need not go far to find a comparable example – there are considerable similarities with the conflict between Skúli Bárðarson and King Hákon. Skúli was also a jarl, later even a duke, and he had received power over a large share of the land, but he revolted against King Hákon anyway, because he wished to rule the whole land and to rule it alone. Skúli and Hákon were both Norwegian, so the conflict could not involve any nationalistic sentiments. There is every reason to believe that Gizurr's case is comparable.

Gizurr probably hoped to gain support even in the parts of Iceland that were not given to him by the king – and the king had no rightful claim to these territories yet, so he could not grant them to anybody else either. Gizurr may have assumed that the king would not send an armed force to Iceland, because it was far away and the king had other, possibly more pressing problems in international politics. Gizurr thus had a realistic chance of ruling Iceland alone, and he would not give up without trying. It is therefore not surprising that, according to *Hákonar saga*, the king was dissatisfied with Gizurr's action on his behalf. In 1259, he received news of Gizurr's negligence (*at Gizurr jarl hafði lítinn hug á lagt at flytja mál hans við Íslendinga, Hákonar saga II*, 207), and in 1260, he sent two emissaries, Ívarr Arnljótarson and Páll línseyma, to Iceland to take care of the matter. Their task was to go to the Alþingi and read out

royal letters about how much tax Icelanders should pay to the king and how much the jarl should receive (ch. 360):

Þeir kómu út fyrir alþingi ok fóru til þings. Var þar fyrir Gizurr jarl ok formenn flestir. Þá váru flutt bréf Hákonar konungs, ok var þar mikil manndeild á hversu þeim var tekit. Flutti jarl konungs erendi ok þó nökkut með öðrum útveg en á bréfum stóð. En Sunnlendingar, þeir sem mestir vinir váru jarls, mæltu mest í mót skattinum, ok svá þeir sem komnir váru austan um Þjórsá. Ok fellu þær lykðir á at erendi þeira Ívars varð ekki, ok fóru þeir útan hit sama sumar á konungs fund. Var þat þeira flutningr at Sunnlendingar mundi eigi svá djarfliga hafa neitat skattinum ef þeir vissi at þat væri í móti vilja jarls. (Hákonar saga II, 207)

[The emissaries] arrived in Iceland before the Alþingi and went to the assembly. There was Jarl Gizurr and most of the chieftains. King Hákon's letters were presented there, and there were great differences in how people responded to them. The jarl supported the king's claims, albeit in a slightly different way than the letters stated. But the southerners, who were the jarl's most loyal friends, opposed the tax more than others, as well as those who lived east of Þjórsá. And it turned out that Ívarr's requests were not accepted, and the emissaries returned to Norway the same summer and went to the king. They said that the southerners would not have opposed the tax so stubbornly if they had known that such opposition was against the jarl's will.

This implies that the farmers did not oppose the tax on their own initiative, but rather due to their personal loyalty to Gizurr, who opposed the tax because of his ambition to rule all Iceland independently of the king.

Hákonar saga focuses on the king's dissatisfaction with Jarl Gizurr when the emissaries returned from Iceland in 1260 (*Hákonar saga II*, 209–10), while *Íslendinga saga* (ch. 196) shows that after the Alþingi, Gizurr increased his focus on gaining more support in Iceland, even among his former opponents. Þórðr Andréasson was now temporarily formally reconciled with Gizurr and assisted him in this effort, but the jarl had another rival, Hrafn Oddsson, whose domain in the Westfjords was still formally independent of the king. Hrafn had considerable power ambitions in the Western Quarter, and he was doubtlessly dissatisfied when the king gave Borgarfjörðr to Gizurr. As Jón Samsonarson has pointed out, Hrafn probably started his own negotiations with the royal emissaries in 1260, intending to decrease Gizurr's power (Jón Samsonarson 1958, 346–48). This idea is supported by the fact that another royal emissary, Hallvarðr gullskór, was sent to Iceland in the summer of 1261 with the provision that Borgarfjörðr was taken from Gizurr and given to Hrafn (*Sturlunga saga I*, 528). The king obviously believed that Hrafn would be more willing than Gizurr to propagate the tax if he received more power in return. Hrafn had not been a royal retainer before, but he was an ideal candidate, because he was influential and was not an adherent of Gizurr. The king needed to show Gizurr that the introduction of royal rule in Iceland did not depend on him alone.

Hallvarðr also had a more significant task – to finally persuade the other chieftains and farmers to swear allegiance to the king (ÍS chs. 197–198; HS ch. 374). *Hákonar saga* offers a detailed account of the events, stating that Jarl Gizurr did not openly oppose the royal emissary (*Hákonar saga II*, 222). Nevertheless, Gizurr secretly debated with the men of the Northern Quarter, trying to find a solution that would allow him to increase his power. The farmers then suggested to Gizurr that they would pay a large sum of money once, instead of a regular tax (*bændr hétu jarli stórfé at leysa þat gjald er á var kallat, Hákonar saga II*, 222). This must again be understood as a sign of their personal loyalty to Gizurr, whom they wished to support in his power ambitions. Hallvarðr refused that, however, and explained that the king wanted only a low tax, and that he mainly wished for the Icelanders' allegiance:

Ok er Hallvarðr spurði þetta, sagði hann at konungrinn vildi ekki at bændr væri pyndir til svá mikla fégjalda, sagði hann at konungrinn vildi hafa hlýðni af bóndum ok slikan skatt af landi sem þeim yrði engir afarkostir í at gjalda ok hét þó þar í mót hlunnendum ok réttarbótum. (Hákonar saga II, 222)

And when Hallvarðr found out about this, he said that the king did not want the farmers to be forced to paying such large sums. He said that the king wished for the farmers' obedience and such a tax from the land that would not be difficult for them to pay. In return, he promised them benefits and legal improvements.

This speech may have appealed to the farmers, but Hallvarðr would probably not have succeeded in persuading them if he had not been supported by the local leaders, of whom Hrafn Oddsson and Þorvarðr Þórarinnsson, who now controlled most of the Eastern Quarter, still independently of the king, were most influential. That, in turn, implies that these chieftains supported the royal rule, although they, unlike Gizurr, were not bound by any direct personal obligations to the king. Hrafn and Þorvarðr even joined forces to put pressure on Gizurr at the Alþingi of 1262, and they threatened to attack the assembly if Gizurr's men did not accept the king's requests (*Hákonar saga II, 223*).

Gizurr now understood that his plan to rule Iceland independently was destined to fail, and he had to concentrate on keeping at least the power he had, as the king had already taken one territory from him, and now that Gizurr faced two powerful Icelandic rivals, he was probably afraid that he would lose all his power if he did not comply. He therefore asked his followers to accept the king's requests, "pleading with them by kind words and calling it plotting against his life if they did not comply" (*bað þá til góðum orðum, en kallaði fjörráð við sik ef þeir gengi eigi undir, Hákonar saga II, 223*); he was clearly afraid of Hrafn's and Þorvarðr's threats. The men from most of Gizurr's regions therefore swore tax and allegiance to the king at the Alþingi of 1262. When Hrafn Oddsson knew for sure that Gizurr's men had sworn the oaths, he swore the same oaths together with the men of the Westfjords and Borgarfjörðr (*Hákonar saga II, 223*). This ending of the episode creates a distance from the narrative type of the jarl's story. The structural pattern leads to the expectation of the defiant jarl's violent death, but instead, Gizurr makes a decision that averts the tragic ending. This distance from the tragic horizon of expectations of the jarl's story gives the narrative of the establishment of the union a positive undertone.

The account of the formal acceptance of royal rule in *Íslendinga saga* gives detailed information about the names of chieftains and influential farmers who swore the oaths and about the numbers of their followers, but it gives surprisingly little information about the character of the oaths. The only thing that is mentioned is the tax or tribute (*skattr*), which is also the term used in fourteenth-century Icelandic annals (see Boulhosa 2005, 105–06):

Um sumarit eftir, er Hallvarðr kom út um sumarit fyrra, var þingreið mikil norðan ór sveitum. Fjölmenni Gizurr jarl mjök, ok reið Ásgrímr Þorsteinsson þá til þings með honum. Hrafn fjölmenni ok mjök vestan. Reið með honum á þing Hallvarðr gullskór ok Einarr Vatnsfirðingr ok Vigfúss Gunnsteinsson, ok myndi þeir hafa sex hundruð manna. Gizurr jarl hafði eigi færa með því liði, er hann tók upp suðr, en átta hundruð manna. Var á því þingi svarðr skattr Hákonu konungi um allan Norðlendingafjórðung ok Sunnlendingafjórðung fyrir vestan Þjórsá. Skattr var þá ok svarinn um allan Vestfirðingafjórðung. Tólf menn sóru skatt í Norðlendingafjórðungi: Ásgrímr Þorsteinsson, Hallr tísti ok Guðríkr, – ór Eyjafirði: Hallr af Möðruvöllum, Þorvarðr ór Saurbæ, Guðmundr frá Hrafnagili, – ór Skagafirði: Geirr auðgi Þorvaldsson, Kálfr ok Þorgeirr Brandssynir, – fyrir vestan Vatnsskarð: Bjarni á Auðkúlustöðum, Sigurðr ór Hvammi, Illugi Gunnarsson. Tólf menn sóru ok skatt ór Vestfirðingafjórðungi. (Sturlunga saga I, 528–29)

The following summer after Hallvarðr's arrival in Iceland, many men from the northern districts rode to the assembly. Jarl Gizurr had a large following, and Ásgrímr Þorsteinsson accompanied him to the assembly. Hrafn came from the north with many men. He was accompanied by Hallvarðr gullskór and Einarr of Vatnsfjörðr and

Vigfúss Gunnsteinsson, and they had about six hundred men. Jarl Gizurr had, including the troop that he had gathered in the south, no fewer than eight hundred men. At that assembly, tax was sworn to the king by all the Northern Quarter and the Southern Quarter west of Þjórsá. Tax was also sworn by all the Western Quarter. Twelve men swore the oath in the Northern Quarter: Ásgrímr Þorsteinsson, Hallr tísti and Guðríkr, – from Eyjafjörðr Hallr of Möðruvellir, Þorvarðr of Saurbæ, Guðmundr of Hrafnagil, – from Skagafjörðr Geirr Þorvaldsson the Wealthy, Kálfr Brandsson and Þorgeirr Brandsson, – west of Vatnsskarð Bjarni of Auðkúlustaðir, Sigurðr of Hvammr, Illugi Gunnarsson. Twelve men from the Western Quarter swore as well.

Comparably, *Þorgils saga skarða* (ch. 80) is very brief about the matter:

Hann reið í Reykjaholt. Var þar Hallvarðr gullskór. Hann hafði komit út um sumarit með boðskap Hákonar konungs. Var hann þá virðr mikils. Gekk þá skattr yfir land, sem mörgum mönnum er kunnigt orðit, ok ritum vér þar eigi fleira af, en þó eru þar mikil söguefni. (Sturlunga saga II, 224)

He rode to Reykjaholt. There was Hallvarðr gullskór. He had arrived in the summer with King Hákon's message. He was greatly respected. Tax was then accepted in the land, as many men know, and we will not write more about it, although there is much to tell.

This lack of interest does not necessarily imply an opposition to the depicted events. It may rather suggest that the formal acceptance of the union was not perceived as a dramatic change, and that there was little debate about the form and content of the oaths. According to the available sources, the tribute was approximately as high as the *þingfararkaup* (see Byock 1986, 39–40), so the farmers did not have to pay more than they were used to. It has also been shown here that Icelandic and Norwegian politics were in practice interconnected already from the beginning of the Sturlung Age, and to some degree also before. If the formal oaths of allegiance were perceived as a matter of ceremony that did not significantly transform the power relations, it is understandable that they receive little attention in the sagas.

The oaths of allegiance sworn by representatives of the remaining regions are not even mentioned in *Sturlunga saga*. Brief information about them is found in the annals and in the extant fragment of *Magnúss saga Hákonarsonar* (ch. 3). According to these sources, the Oddaverjar and the Austfirðings had sworn allegiance to the king by the summer of 1264, the latter probably on the initiative of their kinsman, the newly consecrated Bishop Brandr Jónsson (see Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 254–55). Þorvarðr Þórarinsson sailed to Norway the same summer, and he gave up his domain, the Eastfjords, to the king as a compensation for the killing of Þorgils Böðvarsson and another royal retainer:

Magnús konungr sat í Björgyn um sumarit. Þetta sumar kom af Íslandi Hallvarðr gullskór. Hann sagði þau tíðendi at allir Íslendingar höfðu þá játað undir hlýðni við Magnús konung, ok þá var spurt andlát Hákonar konungs á Íslandi er hann fór útan. Þar var þá með honum Þorvarðr Þórarinsson, ok gekk hann á vald Magnúss konungs ok gaf allt sitt ríki í hans vald fyrir þá hluti er hann hafði brotit við konungdóminn í aftöku Þorgils skarða ok Bergs, hirðmanna konungs Hákonar. Hafa síðan Íslendingar aldri í móti mælt at hlýða boði ok bani Magnúss konungs. Gengu þeir ok með meiri blíðu undir hann en Hákon konung, föður hans. (Hákonar saga II, 273)

King Magnús spent the summer in Björgyn. The same summer, Hallvarðr gullskór returned from Iceland. He brought the news that all Icelanders had agreed to obey King Magnús. When Hallvarðr was leaving, the news of King Hákon's death had reached Iceland. Þorvarðr Þórarinsson came to Norway with him, and he gave himself up to King Magnús and gave up his domain to the king as a compensation for the misdeed he had committed against the kingdom by killing Þorgils skarði and Bergr, King Hákon's retainers. From then on, Icelanders have never refused to obey King Magnús' directives and prohibitions. They were also happier to submit to him than to King Hákon, his father.

Gottskálksannáll, possibly based on chapters of *Magnúss saga* that are now lost, shows that Hrafn and Þorvarðr visited the royal court together in 1273, swore loyalty and fellowship (*trúnaðareida ok félagsskapar*) to each other, and the king gave them power over all Iceland on

his behalf (*fekk þeim allt Ísland til stjórnar undir hans valdi, Hákonar saga II, 285*). Gizurr was already dead at the time, he died on January 12, 1268.

5. 7. 4. The jarl's story, cultural memory, and Icelandic identity

Unlike the genuinely loyal retainer Þorgils Böðvarsson, Jarl Gizurr is portrayed as an excessively ambitious aristocrat, willing to employ all kinds of lies and deceit to enhance his own power. As such, he resembles another defiant jarl, Skúli Bárðarson, who, despite his constantly increasing prestige, was not content with his position and finally revolted against the monarch. That was not what Gizurr did, however – at the critical moment, he realistically assessed the situation and accepted the conditions set by the king. The sagas clearly show that he was not persuaded to this decision primarily by the royal emissaries, but rather by other Icelandic aristocrats, who wished to accept royal rule with the support of the public. Gizurr proved to be a judicious politician this time, and he agreed to compromise, which enabled him to retain his prestigious position for the rest of his life. This ending creates a distance from the horizon of expectations of the inherently tragic jarl's story, and the distance underlines the saga's positive interpretation of the acceptance of royal rule in Iceland.

After Gizurr's death, the administration in Iceland was in the hands of royal officials from the influential chieftain families, who managed to overcome their mutual hostility due to shared obligations to the king. Hrafn Oddsson and Þorvarðr Þórarinsson, who had fought against each other in the bloody battle of Þverá, now governed the land together. King Hákon Magnússon then abolished jarldom in Norway in 1308, because it did not fit his idea of centralized rule (Björn Þorsteinsson 1956, 115). In this sense, Jarl Gizurr was, in the same way as the warrior-aristocrats Skúli Bárðarson and Þórðr Sighvatsson, a relic of the old social system, which was in the process of being replaced by a new model of centralized government.

The distance from the character type of the jarl in the portrayal of Gizurr, on the other hand, stems from the combination of this character type with some elements of the ideal of *rex iustus*. In *Íslendinga saga* it is repeatedly emphasized that Gizurr, the highest Icelandic representative of centralized rule, is highly popular among the people, and he is even portrayed as the bearer of extraordinary luck and God's mercy, due to which he can protect his land from unfavourable fate. These elements of the ideal of *rex iustus* in the narrative portrayal of an Icelander underline the idea that Icelanders perceived royal power as neither foreign nor distant, but that they identified with this concept and accepted it as their own.

King Hákon Hákonarson died before he could really take up the government of Iceland, and Jarl Gizurr passed away only five years later, but they were both preserved in the cultural memory of Icelanders as symbolic embodiments of the decisive stage of social transformation in Iceland – of the decade when the violent clashes of the Sturlung Age were terminated. A similar, or rather even more significant, role in this transformation was doubtlessly played by Hákon's successor, the renowned lawmaker Magnús Hákonarson, but the narrative sources about him have unfortunately not been preserved to this day. His role in the relationship between Norway and Iceland can at least be studied in the story of the “last skald”, the saga writer Sturla Þórðarson the younger.

5. 8. STURLA ÞÓRÐARSON: THE LAST SKALD

The time immediately following the union with Norway is depicted in a short but significant part of *Sturlunga saga*, known as *Sturlu þáttr*. This text describes the last twenty years of the life of Sturla Þórðarson the younger (1214–1284), the writer of *Íslendinga saga*, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, and other historiographic texts. Sturla also composed several skaldic poems. Apart from his literary activity, he participated in the dramatic political events of the Sturlung Age, but he was mostly overshadowed by his more ambitious kinsmen. He finally fully established himself politically by acquiring the high royal office of *lögmaðr* after Iceland's union with Norway.

According to general scholarly agreement, *Sturlu þáttr* is of a later origin than most other parts of *Sturlunga saga* (Jón Jóhannesson 1946, xlvi–xlix). Just like in the case of *Þorgils saga skarða*, it has been suggested that *Sturlu þáttr*, which is also included only in the *Reykjarfjarðarbók* version of *Sturlunga saga*, expresses opposition to the monarchy, thus making *Reykjarfjarðarbók* expressly anti-monarchist in comparison with *Króksfjarðarbók* (Helgi Þorláksson 2012, 82–84). In the following I will argue, however, that Sturla Þórðarson is not presented in the text as an opponent of royal power, and that the *þáttr*, by employing the narrative type of the court poet's story, creates a consciously positive evaluation of the relationship between Icelanders and the monarchy.

5. 8. 1. Sturla Þórðarson: a national hero, a traitor, or a typical Icelandic chieftain?

Sturla Þórðarson has enjoyed scholarly attention mainly as a saga writer, but his political activity and opinions have been studied as well. The predominant interpretation has been that Sturla Þórðarson was one of the fiercest opponents of royal rule in Iceland from the 1240s. This assumption has been used to explain Sturla's fear of King Hákon Hákonarson during his first journey to Norway in 1263, and Sturla has been regarded as a national hero who defended his land's independence. Finnur Jónsson wrote in his history of Old Norse literature:

Sturla var iøvrigt af Gissur bleven gjort til «lendermand», hvorved hans stilling til kong Hakon var bleven en anden. Den modstand, han altid og konsekvent havde gjort mod kongen og hans mere eller mindre åbenlyse indblanding i islandske sager og forhold, var nu brudt. Sturla har indset, at der ikke var noget mere at gøre, men med sorg har han sikkert set tingenes uundgåelige vending. [...] Han var den, der trofast værnede om Snorres minde, som stadig var tro mod sit fædreland og stred så længe som muligt mod kong Hakons bestræbelser [...] (Finnur Jónsson 1901, 720–21)

Furthermore, Gizurr made Sturla his and the king's vassal, whereby his relation to King Hákon was changed. His constant and consequent opposition to the king and to the more or less open royal intervention into Icelandic matters and relations was now broken. Sturla had understood that there was nothing more he could do, but he certainly watched the inevitable turn of the matters with sorrow. [...] He was the one who faithfully protected Snorri's memory, who was constantly loyal to his fatherland, and who struggled against King Hákon's efforts as long as he could [...]

This account is clearly influenced by the time's political climate in Iceland. Nevertheless, this perception of Sturla was not rejected even after the Icelandic struggle for independence had been completed. Björn Þorsteinsson wrote in 1956:

Sturla Þórðarson sagnaritari hefur verið einna eindregnasti andstæðingur konungvaldsins allra íslenzkra höfðingja. Hann vinnur markvíst að því að draga Íslendinga frá trúnaði við Hákon gamla, en efla þann höfðingja, sem honum þótti líklegastur til þess að geta orðið einvaldur í landinu. [...] Honum tókst ekki að koma upp neinu

allsherjarbandalagi gegn konungsveldinu og sór konungi eiða á Þverárþingi [...] Hann semur einnig Íslendingasögu, aðalbálk Sturlungu, á efri árum sínum, og er talið, að hann sé fremur fámáll um andstöðu sína gegn yfirráðum Noregskonungs. [...] bæði hann [Sturla Þórðarson] og Þorvarður Þórarinnsson voru með helztu andstæðingum konungsveldisins hér á landi. Þeir virðast því báðir hafa tekið þýsna skjótum sinnaskiptum í konungsgarði. (Björn Þorsteinsson 1956, 26–27, 32)

The saga writer Sturla Þórðarson was one of the most resolute opponents of the monarchy among the Icelandic chieftains. He worked purposefully to turn Icelanders away from loyalty to Hákon the Old, and he supported the chieftain who seemed most likely to rule the land independently. [...] He failed to establish any general alliance against royal power, and he swore oaths to the king at Þverárþing [...] In his old age, he also composed *Íslendinga saga*, the largest part of *Sturlunga*, and it is assumed that he kept quiet in it about his opposition to the Norwegian king's rule. [...] both he [Sturla Þórðarson] and Þorvarður Þórarinnsson were among the major opponents of the monarchy in Iceland; they both seem to have changed their minds extremely quickly at the royal court.

Similarly, Gunnar Benediktsson wrote in his detailed study of Sturla's life and work that when Sturla was forced to sail to Norway in 1263, he was “expelled from the land as the king's offender because of his opposition to the king's reign over Iceland” (*flæmdur utan sem sakamaður við konung vegna andstöðu gegn yfirráðum hans á Íslandi*, Gunnar Benediktsson 1961, 143).

Such opinions on Sturla's political thinking are still dominant in research today, and they have surprisingly been adopted even by Hans Jacob Orning, who has otherwise refuted many outdated assumptions about the medieval Norwegian monarchy. He nevertheless states that Sturla Þórðarson “had opposed King Haakon in the final days of Iceland's independence, which came to an end in 1262/64. Actually, Sturla came to Norway as a delinquent to receive the king's verdict for opposing him” (Orning 2018, 203).

Since the only available source is *Sturlunga saga*,³¹ our understanding of these events depends on the interpretation of how this text presents Sturla's attitude to royal power and the circumstances of his journey to Norway in 1263. Here it will be argued that *Sturlunga saga* does not imply that Sturla ever opposed the monarchy. The most obvious proof is that Sturla is presented as a loyal supporter of Þórðr Sighvatsson, who was a royal representative since 1247, so anyone who supported Þórðr also indirectly supported royal rule. Due to his loyalty to Þórðr, Sturla was dissatisfied with the king's decision to replace Þórðr with Þorgils Böðvarsson as the royal representative. This led to an argument between Þorgils and Sturla, which is depicted in *Þorgils saga skarða* (ch. 14):

Fundust þeir Sturla Þórðarson frændr at Helgafelli. Fell með þeim heldr fálíga. Sagði Sturla sem allir þeir, er ríki heldu af Þórði kakala, at þeim var óþokki mikill á allri skipan Hákonar konungs. Vildi Sturla draga Þorgils frá konungs trúnaði, en Þorgils vildi heimta Sturlu frá sambandi við þá Hrafn ok Eyjólf. Skildu þeir frændr með engri vináttu. (*Sturlunga saga II*, 125)

[Þorgils] and his kinsman Sturla Þórðarson met at Helgafell, but they were rather unfriendly to each other. Sturla, like everyone else who governed Þórðr Sighvatsson's domain, said that they strongly disapproved of all King Hákon's decisions. Sturla tried to dissuade Þorgils from remaining loyal to the king, but Þorgils tried to persuade Sturla to break his alliance with Hrafn and Eyjólf. The two kinsmen did not part as friends.

³¹ *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* does not mention Sturla's arrival at the royal court in 1263 at all, because it focuses on King Hákon's military expedition against the Scots. Icelandic annals mostly contain only the brief formulation “Sturla Þórðarson's journey” (*útanferð Sturlu Þórðarsonar*, *Íslandske annaler*, 135, 330), and the only longer entry states “Sturla Þórðarson's journey: he was captured by Hrafn Oddsson” (*útanferð Sturlu Þórðarsonar ok var tekinn með valdi af Hrafn Oddssyni*, *Íslandske annaler*, 67); this formulation is more in line with the interpretation that will be suggested here.

Both Þórðr and Þorgils were Sturla's kinsmen, but Sturla was nevertheless not willing to renounce his loyalty to Þórðr, although this inevitably placed him in opposition to Þorgils and to the king's decision. This is a typical example of conflicting obligations – Sturla wished to be loyal to both Þórðr and the king, but it was not possible in this case. Sturla therefore decided to insist on remaining loyal to his ally Þórðr, to whom he had personally sworn oaths (see Magnús Stefánsson 1988, 149).

Apart from his obligations to Þórðr Sighvatsson, Sturla also had his own ambitions in local politics in the Borgarfjörðr region. That is why he, together with Þórðr's other adherent Hrafn Oddsson, opposed the king's decision about the rule over this region in 1252–1253. In 1254, his alliance with Hrafn ended because they started to compete for power over the region; in 1256–1257, Sturla and Hrafn even unsuccessfully planned several attacks on each other. Sturla then sought the support of Jarl Gizurr Þorvaldsson, who had formally received power over Borgarfjörðr from the king. In 1261, however, the king took Borgarfjörðr from Gizurr and gave it to Hrafn because of Gizurr's reluctance to promote the monarchy in Iceland. This led to open enmity between Sturla and Hrafn in 1262, and in 1263, Sturla unsuccessfully attempted to attack Hrafn. After this failed attack, Hrafn captured Sturla and forced him to sail to Norway and accept the king's judgement (see Helgi Þorláksson 1988, 138–41).

These examples imply that Sturla was a pragmatic politician who fought for his own political position on the local level, not against Iceland's union with the Norwegian kingdom. He sought the support of the strongest chieftains likely to help him in furthering his interests. He dared to oppose the king's appointment of chieftains in his region, but he was willing to accept royal rule if it respected these rights and secured peace (see Helgi Þorláksson 1988, 143–45; 2017, 202).

The reason for Sturla's forced journey in 1263 to the court of King Hákon, whose "hostility he feared most" according to *Sturlu þáttr* (*hann uggði hans fjandskap mest, Sturlunga saga II*, 231), was thus clearly not his opposition to royal rule, but rather his attempted attack on Hrafn Oddsson. Hrafn had gained the king's favour and protection by promoting the formal acceptance of royal rule in Iceland in 1261–1262. Furthermore, both Hrafn and Sturla were royal vassals at this time, after having sworn allegiance to the king together with others when the union was established in 1262. Sturla broke his oath of allegiance by attacking Hrafn, because an attack on a fellow royal vassal was regarded as high treason (see Jón Jóhannesson 1956, 330; Magnús Stefánsson 1988, 151–60). Hrafn was doubtlessly also partly responsible for the clashes, but as the winner, he had the possibility to describe the conflict to the royal emissaries in his own way and put the blame on Sturla.

Examples from *Hákonar saga* show that after an accusation of high treason, a necessary condition of a pardon was to visit the king personally and ask for mercy (see Magnús Stefánsson 1988, 167–68), which is what Sturla did. It was probably lucky for Sturla that he met King Magnús Hákonarson in Norway instead of King Hákon, who was on a military expedition against the Scots and died there in December 1263. The young King Magnús was obviously less reluctant to forgive Sturla than his father would have been. *Sturlu þáttr* also implies that an

important role was played by Gautr of Mel, a high-ranking courtier and a friend of the Sturlungs, but his influence was probably even greater than the text admits.³²

Nevertheless, the real reason why King Magnús was magnanimous towards Sturla must have been his belief that their political cooperation would be mutually beneficial. The question then is why the king needed to cooperate with Sturla, when he already had several influential representatives in Iceland. The answer might be that these representatives – Jarl Gizurr Þorvaldsson, Hrafn Oddsson, and Þorvarðr Þórarinnsson – were in fact too influential, and the king suspected that they would aim at strengthening their own power, instead of promoting increasingly centralized rule in the newly established union. He therefore needed an official who came from an old chieftain family, but who was not too powerful or too ambitious. Sturla fulfilled these criteria.

Sturla therefore became a royal official and stayed in Norway until 1271, possibly with a short break in 1265–1266 (Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1988a, 19). During this time, Sturla participated in the production of the lawbook *Járnsíða*, which makes him very politically significant (Magnús Stefánsson 1988, 179; Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1988b, 196–97; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Sverrir Jakobsson 2017, 1, 5). In 1271, Sturla became the first *lögmaðr* in Iceland. When the land was divided into two *lögðæmi* in 1277, Sturla continued as *lögmaðr* in the Northern and Western Quarter in 1277–1282, while Jón Einarsson was *lögmaðr* in the Southern and Eastern Quarter in 1277–1294 (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Sverrir Jakobsson 2017, 6). The prestigious office of *lögmaðr* can be regarded as Sturla's final political success after years of power struggles that had not brought him any decisive victory.

Nevertheless, Sturla faced many difficulties in his office. The freshly established union was still in development, and the instability was further intensified by conflicts between secular and ecclesiastical power, the so-called *staðamál*. *Árna saga biskups* refers to letters sent to the king by the royal official Þorvarðr Þórarinnsson in 1276 and by Bishop Árni Þorláksson in 1277, with complaints about Sturla's lack of activity in political matters:

Þingi váru í sumar réðu þeir Hrafn ok byskup, höfðu skammt ok meðallagi skilvíst at því er sumum þótti; lögsögumaðr var ógreiðr ok skaut flestum málum undir byskups dóm ok annarra manna þeira er sýndiz. Af lögréttumönnum nýttiz lítit. (Biskupa sögur III, 63)

Our assembly this summer was controlled by Hrafn and the bishop, and some felt that they spoke too briefly, and their speech was only partly trustworthy. The *lögsögumaðr*³³ did not respond promptly, and he let the bishop, and others who wished to, decide in most matters. The members of the *lögrétta* were not very useful.

Þar næst segir hann at Jón lögmaðr fór vel ok vitrliga í sínu starfi, en af Sturlu stóð minna gagn en þörf stóð til ok þar þurfti ráð fyrir að sjá. (Biskupa sögur III, 65)

Next, he says that the *lögmaðr* Jón acted well and wisely in his office, but Sturla was less useful than there was need for, and that had to be dealt with.

The most likely cause of Sturla's inefficiency was that his political loyalties were split between the farmers, the ecclesiastical officials, and the king, but in the given situation it was hardly possible to support one group without disadvantaging another. The letters quoted in *Árna saga*

³² The importance of intermediaries in dealing with the king is discussed by Wærdahl 2013 and 2015; the various historical roles of Gautr Jónsson are discussed by Wærdahl 2017.

³³ The older term *lögsögumaðr* is used here as a synonym of the term *lögmaðr*, which is more accurate for the late thirteenth century.

show that Sturla did not manage to handle the complicated situation flawlessly, but nothing else could be expected under the given circumstances. Sturla responded to the complaints by becoming more active in the political dealings: according to *Árna saga*, he undertook another journey to Norway in 1278, together with Hrafn Oddsson and Þorvarðr Þórarinsson. The purpose of their journey was probably first and foremost to discuss the *staðamál*, but it also contributed to the production of a revised and extended lawbook, *Jónsbók* (*Biskupa sögur III*, 67; see Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1988a, 20–21).

5. 8. 2. The royal official Sturla Þórðarson and the narrative type of the court poet's story

Sturlu þáttr does not pay much attention to the details of Sturla's political career. It is surely not because its author did not know about them or wished to hide them from his contemporaries – only a few decades had passed between the events and the time of writing, and the events were still fresh in everyone's memory. *Árna saga biskups*, written down in the first quarter of the fourteenth century, proves this. The reason for the different focus of *Sturlu þáttr* is that the text follows a narrative type that not only shapes its structure but also creates its meaning.

Sturlu þáttr is shaped by the structural pattern of the court poet's story. The protagonist faces alienation from the king at first, due to his failed attack on Hrafn Oddsson, one of the most influential royal representatives in Iceland. Hrafn defeats Sturla, expels him to Norway, and sends reports to the royal court to defame Sturla and put all the blame on him. Sturla is disappointed when Jarl Gizurr Þorvaldsson does not support him, and he recites a *lausavísa* in which he complains of Gizurr's treacherous behaviour. Only a half-stanza is quoted in the text, but it efficiently draws attention to Sturla's poetic art and thereby also to the narrative type of the court poet's story. King Magnús accepts Sturla coldly at first due to the reports of his misdeeds. Such initial distrust between the king and the Icelander is typical for the court poet's story (see Harris 1972, 10–12). The story also shows that Sturla lacks property in Norway because he has left Iceland involuntarily after a defeat. That is also a standard element of this narrative type; the story of Snorri Sturluson is an exception.

In the account of Sturla's reconciliation with the king, the narrative emphasizes the social significance of Sturla's poetic art. None of Sturla's court poetry is quoted in *Sturlu þáttr*, but it is repeatedly mentioned. The *þáttr* directly states that Sturla gains the king's friendship as a reward for his poetry:

Konungr bað hann kveða, ef hann vildi, þat, „er þú þykkist um mik ort hafa.“ Þá kvað Sturla, til þess er lokit var. [...] Konungr mælti: „Spurt hefi ek, at Sturla kann at yrkja.“ [...] Konungr bað taka silfrker, fullt af víni, ok drakk af nökkut, fékk síðan Sturlu ok mælti: „Vín skal til vinar drekka.“ [...] „Nú hefi ek heyrt kvæði þín, Sturla, ok hygg ek, at þú munir vera it bezta skáld. Nú mun ek þat at launum leggja, at þú skalt heim kominn með mér í náðum ok góðum friði. En faðir minn á sök á sínum málum, er þit finnist, en gott mun ek til leggja.“ (Sturlunga saga II, 233–34)

The king asked him to recite, if he wished, “what you think you have composed about me.” Sturla then recited until the poem was finished. [...] The king said: “It has been said that Sturla makes good poems.” [...] The king asked for a silver goblet filled with wine, drank a little from it and then handed it to Sturla, saying: “Drink wine with those whom you wish well.” [...] “I have now heard your poem, Sturla, and I think you might be the best of poets. I will give you this as a reward: you will follow me home and receive mercy and truce. My father will judge his own conflicts with you when you two meet, but I will intercede on your behalf.”

Furthermore, the title “Sturla skáld” is used repeatedly to refer to him in the text. He is called so when he is first presented to the king (*Sturlunga saga II*, 231), when the queen also mentions

that she has heard that Sturla is the greatest poet (*it mesta skáld*, *Sturlunga saga II*, 233). The king later praises Sturla by stating that he composes better poetry than the Pope (*Þat ætla ek, at þú kveðir betr en páfínn*, *Sturlunga saga II*, 234). Sturla's task to write *Hákonar saga* is also mentioned in the *þáttr* (*Sturlunga saga II*, 234); this can be regarded as a fitting task for a skald, whose job is to create verbal records of the monarch's life.³⁴ The text then states that Sturla recites two poems to the Swedish Jarl Birgir and receives gifts for them (*Sturlunga saga II*, 235). Poetry is clearly the main focus of this section, which constantly refers to the character type of the court poet.

In the account of Sturla's last stay in Norway in 1278, it is briefly mentioned that he gains the position of *hirðmaðr* and *skutilsveinn* (*Sturlunga saga II*, 235), but nothing is said about his political activities. Instead, it is emphasized that he composes several poems about King Magnús and works on writing *Magnúss saga* (*Sturlunga saga II*, 235). The narrative implies that he gains his high social status by his poetry and history writing alone; his significant political activity is never foregrounded in the text.

According to *Skáldatal*, it is true that Sturla formally became the only documented court poet (*hirðskáld*) of King Magnús Hákonarson (*The Uppsala Edda*, 108). There is no doubt that Sturla may have used his poetry to formally present himself at the royal court, but it is unlikely that it actually influenced his position in the way it is depicted in *Sturlu þáttr*. As Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has pointed out, the poetic art was no longer a source of social prestige in the thirteenth century. The title "*Sturla skáld*" does not refer to contemporary Norwegian social hierarchy, but rather to traditional Icelandic culture; its connotations are mastery of the original poetic language, knowledge of ancient lore, and freedom in the relationship to kings. All of this was important for the construction and reconstruction of Icelandic identity in the thirteenth century (Sørensen 1995, 102). The focus on the poetic art in *Sturlu þáttr* is therefore best understood as a narrative device that contributes to the indirect interpretation of the events from Sturla's life, which were closely connected to the first years of the union and to the relationship between Icelanders and King Magnús Hákonarson.

The narrative type of the court poet's story creates a positive image of the interaction between the skald and the monarch. Joseph Harris has pointed out the contrast between the tragic tone of the sagas of Icelanders, where the protagonist is subject to fate and faces inevitable conflict, and the optimistic tone of the travel story or the court poet's story, where the protagonist proves his worth, and his alienation from the king is followed by a reconciliation (Harris 1976, 18). This also applies to the comparison between the account of Sturla Þórðarson's life in *Íslendinga saga* and *Sturlu þáttr*. In the saga, Sturla helplessly witnesses the violent deaths of his kinsmen in the endless power struggles, and the tone is inevitably tragic. In the *þáttr*, on the other hand, Sturla proves his worth despite his uncertain initial position, so the tone of the story is conciliatory and optimistic.

³⁴ Sturla also incorporated much of his own poetry into the saga. Stanzas from his poems *Hrynhenda*, *Hákonarkviða*, *Hrafnsmál*, and *Hákonarflokkur* are quoted quite extensively in *Hákonar saga*.

5. 8. 3. The story of “the last skald”, cultural memory, and Icelandic identity

The life of Sturla Þórðarson the younger did not enter the cultural memory primarily as a story of a chieftain or a royal official, although these aspects are also present in his narrative portrayal. Instead, *Sturlu þáttr* follows the structural, thematic, and typological patterns of the court poet’s story, so it has all the connotations that are associated with this narrative type. The choice of this narrative type serves as an evaluative and interpretative device, and it functions on two levels. On a more individual level, it reflects an effort to portray Sturla as an independent Icelander, who enjoys the freedom of negotiation with the king, although his first contact with the monarch is involuntary. In historical reality, his poetic art was clearly not a dominant factor in his relations with the king, but it was essential for the construction of the narrative, because it connects *Sturlu þáttr* to the tradition of the court poets’ stories.

On a more universal level, the narrative type of the court poet’s story can be perceived as a narrative image of the relationship between Icelanders and the monarchy in general, and its structure implies that this relationship is, despite possible initial conflicts or alienation, positive and mutually beneficial. Within the medieval Icelanders’ cultural memory, the relationship between a skald and a king represents the ideal model of cultural and political relations between Iceland and Norway. The court poet’s story emphasizes the image of Icelanders as active participants in the forming of their relationship with the Norwegian monarchy, and it suggests that loyalty to a monarch and freedom are not contradictory as long as the right balance is found in every situation.

The historical reality of Sturla Þórðarson’s life and the inherent meaning of the court poet’s story are not contradictory, as Sturla in fact benefited from his originally involuntary journey to the royal court. There were, however, elements of conflict between Sturla and the monarch. Like in the case of Snorri Sturluson, Sturla Þórðarson’s story could therefore easily be turned into a narrative discourse of opposition to the Norwegian monarchy, if such an attitude to the relationship between Iceland and Norway had been relevant to the society at the time of the text’s origin. It was nevertheless a completely opposite discourse that became dominant in the collective memory of Sturla’s life – a narrative of overcoming disagreements between an Icelander and a king and of the Icelander’s active role in political cooperation with the royal court. The choice of such a discourse doubtlessly stemmed from a predominantly positive attitude to the monarchy at the time of *Sturlu þáttr*’s origin around 1300.

5. 9. ÁRNI ÞORLÁKSSON: THE POLITICIAN

Around the time of the formal establishment of the union between Iceland and Norway, contemporary events that took place in both lands’ secular politics were recorded in extensive narratives. The Icelandic power struggle and the chieftains’ contacts with the royal court became the subject of the contemporary sagas, which were then compiled in *Sturlunga saga*. Details of the Norwegian politics of the time were recorded in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* and *Magnúss saga lagabætis*, both composed by Sturla Þórðarson the younger (1214–1284). There are, on the other hand, no long narratives dealing with the secular politics in the union after the death of Magnús Hákonarson (1280) and Sturla Þórðarson (1284). The secular history

of the union from the 1280s onwards is known only from the extant documents, from the lawbooks, and from brief records in the annals. The only long narratives dealing with Icelandic events in the last decades of the thirteenth century and in the early fourteenth century are *Árna saga biskups* and *Lárentíus saga biskups*, which primarily record ecclesiastical history. They nevertheless offer insight into secular politics and into general social tendencies as well. Their style is shaped by the tradition of Latin hagiography and historiography, but their structural patterns and narrative types share many similarities with the secular contemporary sagas, so the construction of meaning in both groups of texts is comparable.

5. 9. 1. *Árna saga biskups* as a conflict story and the king's role as a mediator

The narrative type of the conflict story has already been presented here. Its structural pattern consists of an introduction of the protagonists, the development of a conflict, a violent culmination of the conflict, a revenge, a reconciliation, and an aftermath. It has been shown here that while the plot of the conflict story follows a dispute between two protagonists, who usually both receive equal or comparable attention in the story, the structural pattern draws attention to the importance of reconciliation. Especially the contemporary sagas place much emphasis on individual mediators who terminate the conflict and re-establish social order. The mediator is not a central character of the story on the level of plot, but he plays a central role in the construction of meaning within the story.

Árna saga biskups is an account of the late-thirteenth-century conflict between secular and ecclesiastical power, which in Iceland centred around control of the land-owning churches (*staðir*), and which is therefore known as the *staðamál*. This dispute took place between Bishop Árni Þorláksson of Skálholt (in office 1269–1298) and the Icelandic royal officials, who replaced the chieftain class after the establishment of the union with Norway. In a broader context, however, the conflict was a part of the Church's general struggle for independence from secular influence, which occurred in all Europe and was brought to Iceland from Norway.

As Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir has pointed out, *Árna saga* is a political narrative written from a position of a near contact with the events, so it has a less general perspective than the bishops' sagas about the distant past. It does not conceal its strong propagandist tone – the purpose of the saga may have been to secure a continuation of Bishop Árni's agenda in his diocese. The bias is expressed through parallels between Bishop Árni and Saint Augustine, as well as through the selection of quotations from documents. The quotations play a similar role as stanzas in older sagas: they serve as a proof of the historicity of the facts, while at the same time highlighting selected aspects of the narrative account. The structure of *Árna saga* is episodic and follows the Latin historiographic style with strict chronology and annalistic references to foreign matters, popes, emperors and kings, wars, councils, and similar details (Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1998, xvi–xx).

That is undeniable, but if we follow the individual narrative threads, rather than the given order of the chapters, we reveal relatively clear patterns. Structurally, these patterns follow the narrative type of the conflict story. Although there is very limited physical violence in the conflicts, the protagonist's disputes with his adversaries are the saga's main theme. As is typical for the conflict story, the text also draws attention to the mediator who limits the escalation of the dispute. Like in *Þórðar saga kakala*, it is again the king who is depicted in the role of

mediator – he represents a superior power with the ability to solve conflicts that nobody in Iceland is powerful enough to terminate.

The saga already introduces the king as a positive character before the beginning of the conflict, in an account of Árne's first journey to Norway in 1263, when Bishop Brandr Jónsson of Hólar is consecrated. The text states that “a close relationship developed between King Magnús and this same Árne already then, and it never ended while they both lived” (*gerðiz þá þegar mikill kunnleiki milli Magnúss konungs ok þessa sama Árna sá er aldrei þraut meðal þeir lifðu báðir*, ch. 4).³⁵ This statement foreshadows the monarch's positive role in the upcoming conflict, and it draws attention to his significance for Icelanders.

Nevertheless, while the overall structure of *Árna saga* emphasizes the significance of strong royal rule, many episodes show that Bishop Árne still uses the traditional Icelandic methods of gaining popularity, such as generosity and efficient conflict resolution, which were used by the chieftains in the Free State period. Árne hosts big feasts and judges cases (ch. 13), and he also turns his opponents into his friends by helpfulness and justice, which was one of the old chieftains' methods as well. The continuity is further emphasized by a direct comparison between Bishop Árne and the twelfth-century chieftain Jón Loptsson (ch. 13):

[...] hann gerði sér vini af óvinum í því at hann helt þeira hluta langt fram þótt vinir hans væri í móti sem forðum gerði Jón Loptsson, ok endrtryggði þá óvinina með sæmðum eðr fégjöfum. (*Biskupa sögur III*, 22–23)

[...] he turned his enemies into his friends by supporting their cases persistently, even though his friends were against it, as Jón Loptsson had done before, and he reconciled with his enemies by increasing their honour or by gifts of property.

Such a comparison creates a direct link to the past, thus underlining the element of continuity. Furthermore, the text makes a connection – underlined by alliteration – between prudence, power, and popularity. These are the same values that are appreciated in chieftains in the sagas of Icelanders and in the secular contemporary sagas:

[...] en því at byskup hafði lögunum jafnan at fylgt urðu fleiri fylgjendr þess at hann tók upp ok varð þungt við hann at skipta bæði sakir vizku, valds ok vinsælda. (*Biskupa sögur III*, 62)

[...] and because the bishop had always followed the law, he gained ever more supporters for the cases he took up, and he became a difficult opponent due to his prudence, power, and popularity.

Although the principles of conflict resolution have officially changed, the saga shows that most of the local disputes still follow the same model as the typical conflicts in the sagas of Icelanders and in the early parts of *Sturlunga saga*. The enmity between Bishop Árne and the royal official Þorvarðr Þórarinsson begins when two farmers have a petty dispute over property; one turns to Þorvarðr for help and the other to Árne (ch. 40). Other similar cases follow. First, Árne protects a farmer from Þorvarðr's supposedly unjust accusation of theft. Then Árne protects a certain Ketill, who is facing legal accusations, while Þorvarðr supports Ketill's opponents, who request compensation (ch. 41). This shows that the farmers still rely on powerful men of their choice, who in turn use conflict resolution as a means of enhancing their power.

While the local disputes among farmers can be solved by the Icelandic authorities, the conflict between secular and ecclesiastical power requires external intervention, and in this

³⁵ All references to *Árna saga biskups* and *Lárentius saga biskups* follow the 1998 edition by Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (*Biskupa sögur III*). Translations are my own.

context the saga underlines the central position of the king. The description of the *staðamál* follows the typical structural pattern of the conflict story: the tension gradually increases, although there is no physical violence, but the escalation of the conflict is limited by a mediator's intervention. Bishop Árni first negotiates with the church owners, but he gives up when he fails to gain Oddastaðr (ch. 9). Later, he renews his claim at the Alþingi, requests public judgement, and wins the lawsuit (ch. 10). Finally, as other major *staðir* become the object of conflict, it is decided that the matter must be judged by the king and the archbishop (chs. 16–17).

King Magnús promises to support Bishop Árni, but in return he asks the bishop to encourage Icelanders to accept the new lawbook *Járnsíða*, which was issued in 1271, but was not ratified immediately: “it is the bishop’s duty to encourage the people to accept things that bring them both honour and improvement and are morally right and necessary” (*það væri byskuplig skylda at eggja fólk á þá hluti sem þeim var bæði í sæmð ok uppreist, siðbót ok nauðsyn*, ch. 20). Árni agrees, and due to his efforts, most of the lawbook is accepted at the Alþingi of 1272. The bishop and the aristocrats are then summoned to the royal court to discuss the *staðamál* (ch. 20). In this episode, the positive evaluation of King Magnús is intertwined with the ecclesiastical viewpoint – that way, the text underlines the ideal of harmony and balance between royal and ecclesiastical power. Árni deems the king “a true and perfect friend of the Church” (*sannan ok fullkominn vin kirkjunnar*, ch. 20), which is why he willingly takes the risk of a journey to Norway to negotiate with the king for the benefit of the Church, “so that the crucified one’s matter would not be delayed because of his own negligence” (*at eigi væri fyrir hans leti í salt lagit sök hins krossfesta*, ch. 21). The reference to Christ evokes ideas of royal power coming from God and of the king as a protector of the Church. In the negotiation about the *staðamál*, the king acknowledges the decision of the archbishop, who proclaims that the *staðir* should be owned by the Church (ch. 23). This decision marks Bishop Árni’s temporary victory and a break in the conflict. The remaining parts of *Járnsíða* are then ratified in 1274.

This episode in the saga is a perfect example of the reciprocal character of the relationship between the king and the bishop. Even King Magnús’ lawbooks state that the king and the bishop are both representatives of God and are obliged to cooperate (NGL I 262, II 193; see Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1998, xxix–xxx). Accordingly, the saga presents the cooperation between Bishop Árni and King Magnús as mutually beneficial. The positive character of the relationship is further underlined by the saga’s focus on how the king treats Bishop Árni with respect (ch. 21), how Árni takes leave of the king in great friendship (ch. 26), and how the king invites Árni to a feast and gives him gifts during his later stay in Björgyn (ch. 54). This overall tone of the saga makes it clear that the text does not express a generally negative attitude to the monarchy, although it admits that disagreements concerning the ratification of laws and other political matters existed in the newly established and still not fully stabilized union.

It is the disunity between various social groups, especially between the Church and the aristocracy, that is presented in the text as the most pressing problem of Icelandic society, and royal power is presented as the only authority that can possibly solve this problem. The saga shows that King Magnús does his best to prevent the conflict between the Church and the secular power, and that the reason for the renewal of the dispute is the king’s death. The

narrative offers a detailed account of what a loss the king's death is for the clerics, even adding a biblical parallel to emphasize the statement (ch. 55):

At liðnum þessum vetri fekk Árni byskup þann skaða sem sameiginligr var allri Nóregis kristni at hinn himneski faðir Jesus Christus kallaði til sín virðuligan herra Magnús konung in adventu beati Nicholai í Barin. Var sá skaði svá mikill öllu landsbúinu, en einkanliga klerkunum, sem forðum var fráfall hins ágæta Jósúa konungs. (Biskupa sögur III, 78)

After the end of this winter, Bishop Árni suffered the loss that was shared by all the Christians in Norway, that the heavenly father Jesus Christ summoned the noble lord, King Magnús, on the day of Saint Nicholas' arrival in Bár.³⁶ It was a heavy loss for all the land's inhabitants, but especially for the clerics, as the decease of the great King Joshua had been before.

The ideology of a strong king supporting the Church continues to be emphasized further on in the text (ch. 71):

Vóru ok þær einar fréttir af Nóregi at þar skeikaði mjök stjórnin sem líkligt var at slökkuðum svá björtum landsins lampa sem var Magnús konungr, þeim sem sanna raun sanns góðvila sýndi at um sína daga var mjök í loga af eldi tvennar elsku sjálfs Guðs ok sinna náunga [...] (Biskupa sögur III, 105)

And the only news from Norway were that the rule went much askew there, as could be expected after the extinguishing of such a bright lantern of the land as King Magnús, who had shown by a true proof of true goodwill that he had been much aflame in the fire of the double love of God and of his neighbours [...]

The absence of a strong monarch after King Magnús' death, when his son and successor Eiríkr is still a child, leads to a renewal of the conflict between ecclesiastical power and the royal council in Norway, and the archbishop and two bishops are exiled from Norway against their will. Direct narratorial comments in the saga point out that Norway has lost both the king and the archbishop, and that the new king is not strong enough, although he has a good character. The text states that God has sent a burden (*byngð*) in the form of illness, starvation, and cattle plague to Norway to turn Norwegians back to the right ways. At the time, Queen Margrét dies, and King Eiríkr is wounded while riding and almost dies as well, but at the plea of Saint Óláfr, God heals him (ch. 91). This scene can be interpreted in the sense that the patron saint of Norway, whose main interest is the land's wellbeing, allows the young king to survive because a strong monarch is of essential importance for the kingdom.

The renewed conflict then reaches Iceland as well when a new declaration issued by the royal council states that the *staðir* must be given back to their secular owners (ch. 73). After this, the conflict gradually increases again: at first, Bishop Árni agrees to a compromise in order to keep peace (ch. 77), but then he renews his claims (ch. 81), and he is accused of breaking his agreement with the royal officials (ch. 82). The matter is taken to the Alþingi (chs. 83–86), where a written agreement is produced (chs. 87–88), but it does not terminate the conflict.

Some sections of the conflict are presented as highly personal, like the typical conflict stories in the sagas of Icelanders. First, the text focuses on the dispute between Bishop Árni and the *sýslumaðr* Ásgrímr Þorsteinsson and his supporter Ormr Klængsson (chs. 64–95), which ends only when the bishop's opponents become seriously ill and ask for forgiveness and reconciliation on their deathbeds (chs. 97, 118). The temporary termination of a conflict due to the non-violent death of the protagonist's adversary again resembles *Þórðar saga*, in which Þórðr Sighvatsson's conflict with Kolbeinn Arnórsson ends in the same manner. Just like in

³⁶ On the day when Saint Nicholas' relics were translated – May 9.

Pórðar saga, however, the conflict cannot be terminated completely without the king's intervention. Bishop Árni continues to disagree with Hrafn Oddsson, the most powerful royal official of the time. Hrafn suggests an agreement and proclaims that he would never hurt Árni (ch. 107), but Árni is reluctant to accept the settlement and does so only for the sake of peace (ch. 108). All the following agreements between them are also reluctantly accepted and soon broken, so there is little chance of a lasting reconciliation without external intervention.

Bishop Árni can expect a positive development only when King Eiríkr becomes old enough to take the rule actively into his hands. Just like his predecessor Magnús, the new king also asks Bishop Árni to support his agenda in return for help in the *staðamál*. When a war with Sweden becomes imminent in 1286, the king summons forty men from each quarter and all the retainers from Iceland to the defence of Norway (ch. 109), and he asks Bishop Árni to encourage the acceptance of this request and to provide the army with goods that will later be returned. The letter states that if the bishop agrees, he will receive the king's support in his agenda (ch. 110). This illustrates the bilateral character of the relationship between the monarch and the bishop – the king does not expect the bishop to obey him unconditionally, but he is ready to negotiate with him and offer him support in return for a service. Somewhat paradoxically, then, the bishop defends the king's case against the royal officials, who reject the request, while Árni supports it in his public speeches, emphasizing the mutual obligation between the king and the people (ch. 110). The saga also shows that the people agree with Árni's argumentation and acknowledge their duties to the king (ch. 111), so the bishop is presented as a mediator between the king and the people, more so than the royal officials, who mainly promote their own interests. The bishop evaluates the relationship between the people and the monarchy pragmatically and objectively – it must not be based on either stubborn opposition or blind obedience, but rather on debate and compromise.

The war with Sweden does not take place after all, but the matter nevertheless intensifies the contact between the king and Bishop Árni. The text emphasizes that the king now rules more independently than before (*fréttiz ok gott frá konunginum at hann réði meira en fyrrum*, ch. 122). It also underlines the idea that the king feels obliged to help the Church to its rights, just like he helps all others (*sagðiz ok konungrinn kenna sik skyldugan með erkibyskups ráði at fylgja kirkjunni til síns réttar sem öðrum*, ch. 127). These are the main elements of the saga's central message, which emphasizes the importance of strong royal rule and of cooperation between secular and ecclesiastical power. This idea is also reflected in the actual events when the newly appointed archbishop confirms his predecessor's decision concerning the *staðamál* (ch. 131), and the king acknowledges this decision (ch. 132). Bishop Árni and his adversaries then finally hold a meeting with the king and the archbishop (ch. 144), and it is concluded that the secular owners of the *staðir* must accept the archbishop's decision (ch. 146). The end of the saga is lost, so the final agreement of 1297 is not found in the extant text, but it would make a logical conclusion of the well-structured conflict story.

The conflict story deals with a tension between secular and ecclesiastical power, but it is of importance that the saga never presents a direct conflict between the Church and the king, only disputes between the Church and the secular aristocracy in the absence of a strong king. The saga thus propagates a strong monarch as a guarantee of peace, order, and stability within the land and of harmony and mutual support between ecclesiastical and secular power.

5. 9. 2. The meaning of *Árna saga* in cultural memory

In this section it has been shown that although *Árna saga* deals with events after the formal establishment of the union between Iceland and Norway and represents another genre than the texts previously discussed in this chapter, it is characterized by considerable similarities to those texts, both on the level of historical reality and on the level of narrative discourse.

On the level of historical reality, significant elements of continuity can be found in the descriptions of political practice and power relations in Iceland. Even after the acceptance of centralized royal rule and of the new laws, many aspects of the relationship between the leaders and the farmers and commoners remained largely unchanged in practice. The farmers still mostly sought to further their individual interests against each other, and they relied on individual secular or ecclesiastical leaders for support. The leaders then turned to the king for advice and judgement. The politics thus consisted of two levels: on the one hand, the leaders could gain popularity and enhance their power by conflict resolution in local matters. On the other hand, they were all loyal to the king and relied on him as a source of justice – this is also directly underlined in the saga (ch. 45). The first level shows a strong continuity with the old system, whereas the second level is based on new impulses, which nevertheless also appeared already before the formal establishment of the union, so they do not mark an abrupt change either.

On the level of narrative discourse, *Árna saga* employs the most common narrative type known from the sagas of Icelanders and the secular contemporary sagas, the conflict story. The choice of this narrative type connects the events to the memory of typologically similar events from the past, and it has an interpretative function. By fitting recent history into the structural pattern of the conflict story with its focus on the mediator, the saga emphasizes the importance of a strong king as a guardian of peace and order. The conflict first develops and escalates in an indirect absence of strong royal power – when the king is not directly involved in the dispute between the bishop and the aristocracy in Iceland. The first part of the conflict ends with a decision made in Norway in cooperation with King Magnús, and after this the conflict subsides, although it is not entirely terminated. The second part of the conflict starts in the absence of a strong monarch after King Magnús' death. The termination of the conflict is marked by an agreement that is reached when the new king has become old enough to take the rule in his own hands and strong royal power is renewed. The stages of escalation and termination of conflict are thus directly connected to the absence or presence of strong royal rule. That implies that the monarch has become irreplaceable in the role of mediator. The same idea is already presented in *Þórðar saga kakala* and other secular contemporary sagas dealing with the Sturlung Age, which means that the decisive stage of the development took place before the formal establishment of the union. The situation within the union that is described in *Árna saga* 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. This continuity is emphasized on the level of narrative discourse by the use of the same narrative types in the sagas describing all the stages of the development.

5. 10. LÁRENTÍUS KÁLFSSON: THE LOYAL CLERIC

5. 10. 1. *Lárentíus saga* as a travel story

The protagonist of *Lárentíus saga biskups* is Bishop Árni Þorláksson's younger contemporary, Bishop Lárentíus Kálfsson of Hólar (1267–1331, in office 1324–1331). Like *Árna saga*, the text was written shortly after the bishop's death, so it records rich details of events that were still fresh in people's memory, but it is nevertheless already shaped by the narrative types known from the saga tradition. In *Lárentíus saga* it is primarily the narrative type of the travel story. The structural pattern of this narrative type begins with the Icelander's journey to Norway, where he is insecure and underrated at first, but he eventually proves his worth and gains respect and a prestigious position due to his skills. The central motif of the travel story is gaining prestige in Norway, and its central focus is the contact between the two lands.

In *Lárentíus saga*, the young Icelandic priest Lárentíus meets the royal official Petr, who promises to take him to Norway. On the ship, Lárentíus is seasick, and Petr makes friendly jokes about it, but Lárentíus is upset (ch. 9). King Eiríkr Magnússon (reign 1280–1299) welcomes Petr, who wants to woo the king's kinswoman and asks Lárentíus to write a letter to her in Latin. Lárentíus modestly says that he lacks the ability, but then he writes the letter. The king admires it and invites Lárentíus to a feast, and Lárentíus spends the winter at the royal court (ch. 10). Later, he studies law and deals with disputes between the archbishop and the canons. The archbishop appreciates his learning and gives him control of the church of Saint Óláfr as a sign of respect (ch. 12). This account follows the structure of the travel story. At first, the Icelander's lack of travel experience is underlined in the humorous scene on the ship, but then the text focuses on the development of the Icelander from a newcomer to a respected person. Lárentíus is well received from the start because he accompanies the king's friend, but later he gains prestige of his own when he proves his qualities and abilities to the king and the archbishop. Since Lárentíus excels in verbal skills, the account also echoes the court poet's story. The ancient art of skaldic poetry is replaced by new intellectual values, such as Latin writing and judicial learning.

The most significant difference from *Árna saga* is that the conflicts that Lárentíus participates in occur within the Church, rather than between secular and ecclesiastical power. The main conflict is the prolonged dispute between Archbishop Jörundr of Niðarós and the canons, which concerns the extent of the canons' independence in legal matters and in control of property. An essential similarity between the two sagas is, on the other hand, that the central conflict illustrates the significance of strong royal rule. In *Lárentíus saga*, the king can solve the conflict due to his authority when the archbishop is powerless against his own men.

King Hákon Magnússon (reign 1299–1319) brings about a settlement between the archbishop and the canons (ch. 15A), but the dispute is renewed when the king is away, and it lasts another year. This shows that the king's physical presence is important in such a serious dispute, and that it is his personal authority, rather than the organized royal administration, that can bring about peace. As the conflict continues, the king steadily supports the archbishop and rebukes the canons for disobeying their leader, speaking so strictly that the canons fear him (ch. 15A). Finally, the king offers the canons two options: they will either be outlawed, or they will hand over the matter to the archbishop, the king, and the foremost men. The canons fall on their

knees before the archbishop and hand over the whole matter to him, whereupon a settlement is reached and held for two years (ch. 16A). This again illustrates the central idea of the king supporting the Church, or specifically the archbishop, who is the true representative of ecclesiastical power in the land if disputes occur within the Church. The king is presented as a wise judge and as the only authority strong enough to control a serious conflict.

The saga also highlights Lárentíus' loyalty to the archbishop despite the canons' aggression, even at the cost of his own personal safety. A group of clerks attempts to physically attack and imprison Lárentíus, and they also hinder him in performing a mass properly and cause him "many offences, mockeries, and adversities" (*margar meingjörðir, athlátr ok mótgang*, ch. 15A). The archbishop's men help Lárentíus in these situations, which shows that the archbishop appreciates his loyalty and repays it with protection, in a similar way as kings do in the typical travel stories. The canons refer to Lárentíus' origin in their verbal attacks – when Lárentíus reads out the archbishop's letter, one of them replies "you do not need to yell so loudly, Icelander, we hear what you are saying" (*eigi þarftú, Íslendingr, svá hátt at æpa, því vér heyrum hvat þú segir*, ch. 14A). The real cause of the mockery is the dispute between the canons and the archbishop, not Lárentíus' Icelandic origin, but the situation resembles the typical travel story, in which the jealous courtiers attempt to embarrass the Icelander by pointing out his origin, which they associate with marginality. The real reason for such verbal attacks is the established courtiers' envy of the capable newcomer, who might threaten their position.

This kind of envy plays an important role in *Lárentíus saga* – when Lárentíus is appreciated by the archbishop, the canons and other clerics envy him, so they persuade the archbishop that Lárentíus should be sent on a visitation to Iceland (ch. 17A). Like in the typical travel story, the Icelander is envied because of the leader's favour, but the favour is fully deserved because of the Icelander's abilities and loyalty to the leader. The situation in the ecclesiastical environment is thus portrayed in the same way as similar situations at the royal court. While it is the king who acts as the Icelander's protector in the typical travel story, in *Lárentíus saga* this role is played by the archbishop, who writes letters to the Icelandic bishops and asks them to support Lárentíus (ch. 17A). The archbishop has a good reason to help Lárentíus, who has remained loyal to him despite all the difficulties caused to him by the canons. This is a parallel to the loyalty of Ari Þorgeirsson to Jarl Erlingr in *Guðmundar saga*, or to the fearlessness of Þorgils Böðvarsson in the fire of Björgyn. In this respect, the episode also contains elements of the royal retainer's story, in which the focus on loyalty is even stronger than in the travel story. Such elements contribute to the construction of the text's meaning within cultural memory. The focus of the text is that although the hostile canons ridicule Lárentíus due to his Icelandic origin, the king and the archbishop are presented as protectors of justice and order in the whole kingdom, making no difference between Norway and Iceland.

After the conflict between the archbishop and the canons has been moderated by the king's intervention, it is renewed when the other central authority, the archbishop, is weakened. The archbishop falls ill, and the canons take over all the power, dismissing all the archbishop's adherents (ch. 22). The canons confiscate Lárentíus' property (ch. 23), falsely accuse him of falsifying the archbishop's letters, imprison him without a lawsuit, and force him to return to Iceland the following summer (chs. 24–26). In the spring, the archbishop dies, and the new elect is Eilífr, one of his former adversaries – this finally terminates the conflict (ch. 27). The text

implies that the injustice against Lárentíus would not have taken place if the archbishop had not been weakened by his illness – he would have protected Lárentíus in return for his loyalty, in the same way as the kings in the typical travel stories protect Icelanders from the injustice of envious courtiers. The saga thus emphasizes the importance of the relationship between Icelanders and the Norwegian authorities, as well as the idea that both the king and the archbishop are essential for justice, peace, and order in the kingdom.³⁷

The narrative type of the travel story also shapes the account of Lárentíus' consecration journey. Lárentíus sails to Norway and is shipwrecked, but most of the people and goods are saved. Lárentíus then falls on his knees before the archbishop and asks for forgiveness for all his misdeeds, which concern disputes within the Church in Iceland. The archbishop replies that he has already forgiven him and asks him for forgiveness as well. Lárentíus spends the winter with the archbishop and discusses all the problematic matters with him (ch. 38). Then the archbishop consecrates Lárentíus (ch. 39), gives him gifts, and takes farewell in good friendship (ch. 40). The episode again follows the structural pattern of the travel story: it begins with a troublesome journey, Lárentíus' relationship with the archbishop develops from an initial alienation to reconciliation and mutual friendship, and Lárentíus is honoured by a prestigious office and valuable gifts. This return to the structural pattern of the travel story highlights its importance for the construction of meaning in the whole saga.

5. 10. 2. The meaning of *Lárentíus saga* in cultural memory

Like *Árna saga*, *Lárentíus saga* is shaped by one of the most common narrative types known from the sagas of Iceland's secular history, in this case the travel story. The narrative type connects the recent events to the memory of the past, endowing them with additional layers of meaning. The travel story focuses on how the protagonist uses his own skills to gradually gain a prestigious position and the favour of the highest authorities in Norway. Due to the saga's ecclesiastical subject matter, the jealous courtiers from the typical travel story are replaced by the canons, and the role of the supreme authority is played mainly by the archbishop, although the text also mentions that the king appreciates Lárentíus' learning. The values, however, remain similar, with the Icelander's intellectual skills, courage, and loyalty in the forefront. Lárentíus' loyalty 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 him and the archbishop is followed by a reconciliation.

Despite the saga's focus on matters of the Church, the structural and motivic parallels with the typical travel story imply that the central message of the narrative also remains the same as in the secular travel stories. The saga underlines the idea that despite conflicts between Icelanders and some individual Norwegians, the relationship between Icelanders and the

³⁷ The saga generally presents the relationship between the secular power and the Church as positive. This is reflected not least in the scenes of the crowning of new kings. When King Eiríkr dies and his brother Hákon is crowned, he grants the Church new privileges (ch. 16). When King Hákon dies and the three-year-old Magnús Eiríksson is elected king of Norway, Sweden, and Gotland, the regent Erlendr Viðkunsson rules "with the advice of Archbishop Eilífr and of all the most powerful lords in Norway" (*með ráði herra Eilífs erkibyskups ok allra völdugustu herra í Noregi*, ch. 31). The focus on the archbishop shows that this regent, unlike those depicted in *Árna saga*, cooperates with the Church and contributes to the harmony between secular and ecclesiastical power.

Norwegian authorities is positive and beneficial. The unity of the kingdom is reflected in Lárentíus' direct involvement in the internal dispute within the Norwegian Church, which can to some extent be perceived as a parallel to the involvement of Icelanders in the Norwegian power struggle during the Sturlung Age, but the connection between the two lands is presented as more immediate in *Lárentíus saga*. That is a sign of actual, not just formal, integration. Like *Árna saga*, *Lárentíus saga* also emphasizes the importance of strong royal rule as the sole authority capable of solving serious internal conflicts. Due to the use of the same narrative types and a comparable focus on the development of conflict resolution and power dynamics, these two texts complete the interpretation of Iceland's contact and union with Norway that is presented in the secular contemporary sagas.

5. 11. CONCLUSION: NARRATIVE TYPES AND ICELANDIC IDENTITY

In the contemporary sagas, the historical reality of the process of establishing the union with Norway and of the preceding and following decades is formed into a narrative discourse by means of various narrative types that were significant within the medieval Icelanders' cultural memory. The narrative types were already known from the sagas dealing with the Saga Age, so they connected the recent events to their typological parallels from older history, integrating them into cultural memory and endowing them with additional meanings related to the construction of identity.

The most significant narrative type in the portrayal of contact between Iceland and Norway 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 social 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 lack of courtly manners, but he proves their mockery wrong by demonstrating his cleverness, eloquence, or courage. Significantly, the king in the travel story often protects the Icelander from the overbearing Norwegian courtiers despite some possible initial distrust between the king and the Icelander. The travel story reveals some of the Icelanders' insecurities, but it expresses their wish for contact with the broader Norse social space, as well as their belief that their own qualities make such contact possible. It inherently expresses a positive attitude to the relationship between Icelanders and the monarchy. It underlines the development of this relationship from alienation to alliance, and it draws attention to the mutually beneficial character of such an alliance. This narrative type connects the story of Ingimundr Þorgeirsson in the late twelfth century and the story of Lárentíus Kálfsson in the fourteenth century to the *útanferðar þættir* from the kings' sagas of older times. By creating such connections, it emphasizes the continuing significance of the theme of marginality and contact.

The theme of marginality plays a central role in the outlaw's story. This narrative type 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 the only contemporary saga where it is dominant, *Arons 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 created by 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 the protagonist's development from an outcast into a respected royal retainer. It is a story of overcoming marginality and of successful integration into a larger whole. The tragedy of isolation is contrasted with the benefits of contact, the outlaw's marginality is contrasted with the royal retainer's prestige, and the central role of fate in the typical outlaw's story is contrasted with the protagonist's free will in the travel story. The text emphasizes 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.

The emphasis on the positive aspects of royal rule is even stronger in the royal retainer's story, which also presents a more confident image of the Icelander than the travel story. Instead of focusing on the Icelander's initial marginality in Norway, it draws attention to the development of his personality that is refined by his stay at the royal court. It emphasizes how his service to the king gives a purpose and a direction to his natural ferocity and courage, so that his sword protects social order, instead of disrupting it. The narrative presents loyalty as a chief value, but it also clearly marks the difference between active loyalty and passive subordination. It highlights the retainer's voluntary decision to serve the king, as well as his excellent qualities, thus suppressing the image of the Icelander's marginality. The development of the protagonist's personality is emphasized even more in *Þorgils saga skarða*, which combines the royal retainer's story with the peaceful chieftain's story. Þorgils arrives in Norway in his early youth, and his impatience and hot temper do not appeal to the king, but the king nevertheless gives him a chance. Þorgils then proves his worth in various quests, including one in the king's absence, which is a typical element of the royal retainer's story. Nevertheless, the saga creates a distance from the narrative type by showing that instead of gaining a good reputation by fighting on the king's behalf, Þorgils gains a good reputation by achieving a peaceful solution with the help of the king's authority. This distance from the horizon of expectations is further developed by a combination of the royal retainer's story with the peaceful chieftain's story. The saga shows how Þorgils changes from a ferocious youth into a responsible royal retainer and then into a peaceful chieftain because his stay at the royal court teaches him to put the community's interests before his own and to use his bravery for useful purposes. The unity among the royal retainers is stronger than personal ambition, and genuine loyalty to the monarch can overcome personal hatred among the aristocrats and prevent bloody fights. Due to these values, Þorgils represents the ideal of the peaceful chieftain, which is underlined in the saga by a parallel with Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson and by references to a saint. Like other peaceful chieftains in *Sturlunga saga* – Sturla Þórðarson the elder, Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, and Þórðr Sturluson, Þorgils is portrayed in contrast to an aggressive chieftain, Þorvarðr Þórarinnsson. When Þorvarðr stubbornly fights for power against his former ally, his behaviour represents the opposite of the ideal of unity that is propagated in the saga. The contrast draws attention to Þorgils' peacefulness, underlining the moral message of the saga. The narrative parallels between all the peaceful chieftains in *Sturlunga saga* 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 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 social system from constant rivalry among aggressive chieftains to centralized rule in the hands of peaceful royal representatives. This development, however, did not disrupt the Icelanders' identity. The existing elements of collective identity – language, culture, religion, and history – were retained, and a new element – loyalty to a monarch – was added. At the same time, Iceland was integrated into a broader Norse social space, and by this integration, it overcame its marginality, which was the main negative element of Icelandic collective identity. Although the peaceful chieftain's story is inherently tragic, this image of a positive social development endows it with an optimistic undertone.

Another inherently tragic narrative type is the conflict story, which depicts a dispute between two protagonists, typically portrayed as the character type of the warrior-chieftain. Neither of the protagonists is presented as a villain, they are rather portrayed as two parties furthering their interests. The structural pattern of the conflict story shows that violence often brings no lasting solution in the dispute, so it draws attention to the importance of mediators and arbitrators for the renewal of peace. During the Sturlung Age, nobody in Iceland was powerful enough to arbitrate the most influential chieftains' conflicts, so it is the Norwegian king who is presented in the role of the mediator. *Þórðar saga kakala* follows the structural pattern of the conflict story, but it creates a double distance from its horizon of expectations. Firstly, the narrative type leads to the expectation of a decisive battle between Þórðr Sighvatsson and Gizurr Þorvaldsson and a violent death of one of them, but instead, the mediation by the king prevents a violent clash between them. This distance from the narrative type emphasizes the importance of royal rule for peaceful conflict resolution. Secondly, the result of the reconciliation leads to the expectation of Þórðr's success in achieving his goal in Icelandic politics with the king's help; ironically, however, Þórðr dies the same day he is finally appointed to the position of royal representative for the second time. This is a different kind of tragic ending than the one found in the conflict stories in the sagas of Icelanders. Þórðr's death is not violent, but it is nevertheless a tragic death from the perspective of the protagonist because it happens at the very moment when he has achieved his life-long goal. 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, who are replaced by peaceful representatives of royal power. This is presented as a positive development, so it creates another distance from the inherently tragic horizon of expectations. The narrative type of the conflict story also creates a connection between stories of the Saga Age, the Sturlung Age, and the time of the union. In *Árna saga biskups*, the structural pattern of the conflict story underlines the importance of the monarch as a mediator just like in *Þórðar saga*. Similarly, *Árna saga* also creates a distance from this narrative type by showing how the mediation prevents violence and terminates social disunity before it can cause any serious social breakdown. The dispute is solved by agreement and compromise before the bishop's death, which is a significant distance from the tragic horizon of expectations of the conflict story.

The next inherently tragic narrative type, 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. This narrative type is best developed in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, which reflects the thirteenth-century contrast between the old and new type of ruler. The old type is represented by Skúli Bárðarson, who embodies the traditional Norse ideal of the warrior-aristocrat. King Hákon, on the other hand, represents the new ideal of *rex iustus*, the king as a peaceful lawmaker, judge, and protector of the powerless. The portrayal of Gizurr Þorvaldsson in *Íslendinga saga*, on the other hand, creates a distance from the structural pattern of the jarl's story by combining elements of both types, 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 or commoners. 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. Beside such idealizations, however, the narrative is doubtlessly also based on historical reality – it is fully understandable that Gizurr was popular as a jarl, as he had enjoyed considerable support even before he received the title. The title was then regarded only as a formal acknowledgement of the existing situation. 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-chieftain, is associated with the old social model, which was being replaced by centralized monarchy with its system of royal officials. In the portrayal of Gizurr Þorvaldsson, the aspects of the character type of the jarl represent the old system of Norse social organization, whereas the aspects of *rex iustus* represent the newly 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.

The last narrative type that significantly shapes the meaning of the contemporary sagas is the court poet's story, which presents the most confident portrayal of the Icelander. Instead of drawing attention to marginality, it underlines the skald's cleverness and eloquence, his active approach to forming a relationship with the monarch, and his special privileges in his relationship with the monarch. The skald enters a king's service on his own initiative and of his own free will because he wishes to make full use of his abilities – both poetic and diplomatic. The skald can speak to the king more openly than anyone else, give him advice or criticize him, and he often uses his rhetorical skills to terminate conflicts. Significantly, this narrative type 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 narrative of Snorri Sturluson has a tragic ending, but that is not a part of the court poet's story itself, but rather a part of the story of the jarl Skúli Bárðarson, with which Snorri's story is inseparably intertwined. This inherently tragic part of the narrative is interpreted by its connection with the inherently optimistic court poet's story, which underlines the portrayal of Snorri as an active participant in Norwegian politics, rather than as a passive victim of the Norwegian rulers' decisions. In the narrative of Sturla Þórðarson the younger, on the other hand, the court poet's story is unequivocally optimistic, portraying an ideal reconciliation and cooperation between the Icelander and the king. The king forbids mutual conflicts among his vassals, but he does that for their own good, with the intention to prevent bloody armed clashes within the land. Only centralized power can

secure peace and social stability, but the king is also magnanimous to his vassals and does not punish them excessively. The focus on the court poet's story covers up some of the political aspects of the chieftains' actions that are regarded as unwise decisions – Snorri's choice of party in the Norwegian power struggle, and Sturla's attempted violent attack on a fellow royal vassal. First and foremost, however, the narrative type has an interpretative and evaluative function. Snorri's unlucky end and 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 shapes the stories that form the very beginning and end of the narrative of Iceland's direct political contact with Norway in *Sturlunga saga*. As such, the structural pattern of the court poet's story frames the whole narrative and contributes to the construction of its meaning, turning it into a story of Iceland's active role in the formation of the union with Norway.

When the contemporary sagas employ the same narrative types as the sagas dealing with the Saga Age, they 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. This development is not presented as a downfall, but it is not excessively idealized either; the texts depict both its positive and negative aspects, as well as elements of both continuity and change. The society was integrated into a broader social, political, and cultural space in the thirteenth century, but its own past did not lose its value in this process. The past, both distant and recent, still defined the collective identity of Icelanders, but its meaning was re-assessed from the perspective of the new present situation. At the same time, the memory of the past also shaped the perception of the present. It was this dialogic relationship between the past and the present that formed the society's identity. Inseparable elements of this identity were on the one hand a sense of individuality and an awareness of the differences between the Icelandic society and other societies, but on the other hand also a need of contact and an awareness of similarity. The identity bearers – the protagonists of the various narrative types in the contemporary sagas – embody each of these elements to a varying extent, but none of them negates any of the elements completely. The contemporary sagas thus create balanced images of the medieval Icelanders' relationship to their own past and present, to the Norwegian monarchy, and to the Norse social space.

6. ICELANDIC SAINTS AND IDENTITY

The previous chapter has shown that the integration of Iceland into the union with Norway did not lead to a loss of Icelandic identity, but that does not mean that the Icelanders' perception of their identity remained entirely unchanged. When Iceland gave up its old political system and became a part of a larger political whole, the theme of integration doubtlessly gained more significance in the social debate, and Icelanders needed to re-define their identity in light of their new social situation. As the internal instability of the Sturlung Age was no longer a reality and the imminent danger of bloodshed had subsided, Icelanders could turn their attention to their relationship with the rest of the world and focus on the long-term development of their position within the European social space.

This tendency is best reflected in the bishops' sagas dealing with the native Icelandic saints. The previous studies of the bishops' sagas have mostly been limited by a focus on the religious meaning only, but here it will be argued that these texts also reflect ideas related to the formation and transformation of Icelandic identity. Significantly, many of the bishops' sagas approach history from a broader perspective than the secular contemporary sagas, which mostly isolate Iceland and Norway and show only very limited interest in the rest of the world. In the words of Lena Rohrbach, "*Íslendinga saga* narrates history in a local conceptual framework. Events abroad, pontificates, reigns, and deaths of foreign dignitaries are not called upon for contextualization and dating. [...] The Norwegian court forms the only setting abroad, but this setting can be read as pertaining to the microspace of *Íslendinga saga*. The Norwegian court was part of the microspace of the Icelandic male elite in the thirteenth century" (Rohrbach 2017, 355–56). This applies not only to *Íslendinga saga*, but to the whole *Sturlunga* compilation, which is focused on the integration of Iceland into the social space of the Norwegian realm, but not on its relationship to the world beyond its borders. Many of the bishops' sagas, on the other hand, refer to the world outside of the Norwegian-Icelandic kingdom much more frequently and with greater significance. Even within the genre of the bishops' sagas, however, there is a development in this respect. While references to pontificates and foreign rulers are found even in the oldest bishops' sagas, the general interest in the relationship between Iceland and the rest of the Christian world increases and changes considerably in the younger texts. That reflects the fact that once the integration of Iceland into the Norwegian realm was at least formally completed, the attention turned to this realm's position within a social space that transcended its political boundaries. The development of this tendency within the genre of the bishops' sagas reflects the gradually changing emphases in the construction of Icelandic identity.

6. 1. THE BISHOPS AS IDENTITY BEARERS

6. 1. 1. Early Icelandic bishops as spiritual and social leaders

In the absence of kings, the Icelandic bishops played a significant role as central figures with whom the society could identify. They represented the divine, but also the secular authority, as the early bishops came from Iceland's most powerful families (see Long 2017, 74). This is already obvious in the first extant written account of Icelandic history, *Íslendingabók* (ca. 1130). In this work, Icelandic identity is derived from the first settlers, the law, and the Alþingi, but it

is the conversion to Christianity that is presented as the key event in Icelandic history, and the final chapters deal in relatively great detail with the first two bishops, Ísleifr and Gizurr. The text emphasizes their social, rather than spiritual importance, which means that it does not foreground the division between secular and ecclesiastical power (ch. 10):

Gizurr byskup vas ástsælli af öllum landsmönnum en hverr maðr annarra, þeira es vér vitim hér á landi hafa verit. [...] Þat eru miklar jartegnir, hvat hlýðnir landsmenn váru þeim manni, es hann kom því fram, at fé allt vas virt með svardögum, þat es á Íslandi vas, ok landit sjalft ok tiundir af gørvar ok lög á lögð, at svá skal vesa, meðan Ísland es byggt. (Íslendingabók 1986, 22)

Bishop Gizurr was more popular with all his countrymen than any other person we know to have been in this country. [...] It is a great sign of how obedient the people of the country were to that man, that he brought it about that all property in Iceland was valued under oath, including the land itself, and tithes paid on it, and laws laid down that it should be so as long as Iceland is inhabited. (*Íslendingabók* 2006, 11–12)

Unlike *Íslendingabók*, the hundred years younger *Hungrvaka* from the first half of the thirteenth century, a history of the first five bishops of Skálholt, focuses almost solely on ecclesiastical history, and it also pays more attention to the spiritual aspects, although not as much as the hagiographic sagas of individual bishops. It attributes sanctity even to some of the bishops who were usually not perceived as saints (ch. 2):

Inn efra hlut ævi Ísleifs byskups bar marga hluti honum til handa, þá er mjök birti gæzku hans fyrir þeim mönnum er þat kunnu í skynja, af því at margir menn váru þeir óðir færðir honum til handa er heilir gengu frá hans fundi. Mungát blezaði hann, þat er skjadak var í, ok var þaðan frá vel drekkanda, ok mart annat þessu líkt bar honum til handa, þótt ek greina nú ekki svá sér hvat þat sem hann gerði ok inum vitrustum mönnum þóttu inir mestu kraptar fylgja. (Biskupa sögur II, 10)

In the latter part of the life of Bishop Ísleifr, many things happened that clearly revealed his goodness to those who were able to perceive it, since many mad people were brought to him and were healed when they left him. He blessed beer that was harmful due to bad brewing, and it was good to drink afterwards, and many other such things happened to him, although I do not tell about every single thing that he did and that appeared to the wisest people to originate from extraordinary powers.

This shows that the specific spiritual significance of ecclesiastical dignitaries, different from the social significance of secular nobility, was already perceived more strongly than before. At the same time, however, the text also points out the bishops' noble social status and emphasizes that they were honoured by foreign secular rulers and ecclesiastical dignitaries alike (ch. 4):

[Gizurr Ísleifsson] var jafnan mikils virðr hvar sem hann kom ok var þá tignum mönnum á hendi er hann var útanlands. Haraldr konungr Sigurðarson var þá konungr í Nóregi, ok mælti hann þeim orðum við Gizur at honum kvazk svá sýnask til at hann myndi bezt til fallinn at bera hvert tignarnaþn sem hann hlyti. [...] En páfínn sendi þá Gizur til handa Harðvíg erkibyskupi í Magaðaborg á Saxlandi ok bauð at hann skyldi gefa honum byskupsvígslu, en hann tók við honum með mikilli sæmð ok virðingu ok vígði hann til byskups fjórum nóttum fyrir Máriumessu ina síðari. [...] Hann tók tign ok virðing svá mikla þegar snemmendis byskupsdóms síns, ok svá vildi hverr maðr sitja ok standa sem hann bauð, ungr ok gamall, sæll ok fátækr, konur ok karlar, ok var rétt at segja at hann var bæði konungr ok byskup yfir landinu meðan hann lifði. (Biskupa sögur II, 14–16)

[Gizurr Ísleifsson] was always greatly respected, wherever he went, and he stayed with noble men when he was abroad. Haraldr Sigurðarson was king of Norway at the time, and he said to Gizurr that he seemed to him to be best suited to bearing any title that he would receive. [...] And the Pope sent Gizurr to Archbishop Harðvígr in Magaðaborg in Saxland, and he asked him to consecrate him to bishop, and the archbishop accepted him with much honour and respect, and he consecrated him to bishop four nights before the Feast of the Nativity of Saint Mary. [...] He received such a great honour and respect already at the beginning of his time in office that every person wished to do his bidding, young and old, rich and poor, women and men, and it is right to say that he was both a king and a bishop in his land while he lived.

Apart from the increased focus on ecclesiastical identity, it is this broadening of perspective that is the major sign of development. About a hundred years after the writing of *Íslendingabók*, the theme of the international esteem of significant Icelanders was gradually gaining more importance in the literature. The text's emphasis on the acknowledgement that Gizurr Ísleifsson receives abroad can be perceived as a narrative construction of an acknowledgement of Iceland as a whole. This implies that the Icelanders were becoming increasingly aware of their peripheral position and felt the need to counterbalance their marginality by creating an image of their intellectual, social, and spiritual excellence. It is of interest that the text not only underlines Gizurr's honourable position as an ecclesiastical dignitary, but also attributes royal qualities to him – first when the king of Norway proclaims him worthy of bearing “any title that he would receive” (*hvert tignarnafn sem hann hlyti*), leaving the choice of rank open, and then quite directly, when Gizurr is called a bishop and king in one person. This implies that, apart from being aware of their marginality, Icelanders also regarded the lack of royal rule as a peculiarity that needed an explanation, and perhaps also a compensation (see Ármann Jakobsson 1994b, 33–36; 2007, 119–28).

Also, not surprisingly, as Icelanders had no saintly kings comparable to the Scandinavian national saints, they looked among their bishops to find their own national saints³⁸ and thereby mark their spiritual equality with other European nations (see Long 2017, 74). Three of the Icelandic bishops are depicted as saints in the sources: Þorlákr Þórhallsson (Bishop of Skálholt 1178–1193), who was acknowledged by the Pope as the patron saint of Iceland in 1984; Jón Ögmundarson (Bishop of Hólar 1106–1121), whose canonization by the Alþingi has not been ratified by the Pope; and Guðmundr Arason (Bishop of Hólar 1203–1237), who was not canonized at all and is portrayed in the sagas as “the people's saint” (see McCreesh 2007, 14).

Þorlákr's sanctity was proclaimed shortly after his death. The bishop died in 1193, and already at the Alþingi of 1198, formal permission for veneration of Þorlákr was given. The same year, his relics were translated to Skálholt, and at the Alþingi of 1199, an account of his miracles was read out (Wolf 2008, 246–47). Þorlákr's popularity as a saint in Iceland is confirmed by miracle collections, sagas, and church dedications. The oldest extant miracle collection is from ca. 1220;³⁹ there is a fragment of a Latin *vita* from ca. 1200⁴⁰ and several fragments of Latin liturgical texts from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries (Wolf 2008, 248).

The choice of Jón Ögmundarson as Iceland's second saint may have originated from an initiative by Brandr, Bishop of Hólar in 1163–1201, who probably wished to look for a saint from his own diocese. Jón's relics were translated to Hólar in 1200, and his feast day, April 23, was decreed a Holy Day of Obligation for all Iceland at the Alþingi of 1200. Jón's *vita*, written by Brother Gunnlaugr in Latin and extant only in Old Norse translations, was written to substantiate his claim to sainthood (McCreesh 2007, 16).

³⁸ Scandinavia also had some saintly bishops, but they cannot be regarded as “national saints” – this role was reserved to the saintly kings, such as Óláfr of Norway and Knútr of Denmark, who became significant as identity bearers due to flourishing narrative traditions; the Icelandic saintly bishops' sagas played a comparable role in the construction of identity as the sagas of the Scandinavian saintly kings.

³⁹ AM 645 4to, *Jarteinabók Þorláks byskups in forna* (The Ancient Miracle Collection of Þorlákr); it records 46 miracles that took place in 1198–1200.

⁴⁰ AM 386 4to – this is believed to have been the source for the oldest liturgical texts about Þorlákr and for the oldest saga of Þorlákr.

In the meantime, even before Þorlákr and Jón were declared saints at the Alþingi by the chieftains, the common people in the Northern Quarter were convinced that the priest Guðmundr Arason was a miracle-worker and presumably a saint (McCreesh 2007, 17). At first, his veneration was opposed by the Icelandic Church and the secular leaders alike, but in the fourteenth century, these same authorities aimed at his canonization. The effort brought no results, however, due to a change of policy at the Vatican. In 1234, due to abuse of the system of episcopal canonization and the resulting proliferation of local saints, Pope Gregory IX decided to restrict the power of canonization to the Holy See (McCreesh 2007, 20).

Although neither of these bishops was canonized by the Pope in the Middle Ages, the public belief in their sanctity was decisive for how the memory of their role as bishops and as the people's holy protectors was formulated in oral tradition and re-formulated in written texts. The local saints inspired the production of a new type of literature, the bishops' sagas, which were influenced by the existing Old Norse translations of Latin hagiographies, but they focus on local matters and deal also with issues connected to Icelandic identity.

6. 1. 2. Identity and politics in the sagas of Iceland's first saintly bishops

The hagiographic sagas of the first Icelandic saintly bishops, *Jóns saga helga* and *Þorláks saga helga*, were first written in the early thirteenth century, and they both exist in several redactions from the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. These texts primarily follow the model of the Latin hagiographies of European saints, which had already become known in Iceland and some of them had been translated into Old Norse. They focus on the saints' character and moral virtues, consecration, work for the Church, death, and post-mortem miracles, leaving less space for details of the political circumstances of the bishops' careers than the non-hagiographic texts such as *Árna saga biskups*, and yet more than many of the typical continental hagiographies. They construct their protagonists' significance on two levels: the social level and the spiritual level. The social significance is based on the protagonists' role as ecclesiastical dignitaries who uphold social order and are also involved in political matters, including contact with other lands, primarily Norway. The spiritual significance is based on the portrayal of the bishops' pious life, and first and foremost on the accounts of their post-mortem status as saints. On both these levels, the saintly bishops can play a significant role as identity bearers. In context of the present study, one of the central questions is how the breadth of the horizon within which the social and spiritual significance of the saintly bishops is constructed varies in different sagas in connection with their time of origin. An outline of this development may shed light on some more general tendencies in the medieval Icelanders' definition of their collective identity.

In *Þorláks saga helga* and *Jóns saga helga*, the social significance of the protagonists is of course partly constructed within the borders of Iceland. The texts show how the bishops help the people in their dioceses, take care of the poor, and uphold social order (ÞS 6, 14, 15, 19; JS 8),⁴¹ and how the bishoprics flourish under their leadership both materially and as centres of knowledge and education (ÞS 12, JS 8). As the Church was the only officially established

⁴¹ All references to *Þorláks saga helga* follow the 2002 edition by Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (*Biskupa sögur II*) and refer to the A-redaction unless specified otherwise. All references to *Jóns saga helga* follow the 2003 edition by Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, and Peter Foote (*Biskupa sögur I*), which builds on all three existing redactions. Translations are my own.

institution in Iceland at the time, these matters were doubtlessly of great social significance. Nevertheless, the sagas also give an account of the protagonists' contact with other lands on the social level. Þorlákr is said to have studied in Paris and Lincoln, which must have been a source of great prestige at the time, although the narrative highlights the usefulness of Þorlákr's knowledge instead (ÞS 4). The focus on international esteem is stronger in *Jóns saga*. Jón's glorious ecclesiastical career is first predicted long before his birth when his mother is in Norway and encounters King Óláfr Haraldsson, who expresses his belief that her future child will be blessed with great glory (JS 1). Later, when Jón stays at the Danish royal court with his parents in his childhood, the queen predicts that he will become a bishop (JS 1). Next, the saga gives an account of Jón proving his worth abroad in his youth. He makes a pilgrimage to Rome, and on his way back he visits the king of Denmark, who is attending mass when Jón arrives, but the priest reads so poorly that the congregation almost laughs at him; Jón then reads instead of him, and his performance is so impressive that the king then seats him by his side as a sign of respect (JS 2). Still at the king's court, Jón has a dream in which he sees Christ in a cathedral and King David playing the harp; Jón remembers the melody from the dream and plays it for the king and the courtiers, who are all deeply impressed (JS 3). Finally, during his consecration journey to Archbishop Özurr of Denmark, Jón sings mass so beautifully that the archbishop finds his voice more like the voice of angels than men (JS 7). These episodes emphasize the prestige that the Icelandic clerics receive abroad in a similar manner as the previously discussed scenes in *Hungrvaka*. Here, however, the qualities that are foregrounded are solely clerical: learning in the case of Þorlákr, and ecclesiastical glory and an unusually beautiful reading and singing voice in the case of Jón. The implication might be that the protagonists are equal to clerics from other Christian lands in terms of personal qualities that can bring them prestige and esteem in the ecclesiastical environment.

Nevertheless, even these hagiographic sagas contain episodes that are unexpectedly political, focusing on the relationship between Icelanders and the secular rulers of Norway. In *Jóns saga helga* it is the story of the Icelander Gísl Illugason, who kills a retainer of King Magnús Barefoot in revenge for his father and is captured and imprisoned for the killing. All the Icelanders who are present in Þrándheimr then gather, break into the prison, and set him free. In the earlier redactions of the saga (*Biskupa sögur I*, 188–90), the tale is very brief and straightforward: the king gets angry and forbids the Icelanders to speak to their defence, but he allows the priest Jón Ögmundarson to speak, and Jón manages to bring about a reconciliation. The political aspect is not stronger here than in the sections of *Hungrvaka* that underline the esteem that Gizurr Ísleifsson enjoys while visiting foreign nobles; the texts focus on Jón's eloquence and dignity that persuade the enraged monarch to forgiveness. In the later L-redaction (*Biskupa sögur I*, 319–35), however, the story is longer and more complex, and political elements are intertwined with religious elements in a noteworthy manner – the tale combines an utterly miraculous event with a *mannjafnaðr* between the Icelandic cleric and a Norwegian retainer. Like in the earlier redactions, Gísl kills a retainer, all the present Icelanders free Gísl from prison, and the king is enraged by this. Then, during the lawsuit, a retainer named Sigurðr speaks hatefully of Icelanders and deems one Norwegian worth ten Icelanders:

Nú er slikt ódádaverk mikil ok stórra hefnda fyrir vert, ok eigi er at bættra at tíu sé drepnir af íslenskum monnum fyrir einn norrænan, ok refsir þeim svá sína ofdirfð er þeir tóku mann ór konungs valdi. (Biskupa sögur I, 323)

This is a serious misdeed worthy of a great revenge, and it would not be too great a redress if ten Icelanders were killed for one Norwegian as a punishment for their insolence, as they freed a man who was in the king's power.

The king allows no other Icelander to speak but the priest Jón, and Jón then condemns Sigurðr's speech and relates it to the devil's ill will, but he also reminds the king of the Icelanders' allegiance to him:

[...] *fjándinn mælti fyrir munn þeim er í fyrstu talaði, svá segjandi: „Nú er veginn einn konungs maðr, en makligt væri at drepnir væri tíu íslenzkir fyrir einn norrænan.“ En hugsjó um þat, góðr herra, at svá erum vér íslenzkir menn yðrir þegnar sem þeir er hér eru innan lands. (Biskupa sögur I, 324)*

[...] the devil talked through the mouth of the man who spoke first, saying: “Since one royal retainer has been killed, it would be fitting if ten Icelanders were killed for one Norwegian.” But keep in mind, my lord, that we Icelanders are your subjects just like those who live here in this land.

The latter part of the utterance is conciliatory, and it suggests that it makes no sense to allow the friendly relationship between Icelanders and the king to be disrupted by this individual retainer's evil words. The formulation of the Icelanders' subjection to the king, expressed by the term *þegnar*, is used in a positive context, as it is intended to remind the king of his duties as a protector and righteous judge of his subjects (see Sverrir Jakobsson 2005, 343–45). Icelanders were not the king's subjects at the time of Jón Ögmundarson's life, but they were the king's subjects when the L-redaction was composed. The projection of this situation onto a historical event can be regarded as an acknowledgement and approval of the situation, implying that Icelanders did not oppose royal rule, but they emphasized the idea that they expected the king to be righteous and just in his dealings with them.

In the L-version of *Jóns saga*, however, the king is not persuaded by Jón's speech and has Gísl hanged on the gallows. Jón gives Gísl a cloak that he received as a gift from the king, and the cloak together with Jón's prayers protects Gísl, so he stays alive after three days on the gallows. Jón then has him taken down. The retainer who spoke so hatefully of Icelanders becomes mortally ill, and he asks Jón to heal him by his prayers. Jón does so, but only when the retainer has promised to establish a monastery and donate his property to it. The king is impressed by the miracles and shows Jón deep respect:

Ok er konungr sá Jón prest, rétti hann báðar hendr á móti honum blíðliga ok mælti: „Gakk hér undir borð hjá oss, Jón prestr, inn kærasti Guðs vinr, ok svá vilda ek at þú værir várr inn beztu vinr, því at ek veit fyrir víst at saman ferr Guðs vili ok þinn, ok þat vilda ek gjarna at saman færi okkar vili.“ Inn heilagi Jón svarar þá: „Nú munu þér vilja vel til Íslendinga, kumpána minna, því at þat þykir mér allmiklu varða.“ (Biskupa sögur I, 332–33)

And when the king saw the priest Jón, he stretched out both arms to him in a friendly gesture and said: “Come to our table, priest Jón, the dearest friend of God. I would like you to be our best friend, because I know for sure that God's will and yours are the same, and I would like our will to be the same as well.” Saint Jón answered: “Now you should be kind to Icelanders, my companions, because that is very important to me.”

The king then reconciles with Gísl and offers him the same esteem that the killed retainer enjoyed before: “go to Gjafvaldr's seat and have the same respect from me as he had all his life” (*gakk til sætis Gjafvalds ok haf slika virðing af oss sem hann hafði um alla sína daga, Biskupa sögur I, 333*). This is a conciliatory ending, which focuses on the mutual goodwill and respect between the king and the Icelandic cleric. At the same time, however, the episode shows that the cleric clearly has the upper hand – he makes the proud retainer give up most of his property, and he makes the king almost beg for his friendship. He is helped by miraculous demonstrations of the divine will, which mark his spiritual superiority. This combination of the

focus on reconciliation and on the protagonist's worthiness expresses the medieval Icelanders' wish to overcome their marginality within the Norse social space. In this respect, the narrative resembles the travel stories that have been discussed here.

An episode in *Þorláks saga* shows a similar concern with the Icelanders' position in relation to Norway. It also offers an insight into the broader political context, although it does not give enough information to allow a full understanding of the situation. Þorlákr Þórhallsson is elected bishop of Skálholt in 1174, but before he can undertake his consecration journey, the relationship between Norway and Iceland becomes problematic due to disputes that are mentioned, but not specified, in the saga (ch. 10):

Klængur byskup lá í rekkju með litlum mætti ok Þorlákr var þá í Skálaholti, af því at menn vildu eigi at hann færi útan fyrir sakir ófriðar þess er þá var millum Nóregis ok Íslands, er málum var ósett þeim er gǫrzk höfðu landa í millum af vígum ok fjárupptekðum, ok dvalði hann þat um nokkurra vetra sakir. (Biskupa sögur II, 64)

Bishop Klængur lay in bed with little strength, and Þorlákr was at Skálholt at the time. People did not want him to go abroad because of the hostilities that were taking place between Norway and Iceland while the conflicts that had occurred between the lands due to killings and confiscation of property were unresolved. This delayed him by several winters.

The cause of the tension was probably a dispute between the Norwegian Brennu-Páll and the Icelandic priest Helgi Skaftason. Helgi's farm was burned in 1174; in revenge, Helgi burned the ship of Brennu-Páll, probably a participant in the burning of the farm. The burning of the ship was then avenged by the killing of Helgi in 1175.⁴²

Þorláks saga offers only a vague outline of this situation, and it focuses on Þorlákr's firm and fearless approach to the matter. In the summer of 1177, Þorlákr insists on undertaking the consecration journey despite the difficulties, because he cannot bear the idea of Skálholt lacking a bishop after his predecessor's death (ch. 10). When Þorlákr arrives in Norway, King Magnús Erlingsson refuses to give consent to his consecration at first, although Þorlákr is clearly not personally involved in the conflict (ch. 11). The text does not explain King Magnús' hostility to Þorlákr; scholars believe that the reason may have been Þorlákr's connection to the Oddaverjar, who were probably involved in the conflict (Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 153–54; Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 67–68). Instead of discussing the causes of the enmity, which were

⁴² A brief account of the conflict is found in *Prestssaga Guðmundar Arasonar* (chs. 4–5):

Veginn Einarr Grímsson ok brenndr bær Helga Skaftasonar í Saurbæ á Kjalarnesi. [...] Önnur missiri eftir var veginn Helgi Skaftason á alþingi fyrir þat, er hann brenndi kaupskip fyrir Páli Austmanni, er kallaðr var Brennu-Páll. En eftir vígit mælti Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson ok fekk sjálfðæmi at Austmönnum, ok fekk hann af því virðing mikla. (Sturlunga saga I, 124–25)

Einarr Grímsson was killed and Helgi Skaftason's farm at Saurbæ on Kjalarnes was burned down. [...] About half a year after that, Helgi Skaftason was killed at the assembly because he had burned down the merchant ship belonging to Páll the Norwegian, who was called Brennu-Páll. Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson prosecuted the case of the killing and received self-judgement from the Norwegians, which brought him much respect.

The beginning of this conflict may be referred to in Archbishop Eysteinn's letter to the Icelanders from 1273. If the dating of the events is correct, the letter was written before the events depicted in *Prestssaga*, which implies that the Icelanders had mistreated the Norwegians in some way before the conflict between Helgi and Brennu-Páll broke out; the letter offers no further details:

Svá ok þat sem þér hafit afgert við konunginn ok við landslýð hans, þá leiðréttisk þat við hann, þótt margir verði við bótina skipask, þar sem fáir hafa misgert. (DI I, 223)

And your misdeeds against the king and his people must be redressed, even if many people must contribute to the compensation, although few people have committed the misdeed.

probably known to the intended audience, the text again focuses on Þorlákr's mental strength, and it also foregrounds the reconciliation that was brought about by Archbishop Eysteinn:

Þá er Þorlákr electus kom á fund Eysteins erkibyskups þá tók hann við honum forkunnar vel, ok lét hann þat brátt vitat vera at hann vildi allt leggja þat bliðliga til af sinni hendi er hann þóttisk skyldr til, en hann vildi honum eigi elligar byskupstign gefa nema samþykki konungs væri til. Þeir hófðu þá ríki yfir Nóregi feðgar, Magnús konungr and Erlingr jarl, faðir hans, ok tóku þeir þungliga öllu Þorláks máli, ok kómu þaðan hót fyrir hægendu at hvárki myndi óhætt fé né mǫnnum. En Þorlákr lét sér lítit um þat finnask ok sýndi þar sinn alhuga vera allan sem Davíð kennir í psaltara, at betra sé Guði at treystask en hófðingjum, ok lét hann þetta af því hjá sér líða. En erkibyskup þóttisk sitja í miklum vanda er hann vildi hvártveggja elska, ok vildi hann þess gæta er Páll postoli kennir í sínum pistli: „Óttizk þér Guð,“ segir hann, „en vegsamið konung.“ Mátti þat ok á öllu sjá at hann vildi hér hvárstveggja vandliga gæta í þeirra máli. Bar erkibyskup þá boð á millum þeira ok aðrir góðgjarnir menn, ok kom þar at konungrinn ok jarlinn samþykkðu því at Þorlákr tæki byskupsvígslu, ok gerðisk þá vingunarsviþr þeira á milli, ok gáfusk þeir gjöfum áðr þeir skildu. [...] En er Þorlákr byskup var skiliðr at samvistu viðr erkibyskup þá spurðu þeir byskuparnir hversu honum hefði þokkazk Þorlákr byskup. Hann sagði svá at hann þóttisk óngan byskup þann hafa vígt er honum þótti jafn gǫrla með sér hafa alla þá mannkosti er byskupum er skylt at hafa [...] „Má ek yðr svá nokkut segja helzt hve vitrligir mér hafa virzk hans hættir,“ sagði erkibyskup, „at ek munda þvílíkt kjósa mitt lífsdægr if efstu sem ek sá hans hvert.“ (Biskupa sögur II, 64–66)

When the bishop elect Þorlákr met Archbishop Eysteinn, he gave him a very warm welcome and immediately let him know that he would gladly let him have everything that he felt obliged to provide him with, but he would not consecrate him unless the king consented to it. Norway was at the time ruled by King Magnús and his father Jarl Erlingr, and they showed unwillingness in Þorlákr's matter, and threats came from them instead of favour, that neither property nor people would stay safe. But Þorlákr was little affected by it, in which he showed his steadfastness, like when David teaches us in his psalm that it is better to trust in God than to put confidence in princes, and for his reason he did not let this affect him. But the archbishop found himself in a great difficulty because he wished to love both parties, and he wanted to follow what the apostle Paul teaches us in his epistle: "Fear God," he says, "and honour the king." It was obvious from all his acts that he wished to carefully follow both in this matter. The archbishop then mediated between them together with other good-willed people, and it came about that the king and the jarl consented to Þorlákr's consecration, and they appeared to be friends from then on, and they exchanged gifts before they parted. [...] And when Bishop Þorlákr had left the archbishop's company, the other bishops asked how he had felt about Bishop Þorlákr. He said he felt that he had never consecrated a bishop who possessed equally great virtues that befit bishops [...] "The best way to express how wise I find his behaviour" said the archbishop, "is that I would choose the last day of my life to be like I saw each of his days to be."

This focus on the final reconciliation underlines the overall message of the episode. The whole episode follows the structure of the typical travel story – the Icelander faces the king's distrust when he first arrives at the Norwegian royal court, but he overcomes the alienation with the help of a mediator due to his own intelligence and decisiveness, and his relationship with the king finally turns into mutual respect; he also receives a prestigious position and is praised for his qualities. The well-known narrative type of the travel story implies a generally positive attitude to the relationship between Iceland and Norway despite an awareness of possible disagreements. The two biblical quotations, "*betra sé Guði at treystask en hófðingjum*" and "*óttizk þér Guð, en vegsamið konung*", seem to contradict each other, but in their respective contexts, they make sense together. The former is linked to Þorlákr's steadfastness in a situation when the monarchs disrupt the consecration process. It does not express a rejection of royal rule, but rather the idea that even kings can make bad decisions concerning the Church, but that patience and determination will eventually lead to a satisfactory solution with the help of God. The latter is connected to the reconciliation mediated by the archbishop, and in this context, it underlines the positive relationship between Icelanders and the Norwegian authorities on the one hand, and between secular and ecclesiastical power on the other hand, despite inevitable temporary discord.

These episodes show that *Jóns saga helga* and *Þorláks saga helga*, despite their hagiographic focus, do not ignore the theme of Iceland's relationship to a broader social space. The Icelandic saintly bishops are presented in situations in which they face conflicts with Norwegian monarchs, but they eventually reach a satisfactory reconciliation and prove their mental strength or their spiritual worthiness, manifested in a divine intervention. In this context, the saintly bishops play a significant role as identity bearers, in a similar manner as the protagonists of the secular travel stories. The narratives reflect the Icelanders' inevitably ambiguous relationship to Norway – they acknowledged the political and cultural bonds between the two lands, but they were aware of their peripheral position and felt the need to subvert their marginality by the narrative construction of their spiritual or intellectual superiority. That way, they constantly negotiated their equality within the Norse social space.

That does not, however, automatically mean that the narratives construct the cultural myth of Icelandic national saints. Significantly, the episodes dealing with contact with other lands define the significance of the bishops on the social, rather than spiritual level. Their significance on the spiritual level is constructed in most of the other chapters of the sagas, and the answer to the question of whether they are portrayed as national saints must be sought there. We must ask whether the texts emphasize the saints' position as spiritual protectors of the whole land and whether they compare their spiritual significance to that of saints from other lands. And the answer is that it is not the case. In constructing the saintly bishops' spiritual significance in the descriptions of their earthly lives, the sagas highlight their unusually virtuous behaviour, which can serve as a model to pious individuals who wish to follow their example. Such focus on individual morals implies that the sagas do not foreground the spiritual worthiness of Iceland as a whole, but rather the question of individual salvation. Similarly, the miracles that construct the bishops' post-mortem spiritual significance as saints are typically described as beneficial only to individuals or small groups. A few scarce exceptions are accounts of the weather and crops miraculously improving in all Iceland (JS 13, 15, 33, 35), but this does not seem to be enough to define the saint as a protector of the whole land on the spiritual level, nor do these episodes contain formulations that would encourage such an interpretation.

Another element of the cultural myth of the “national saint” is that the text should show how foreigners are convinced by miraculous occurrences to acknowledge the Icelandic bishop's sanctity. There are no such scenes in *Þorláks saga*; the final chapter of the A-redaction only briefly mentions that Þorlákr is venerated also abroad and that offerings are sent to Skálholt “mostly from Norway, much from England, Sweden, Denmark, Gautland, Gotland, Scotland, Orkney, the Faroes, Caithness, Shetland, Greenland, but mostly from within the land” (*mest ór Nóregi, mikit af Englandi, Svíþjóð, Danmörk, Gautlandi, Gotlandi, Skotlandi, Orkneyjum, Færeyjum, Katanesi, Hjaltlandi, Grænlandi, en mest innan lands, Biskupa sögur II*, 99). This brief sentence in the saga lacks the context that would construct the cultural myth of a “national saint”. The H-redaction of *Jóns saga* contains an episode in which a merchant ship is lost in fog near Iceland and an Icelander on board suggests invoking Saint Jón, but the weather is not improved immediately, so the merchants – probably Norwegians, called “*Austmenn*” in the text – challenge the sanctity of Bishop Jón (*Þá tóku Austmenn at ámæla Jóni byskupi ok sögðu hann eigi helgan vera, Biskupa sögur I*, 310). At that moment, the fog subsides, and wind starts blowing and brings the ship to land, so all the merchants praise Saint Jón (JS 64F). There is, however, only one such scene in the saga. Furthermore, the saga also contains a scene in which

an Icelandic priest doubts Jón's sanctity (JS 61), so the text does not ascribe such doubts specifically to foreigners, but rather associates them with the fact that Jón's sanctity was newly discovered and not yet fully established.

The sagas do not directly compare their protagonists to foreign saints either. References to international saints appear frequently in biblical quotations that express the idea that the bishops follow the example of the apostles. Famous foreign saints, such as Saint Martin, are also occasionally referred to as examples of perfect holiness (ÞS 17; JS 61). Nevertheless, the texts do not directly express the idea that the spiritual worthiness of a land is measured by the glory of its saints. Interestingly, in the "competition" for Bishop Jón's status as a saint in *Jóns saga*, his "rival" is not any foreign saint, but Saint Þorlákr. The "rivalry" is most striking in an episode in which people attempt to heal a man's illness with water consecrated by Saint Þorlákr, but it does not help until the man invokes Saint Jón; then he is healed with the help of the invocation and of the consecrated water (JS 29). This scene almost implies that Jón is a more powerful saint than Þorlákr, albeit without challenging Þorlákr's sanctity. Other scenes rather show Þorlákr directly promoting Jón's sanctity and revealing it to the people. In one such episode, a sick woman's husband invokes Saint Þorlákr, but the saint reveals himself to a girl in a vision, saying that there are other saints who should be invoked; the woman then invokes Saint Jón and is healed (JS 25). In another episode, Saint Þorlákr appears to a woman in a vision to tell her that it was not him but his "brother" Saint Jón who helped her in a dangerous situation (JS 63). The H-redaction adds here that Þorlákr says to the woman that Jón "performs all his miracles more secretly, but his merit in God's eyes is nevertheless no lower than mine" (*leynisk meirr at öllum jarsteinum, ok er hann þó hvergi lægri at verðleikum við Guð en ek, Bikupa sögur I*, 304). This formulation directly expresses the idea of Jón's equality to Þorlákr, which is otherwise indirectly but clearly implied in the episodes. The presence of this idea in the saga suggests that the spiritual significance of the two saints was a subject of debate in Iceland, and it makes sense in context of what we know about the history of their veneration. It is surely not a coincidence that Jón's relics were translated two years after Þorlákr's, although Jón had lived and died about seven decades before Þorlákr. There is little doubt that the effort to introduce the veneration of Jón was motivated by the Hólar diocese's need to prove its spiritual equality with the older, better established Skálholt diocese, which could regard Þorlákr as "its own" saint. As this struggle for an acknowledgement of equality took place within the borders of Iceland, the international status of the Icelandic saints was not a central theme in the discussion about Þorlákr's and Jón's spiritual significance at the time.

All the aspects that have been discussed here show that the saintly bishops' significance on the spiritual level is constructed in a mental framework centred on Iceland in these texts. This implies that the sense of identity formed by these texts is mainly constructed within the borders of Iceland. Iceland's 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.

6. 1. 3. Saint Þorlákr in *Árna saga* and the cultural myth of the “national saint”

As has been mentioned here, *Árna saga biskups* deals mainly with the dispute between the secular and ecclesiastical power about the ownership of church property. There is little doubt that these events are overall described accurately in the saga, but there is one narrative device that seems to have been deliberately employed for expressing a bias. This narrative device is the frequent construction of parallels between Bishop Árni and Saint Þorlákr. Bishop Árni is compared especially to the depiction of Saint Þorlákr in the so-called *Oddaverja þáttr*, a part of the B-redaction of *Þorláks saga*.

Oddaverja þáttr is a collection of episodes dealing with Bishop Þorlákr’s conflicts with the secular chieftains. It focuses on power struggles and political issues, but it is also strongly hagiographic. The text explicitly refers to miracles when Þorlákr is repeatedly protected from violent assaults or his opponents are punished by circumstances that the narrative interprets as divine interventions. The hagiographic tendency is further supported by parallels to *Ambrósíus saga*; three of the six parallels between Þorlákr and Ambrose in the B-redaction of *Þorláks saga* are in *Oddaverja þáttr*. Ambrose was a saintly bishop who firmly opposed secular power, so these parallels underline both Þorlákr’s sanctity and his conflict with the chieftains, which is with all probability strongly exaggerated in the *þáttr* (see Ármann Jakobsson and Ásdís Egilsdóttir 1999, 96–99; Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 68–72).

The author of *Árna saga* creates the impression that Árni’s actions are modelled on Þorlákr’s life, but it is in fact this specific account of Þorlákr’s actions, *Oddaverja þáttr*, that is probably modelled on Árni’s actions. *Oddaverja þáttr* is not in the older A-redaction of *Þorláks saga*, it is an addition in the B-redaction, which was written at the time of Bishop Árni. *Oddaverja þáttr* was with all probability written for the purpose of supporting Bishop Árni’s argumentation in the *staðamál* by a reference to the authority of Iceland’s first and most prominent saint (see Ármann Jakobsson and Ásdís Egilsdóttir 1999, 92–99; Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 112–23; Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 75–77). That is also implied in the prologue of the B-redaction, where it is stated that the purpose of the saga is to serve as an example to be followed, and that the reason for the re-writing is the need for emphasizing the hardships that Þorlákr suffered (*Biskupa sögur II*, 143–44). That means that this portrayal of Þorlákr is constructed as a model for Árni, with a focus on the alleged similarity of the problems that Árni and Þorlákr faced. The parallels between Árni and Þorlákr that are constructed in this way are then purposefully used in *Árna saga* as a means of interpretation and evaluation.

The first parallel concerns the conflict between the bishop and the secular owner of Oddastaðr. According to *Árna saga* (ch. 9), Bishop Árni fails to gain Oddastaðr, gives up, and returns home. Þorlákr is depicted in the same situation in *Oddaverja þáttr* (ÞS-B ch. 22), but it is likely that the account of Þorlákr’s action is in fact modelled on Árni’s action. The parallel is emphasized by a direct reference to Þorlákr’s argument with another powerful chieftain, Sigurðr Ormsson of Svínafell, in *Árna saga*; this argument is also described in *Oddaverja þáttr*:

Oddaverja þáttr (ÞS-B ch. 21): *Þá er Þorlákr byskup inn helgi hafði setit einn vetr at stóli sínum, byrjaði hann sína yfirferð um sumarit eptir til Austfjarða. [...] En sakir þess at bóndi [Sigurðr Ormsson] vildi þar láta kirkju vígja þá kallaði byskup hann til tals við sik um morgininn eptir ok bar fram boðskap herra Eysteins erkibyskups, þann sem hann bauð honum undir sitt vald at heimta allar kirkjur ok kirknafé í sínu byskupsdæmi. [...] Leið þá á daginn svá at bóndi sá at kirkjuvígslan myndi engi verða nema hann léti af sínu máli. Snøri hann nú á svinn ráðinu ok leggr máldaga kirkjunnar ok sjálfa hana í vald byskups. Vígði hann þá kirkjuna ok sǫng messu. Ok eptir*

messuna skipaði hann Sigurði staðinn í lén um stundar sakir, ok hann jár honum at halda. [...] En þó at margir væri tregir til at já undan sér sínar erfðir þá kom þó í einn stað niðr at Þorlákr byskup fékk forræði á öllum stöðum fyrir austan Hjörleifshöfða utan at Þvátta ok Hallormsstöðum, ok þat hefir þar haldizk jafnan síðan. (Biskupa sögur II, 164–65)

When Bishop Saint Þorlákr had been in office one winter, he started his visitation to the Eastfjords the next summer. [...] But because the landowner [Sigurðr Ormsson] wanted to have a church consecrated there, the bishop asked him to talk with him the next morning. He presented the message of Archbishop Eysteinn, in which the archbishop asked Þorlákr to gain power over all the churches and church property in his diocese. [...] In the course of the day, the landowner understood that the church would not be consecrated unless he gave up his case, so he made the wise decision to give the charter of endowment and the church itself in the bishop's power. Then the bishop consecrated the church and sang mass. And after the mass, he gave the *staðr* to Sigurðr as a fief for the time being, and Sigurðr consented to accept it. [...] And although many were reluctant to consent to give up their hereditary property, it finally came about that Bishop Þorlákr gained control of all the *staðir* east of Hjörleifshöfði, except for Þvátta and Hallormsstaðir, and it has been so ever since.

Árna saga (ch. 12): *Þat sumar reið Árni byskup fyrir norðan Sólheimajökul ok rak byskupligt embætti um Austfirðingaffjórðung, ok eptir tilskipan herra Jóns erkibyskups hóf hann tilkall á alla staði, þá sem þar vóru. En þótt þat yrði með nokkurum mótmælum af þeira hendi sem heldu þess kyns eignir fekk hann vald yfir flestum öllum stöðum utan Þvátta ok Hallormsstöðum. Gengu því Austfirðingar léttligar at þessu en aðrir menn at hinn sæli Þorlákr með ráði Eysteinnis erkibyskups hóf þat sama tilkall at Svínafelli við Sigurð Ormsson, ok hann jáði byskupi þeiri kyrkjueign; vóru ok eptir þessu dæmi velflestir staðir í hans vald gefnir í Austfirðingaffjórðungi. En eptir kirkjuvigslu ok messu skipaði byskup Sigurði staðinn í lén, ok af þessu tiltæki byskups hófz sá vandi at höfðingjar í Austfjörðum skipuðu staði [með ráði] byskupa allt til Árna byskups. (Biskupa sögur III, 20–21)*

That summer, Bishop Árni rode north of Sólheimajökull to perform his official duties in the Eastern Quarter, and upon Archbishop Jón's orders, he claimed all the *staðir* that were there. And despite some protests from those who held such property, he gained control of almost all *staðir* except Þvátta and Hallormsstaðir. The Easterners accepted this more easily than others because Saint Þorlákr had upon Archbishop Eysteinn's orders claimed Svínafell from Sigurðr Ormsson in the same way, and Sigurðr had given the church property to the bishop, and after his example, most of the *staðir* in the Eastern Quarter had been given under the bishop's control. And after the consecration and the mass, the bishop gave the *staðr* to Sigurðr as a fief, and from this achievement of the bishop there originated the custom that the chieftains in the Eastfjords submitted their *staðir* under the bishops' control up to Árni's time.

The parallels are so striking that there is little doubt that they were created intentionally. It is noteworthy that Árni is said to have gained control of churches in the same area as Þorlákr, with the exception of the same two churches. Moreover, the fact that a church was under Þorlákr's control in his days is mentioned several more times in *Árna saga* as a part of Árni's argumentation, and Þorlákr is referred to as “blessed” or “holy” (*hinn sæli*) in these cases:

Árna saga (ch. 113): *Hann [Eiríkr Marðarson] tók Holtskirkju í Önundarfirði, ónýtandi skipun Árna byskups ok vitni þeira er með eiðum sönnuðu at þessi kirkja var á dögum Hákonar konungs ok Sigurðar erkibyskups undir valdi Skálaholtsbyskups, ok svá sögðu þeim þeira fyrirmenn at hún var á dögum hins sæla Þorláks byskups undir hans skipan. (Biskupa sögur III, 160)*

He [Eiríkr Marðarson] took the church at Holt in Önundarfjörðr, disregarding Bishop Árni's decision and the testimony of those who confirmed by oath that this church had been under the Skálholt bishop's control in the days of King Hákon and Archbishop Sigurðr, and that their ancestors told them that in the days of the blessed Bishop Þorlákr it had been under his control.

Árna saga (ch. 120): *Hann [Hrafn Oddsson] skyldaði ok til sóknarmenn at taka Holtstað í Önundarfirði móti eiðum prestanna Steinþórs, Árna, Finns, Snorra, Jóns, er þann stað sóru jafnan frá dögum hins sæla Þorláks byskups hafa undir Skálaholtsbyskupi verit, til þess er Hrafn Oddsson tók hann á dögum Árna byskups. (Biskupa sögur III, 169)*

He [Hrafn Oddsson] also commanded the officials to take the church at Holt in Önundarfjörðr despite the oaths of the priests Steinþór, Árni, Finn, Snorri, and Jón, who swore that the church had always been under the Skálholt bishop's control since the days of the blessed Bishop Þorlákr until Hrafn Oddsson took it in the days of Bishop Árni.

Þorlákr's sanctity is clearly intended to justify Árne's claim and to lend more authority to his action. This idea is further supported by the similarity of the argumentation used in *Árna saga* and *Oddaverja þáttur* – both texts refer to the apostles and the Pope as sources of the bishops' authority:

Oddaverja þáttur (Þs-B ch. 21): *Byskup sagði at skipan sjálfra postolanna gaf honum vald yfir öllum Guðs eignum fyrir útan alla grein. „Heilagir feðr kristinnar ok páfarnir, postolanna eptirkomendr, hafa þetta sama boðit ok skipat í kirkjunnar lögum um alla kristnina. [...]“* (*Biskupa sögur II*, 164)

The bishop said that the ordinance of the apostles themselves gave him power over all God's property without any distinction. "The holy fathers of the Church, and the Popes, the successors of the apostles, have determined and ordained the same throughout all Christendom in the laws of the Church."

Árna saga (ch. 80): *[...] vóru enn sumir menn hærri vizku, þeir sem kunnu sjá ok lesit höfðu lögtekna skipan postulanna, páfanna ok kennara kristinnar, at allt þat sem guði var gefit ok helgat eptir sameiginligum lögum á at vera undir vernd ok valdi, skipan ok forsjá byskupa ok lærðra manna [...]* (*Biskupa sögur III*, 117)

[...] yet there were some people of higher wisdom, who could understand and had read the lawful decision of the apostles, Popes and Church Fathers that all that was given to God and consecrated according to the common law must be under the protection and control and in the power of the bishops and clerics [...]

Árna saga (ch. 86): *Því bauð ek þeim prestum sem af kirkjum gengu at segja at þeir léti þær utan sína vild, at páfinn, sá sem sitr í Guðs sæti, segir klerkum öll kirkna forráð ok honum á öll kristni með réttu at hlýða.* (*Biskupa sögur III*, 128–29)

I asked the priests who gave up their churches to say that they gave them up against their will, because the Pope, who sits in God's seat, gives all control of churches to clerics, and the Pope must be lawfully obeyed by all Christendom.

Bishop Árne thus uses a twofold argumentation – the authority of the apostles and the Pope, and the authority of the Icelandic saintly bishop Þorlákr, who is presented as Árne's role model. Þorlákr is portrayed as a significant local historical personage, whose example can be followed by his successors, but also as a saint, whose holiness is timeless and universal. That means that his authority is not only local and historical, but it is validated by an element of eternity.

The obvious purpose of the text's references to Saint Þorlákr is to justify Bishop Árne's action, but their meaning may also go beyond the narrow context of the *staðamál* and be connected to the broader perception of Icelandic identity. At the time of Bishop Árne, the Norwegian influence in Iceland became much more direct than before, both in secular and ecclesiastical politics. There is nothing in the sources to suggest that Icelanders opposed the Norwegian influence; Bishop Árne even repeatedly turned to the king and to the archbishop for support in his disputes with the Icelandic secular leaders. Nevertheless, it is likely that Icelanders needed to redefine their identity in light of their present situation. The union with Norway connected Iceland more directly to the rest of the Christian world, which probably increased the Icelanders' need to negotiate their position of equality within the social space of the Christian world despite their geographic and economic marginality.

Medieval Icelanders always defined their identity by reference to their own history. This has been well known in the case of secular history, as the numerous narratives of the settlement of Iceland and of the Saga Age have long been perceived as means of constructing identity. Here it has been shown that the same principles also applied to the construction of the memory of the saintly bishops. Saint Þorlákr was regarded not only as an embodiment of the Church's struggle for independence from secular power, but also of Iceland's place in the history of Christianity. In this sense, the portrayal of Saint Þorlákr in *Árna saga* can be interpreted as a part of the society's endeavour to redefine its identity in light of its current relationship with

the Norwegian ecclesiastical and royal power. By referring to an Icelandic saint as a source of authority, the saga makes a statement about Iceland as a land with a significant Christian history of its own. It creates the cultural myth of the Icelandic “national saint”, which connects Iceland’s history to the history of the Christian world. This discourse integrates Iceland into the social space of the Christian world and is a declaration of Iceland’s equality within this social space.

6. 1. 4. Icelandic saints in *Lárentíus saga*

The cultural myth of the Icelandic “national saint” is established in *Árna saga*, but there is no direct comparison between Iceland and other lands in terms of their spiritual worthiness measured by the glory of their saints. This is the next step of the development, which is reflected in *Lárentíus saga*, a text that is several decades younger than *Árna saga*, dealing with the years 1267–1331 and written around 1346. In *Lárentíus saga*, Icelandic saints are primarily depicted in scenes of confrontation between Icelandic clerics and Norwegians. The confrontation is not directly hostile, but just like the Norwegians challenge the Icelanders’ intellectual skills in the travel stories, here they challenge the Icelandic holy bishops’ genuine sanctity, and thus also Iceland’s spiritual equality to other lands. The holy bishops’ sanctity is then proven by miraculous signs, and this indirectly confirms the spiritual worthiness of Iceland.

In chapter 6, King Eiríkr Magnússon of Norway invokes various saints to get good wind for sailing. A priest recommends him to invoke Saint Jón of Hólar, and the king replies that he hopes Jón is not as half-hearted (*seinlátr*) as Icelanders usually are. He does not reject the saint entirely, but he doubts his power because he is sceptical about the abilities of Icelanders in general. Then he invokes Saint Jón anyway, gets good wind, and sends precious cloth to the saint. The effect of the invocation proves the saint’s power, and thus indirectly the qualities of Icelanders as a whole.

A more dramatic conflict occurs in an episode about a Norwegian monk who challenges Saint Þorlákr’s sanctity, thus undermining the validity of Iceland’s cultural memory, and is miraculously punished (ch. 18A). In Iceland, Lárentíus asks the monk Björn to prepare a sermon for the mass of Saint Þorlákr, but Björn criticizes Icelanders for the veneration of a saint who is not acknowledged by the archbishop:

Undarligir menn eru þér Íslendingar, því at þér kallið þá marga heilaga menn sem hér hafa vaxit upp hjá yðr ok í öðrum löndum vita menn engin skyn á, því er mikil dirfð yðar Íslendinga at þér haldið þennan mann helgan sem erkibyskupsstóllin í Niðarósi heldr enga minning af. (Biskupa sögur III, 269)

You Icelanders are strange people when you regard many men who grew up here in your land as saints, although people in other lands have no idea about them. Great is the impudence of you Icelanders when you venerate as a saint this man, who is not commemorated by the archbishopric of Niðarós.

The formulations in the speech imply that the Norwegian monk is aware of the Icelanders’ effort to consciously improve their status by referring to their native saints, and that by opposing this, he propagates the Norwegians’ superiority. He wants to forbid the veneration of Þorlákr until it is acknowledged (*lögtekít*) by the archbishop, but Lárentíus asks him to refrain from such silliness (*fólkska*) because everybody in Iceland and elsewhere knows that Þorlákr is a saint, performs miracles, and will punish Björn for his lack of belief. They do not reach any agreement, and Björn decides to eat meat on Þorlákr’s holiday. Before the evening mass, Björn

calls Lárentíus to himself because he has suddenly become ill and feels death approaching. Lárentíus replies that it is not surprising because Björn has doubted the sanctity of Þorlákr, who is merciful to the needy, but also vengeful to those who dishonour him. Lárentíus tells Björn a story of a foolish man (*dári*) in England who ridiculed Þorlákr:

At því gafz einum dára í Englandi at hann þóttiz gjöra til háðungar ok spotts viðr hinn heilaga Þorlák byskup takandi eitt mörbjúga, fram berandi fyrir líkneski Þorláks byskups þessum orðum talandi: „Viltú, mörlandi, því at þú ert utan af Íslandi?“ (Biskupa sögur III, 271–72)

One foolish man in England turned to dishonouring and ridiculing the saintly Bishop Þorlákr by taking a suet-sausage and bringing it to a statue of Bishop Þorlákr with these words: “Do you want this, suet-lander,⁴³ because you come from Iceland?”

The saint punished this Englishman by making him unable to move his hand until he repented. The monk Björn also repents and acknowledges Þorlákr’s sanctity, and the illness subsides immediately. The next day, Björn preaches about Þorlákr and tells the truth about what happened to him, so the story brings the saint fame, praise, and glory (*frægð, lof ok dýrð*).

This scene is only loosely connected to the saga’s main storyline, so its function is clearly ideological. The effect of the episode is also underlined by the extraordinary structural pattern of a story within a story. Þorlákr is presented as a national saint of Iceland, and as such, he is directly linked to Icelandic identity, just like in *Árna saga*. The difference is that in *Lárentíus saga*, the authority of the saint serves as a proof of Iceland’s worthiness in a direct confrontation with a Norwegian cleric. The Icelander in the story is not opposed to integration into the broader social space of the Christian world, he even desires such an integration, but he must face the Norwegian’s reluctance to acknowledge Iceland’s equality. The Icelander is, however, aided by a divine intervention, and the ending is conciliatory.

At the same time, *Lárentíus saga* also uses the motif of Icelandic saints to create a positive impression of Norwegians who appreciate them. The Norwegian-born Bishop Auðunn Þorbergsson of Hólar looks for Guðmundr Arason’s relics in order to support his cult (ch. 29A); when the relics are found, they are placed in a shrine in the church, and this is followed by pilgrimages, veneration, and miracles (ch. 30A). Bishop Auðunn also introduces the day of the translation of Saint Jón’s relics as an official holiday in Iceland (ch. 30A). The saga praises Auðunn, stating that “due to such acts, one could recognize that Bishop Auðunn was a distinguished leader” (*mátti af slíkum hlutum merkja at Auðun byskup var mikilsháttar höfðingi, Biskupa sögur III, 326*). Later, Bishop Auðunn prays to Saint Jón for an improvement of the weather, promising to make him a statue, and the weather improves immediately (ch. 33A).

These scenes show that *Lárentíus saga* does not reflect a predominantly negative attitude to Norwegians. Instead, it emphasizes Iceland’s spiritual equality, which is embodied by the Icelandic saints. Norwegians who are willing to acknowledge the saints, and thus also the equality of Icelanders, are shown in a positive light in the saga. Others are convinced by miraculous signs, so their scepticism subsides, and the ending of the confrontation is conciliatory. Icelandic identity is thus not based on an opposition to Norway, but rather on the need to constantly negotiate and confirm the position of Icelanders within the Norwegian kingdom and within the Christian world. This probably reflects the Icelanders’ increased

⁴³ *Mörlandi*, the “suet-lander” or suet eater, is a deprecating term for medieval Icelanders used by foreigners, who regarded the Icelanders’ peculiar diet as a sign of their poverty and cultural inferiority.

awareness of their marginality in the realm into which they were already politically integrated, but the process of social and cultural integration was still far from completed.

6. 1. 5. Icelandic saints in *Guðmundar sögur biskups*

The cultural myth of the “national saint” underwent a further development in *Guðmundar sögur biskups*, which deal with older events than *Árna saga* and *Lárentíus saga*, but the A-redaction was composed around the same time or slightly later than *Árna saga*,⁴⁴ and the D-redaction was probably composed around the same time as *Lárentíus saga*, but it reflects the next stage of the development of the perception of “national saints”. There are subtle but significant differences between the A-redaction and the D-redaction, which perfectly illustrate the changing emphases in the construction of identity. While the A-redaction continues to emphasize Iceland’s spiritual equality with Norway, the D-redaction focuses more on Iceland’s position within the broader Christian world.

There is only one brief episode of a direct confrontation between the Icelandic bishop and the Norwegian archbishop in the D-redaction (ch. 48).⁴⁵ Bishop Guðmundr, during the first of his two longer stays in Niðarós, asks the archbishop for permission to sing mass for Saint Þorlákr according to Icelandic custom (*gengr herra Guðmundr til herra erkibyskups ok spyrr, ef hann vill orlofa, at hann syngi sælum Þorláki eftir íslenzkum vana, Byskupa sögur III: Hólabyskupar*, 326). The archbishop refuses, saying that he would not allow Guðmundr to break the laws in Norway, whatever he might do in Iceland (*Þat lofast eigi at þér brjótið lög á oss hér í Noregi, hversu sem þér gerit, herra, á Íslandi, Byskupa sögur III: Hólabyskupar*, 327). The archbishop claims the right to decide about the veneration of saints in his diocese, and he insists that the veneration of any saint who has not been approved by him is against the law (see Sigurdson 2011, 175–76). Guðmundr then decides to sing All Saints’ mass on Þorlákr’s day, so that he does not break the archbishop’s law, but he nevertheless praises Þorlákr. The archbishop admits that it is a clever solution and that Guðmundr must be an excellent man. No miracles are involved in this episode, but there is an obvious element of competition between the “official” Norwegian power and the Icelander’s wits. Guðmundr formally obeys the archbishop, but at the same time, he smartly outwits him. This can be interpreted as another example of the Icelanders’ ambiguous attitude to the Norwegian power: they do not oppose it, but they feel the need to constantly negotiate their position.

Nevertheless, the episode in *Guðmundar sögur* that is most significant in terms of identity – Rannveig’s vision of the Otherworld⁴⁶ – presents a more complex view of Iceland’s relationship to the more central parts of the Christian world, with a focus on the spiritual level of this relationship. The form of a vision is strongly associated with a religious focus, and so is the emphasis on the afterlife and on the punishment of sinners. The main theme of the episode,

⁴⁴ That means that it was composed over a hundred years after the writing of the first sagas of the other two Icelandic saints. The reason for the delay was that the veneration of Guðmundr was opposed by the Icelandic Church at first.

⁴⁵ All references to the D-redaction of *Guðmundar saga* are based on the 1948 edition by Guðni Jónsson (*Byskupa sögur III: Hólabyskupar*). Translations are my own.

⁴⁶ The scene is found in both the A-redaction and the D-redaction (A chs. 58–59, *Guðmundar sögur biskups I*, 92–99; D ch. 4, *Byskupa sögur III: Hólabyskupar*, 167–71).

however, is the relationship between Iceland, Norway, and the rest of the world, so the saints play an important role in matters related to identity.

The protagonist Rannveig experiences a vision of Hell, is horrified by what she sees there, and turns to invoking saints – the Virgin Mary, the apostle Peter, and the Norway-related saints Óláfr, Magnús, and Hallvarðr.⁴⁷ The text explains that she chooses these saints “because the people of the land invoked them much at the time” (*því at menn hétu þá mjök á þá hér á landi, Guðmundar sögur biskups I, 95*). These three saints save her from the flames of Hell. In the A-redaction, Saint Óláfr then praises Iceland for having many saints, but at the same time, he also points out that he and the other Norwegian saints uphold Iceland together with the native saints (*bænir þeirra ok várar*).⁴⁸

„[...] skaltu ná at sjá verðleik heilagra manna, er hér eru á yðru landi bæði lifendr ok andaðir, því at eigi eru á öðrum löndum at jafnmiklum mannfjölda fleiri heilagir menn enn á Íslandi, ok halda bænir þeirra ok várar landinu upp, en ella mundi fyrirfarask landit.“ (*Guðmundar sögur biskups I, 96*)

“[...] you shall behold the power of the saints who are here in your land, both living and deceased, because other lands with the same number of inhabitants do not have as many saints as Iceland, and their prayers and ours uphold the land, for otherwise the land would perish.”

This formulation implies that Iceland acknowledges its partial spiritual dependence on Norway with its archbishopric and powerful saints, and that there is nothing wrong with such a dependence because it provides Iceland with protection. At the same time, however, it is also emphasized that Iceland has an unusually high proportion of saints, and that in this respect, it is not at all inferior to other lands. The scene thus points to an ambivalence that may reflect the early-fourteenth-century Icelanders’ attitude to Norway – pride of belonging within the Norwegian realm with its saintly kings and powerful rulers and archbishops is combined with a self-assertive need to prove Iceland’s equality within this union.

Interestingly, these formulations are not present in the D-redaction, where the episode otherwise mostly includes the same motifs as its version in the A-redaction, so the omission seems to be deliberate, suggesting that the slightly later version reflects a more confident view. The structure is therefore simpler, whereas the A-redaction further elaborates on the previous theme by specific references to Icelandic saints and other Icelandic bishops who are also regarded as holy men:

„Nú sér þú hér staði, þá er eigu helgir menn, bæði lifendr ok dauðir, en hér eru hús eigi öll jafnfögr, því at þeir eru helgir menn allir, ok eru þó helgastir af þeim Jón byskup ok Þorlákr byskup inn yngri, en þá næst Björn byskup ok Ísleifr byskup ok Þorlákr byskup inn ellri.“ (*Guðmundar sögur biskups I, 97–98*)

“Here you see the abodes owned by the saints, both living and deceased, but not all the houses here are equally beautiful, because all these men are holy, but the saintliest of them are Bishop Jón and Bishop Þorlákr the younger, and then Bishop Björn and Bishop Ísleifr and Bishop Þorlákr the elder.

⁴⁷ Saint Óláfr Haraldsson was a Norwegian king (1015–1028) and was regarded as the patron saint and “eternal king” of Norway. Saint Magnús was Magnús Erlendsson, Earl of Orkney (1106–1115); he was killed because of his political rivalry with his co-ruler Hákon, but due to his pious lifestyle he was proclaimed a martyr and sanctified in 1136 by Bishop William of Orkney; his story is known from *Orkneyinga saga* and two versions of a separate *Magnúss saga*, as well as from a Latin *vita*. Orkney was strongly connected to Norwegian rule, so Magnús can be regarded as a Norway-related saint. Saint Hallvarðr, the patron saint of Oslo, was Hallvarðr Vébjörnsson (ca. 1020–1043), a wealthy but politically unimportant man, who was proclaimed a martyr because he died while protecting a poor woman from prosecution.

⁴⁸ All references to the A-redaction of *Guðmundar saga* follow the 1983 edition by Stefán Karlsson, but the spelling of the text has been normalized here. The normalization and translations are my own.

The focus on the Icelandic saintly bishops may imply an intention to counterbalance the previous ambivalent section by a more confident statement of Iceland's spiritual accomplishments. In the D-redaction, where the ambivalence never occurs, this is unnecessary.

The placement of the episode within the texts follows similar tendencies. In the A-redaction, Rannveig's vision is placed between the revelation of Saint Þorlákr's sanctity and the translation of his relics, which is followed by miracles. Such a placement foregrounds Guðmundr's significance as one of Iceland's local saints and emphasizes their importance in a context where the Norwegian saints enjoy a prominent position. In the D-redaction, the vision is moved to the introductory section, which deals with Guðmundr's birth and childhood, and the vision is preceded by parallels between Guðmundr and the foreign saints Ambrose, Athanasius, and Thomas of Canterbury. This placement suggests a parallel between Guðmundr's worldly family and his "spiritual family", the saints in heaven, and it underlines his position among the international saints. This reflects a decrease of interest in the comparison between Icelandic and Norwegian saints and a more confident approach based on the idea of equality between Icelandic and not just Norwegian, but also the whole world's saints.

The next part of the episode is a description of Guðmundr's heavenly abode, which is narrated similarly in both redactions:

A: „*En annat hús þar hjá hátt ok göfugligt, þangat mantu heyra söng fagran ok hljóð mikit ok dýrðligt. Þat á Guðmundr prestr Arason, því at svá halda bænir hans upp landi þessu, sem várar bænir halda upp Nóregi ok Orkneyjum, ok man hann verða mestr upphaldsmaðr landi þessu, ok sitja eigi í lægra sæti enn Thomas erkibyskup á Englandi.*“ (Guðmundar sögur biskups I, 98)

“Next there is another house, high and magnificent, from where you can hear beautiful singing and loud and glorious music. That is owned by the priest Guðmundr Arason, because his prayers uphold this land, just as our prayers uphold Norway and the Orkney Islands, and he will become the greatest upholder of this land and take a place no lower than that of Archbishop Thomas in England.”

D: „*Sér þú herbergi þetta, svo signat ok sæmiligt, er jafnan stendr án flekk ok fölnan ok með sama ríkdómi ok ólíðandi gleði? Sjá er eignarjörð ok óðal Guðmundar Arasonar, er fá mun um síðir eigi lægra sess en Tómas í Kantia, ok svo sem vér fullting veitum Nóregi ok Orkneyjum, svo mun hann hjálpa Ísland með sínum bænum.*“ (Byskupa sögur III: Hólabyskupar, 170)

“Do you see this abode, so blessed and glorious, that stands forever without any blemish or imperfection and with the same magnificence and eternal joy? That is the possession and property of Guðmundr Arason, who will eventually take a place no lower than that of Thomas of Canterbury, and just like we protect Norway and the Orkney Islands, he will help Iceland with his prayers.”

The assertive declaration of Icelandic spiritual self-sufficiency reaches its peak here: Guðmundr is presented as equal not only to the Norwegian saints, as he protects his land in the same manner as they protect theirs, but also to a famous saint from England, which was politically and culturally superior even to Norway. This is the final step of the development of the saintly bishops' significance in the cultural memory. The focus now fully turns to their role as national saints, whose glory defines the spiritual worthiness of the land. The reason for this development was that due to their intensified contact with the European social space, Icelanders became more aware of their marginal position within the Christian world, and they felt the need to subvert this marginality by a direct statement of their spiritual equality to the rest of the Christian world.

6. 2. LANGUAGE AND THE PERCEPTION OF IDENTITY IN ICELAND

As has been mentioned here, the idea of a connection between identity and language probably had a long history in Iceland; in any case it is attested in *Grágás* and in the *First Grammatical Treatise* (see above, section 2. 4. 3.; see Hastrup 1984, 237–43). Nevertheless, the older bishops' sagas pay little attention to this aspect and use other cultural myths to construct identity. In *Lárentíus saga*, on the other hand, the theme of language identity re-emerges.

Lárentíus saga generally reflects a decreasing interest in the political, social, and cultural boundaries between Iceland and Norway. The main conflict of the saga takes place in Norway, the Icelandic protagonist is directly involved in it, and the text makes little difference between Norwegian and Icelandic recent history. It is thus not surprising that instead of creating a cultural myth of Icelandic language identity as a mark of individuality within the Norse social space, the saga highlights the unity of this space by creating a cultural myth of Norse language identity, which is shared by all inhabitants of the Norwegian-Icelandic realm. The inhabitants of the Norse social space are contrasted to foreigners of non-Norse origin. It is not, however, contrast in the sense of enmity, but in the sense of an awareness of a clearly culturally defined difference. The development from Icelandic to Norse language identity can indicate that a feeling of Icelandic-Norwegian social unity was already growing strong due to the political integration, or that the perception of cultural boundaries was changed by more frequent contact with foreigners at the time.

The episodes in which this theme occurs are of little importance to the central events of *Lárentíus saga*, and their extraordinarily humorous tone, which contrasts with the otherwise serious tone of the saga, draws increased attention to them. They are obviously included specifically for the purpose of thematizing identity. Both episodes that concern language identity deal with the Flemish cleric Jón. In the first episode, it is stated that Jón is not as useful in helping the archbishop as he would be if he spoke Norse (ch. 11). Later, when Jón expresses a wish to receive control of a church from the archbishop, Lárentíus objects to it, because Jón cannot speak Norse. Jón insists that he can say what he needs, so Lárentíus tests him, and Jón replies in comically imperfect Norse⁴⁹ (ch. 14):

Nú er þar til at taka at Laurentius var með Jörundi erkibyskupi í Niðarósi ok studeraði jafnan í kirkjunnar lögum er meistari Jóhannes flæmingi las honum; vóru þeir ok miklir vinir sín í millum. Laurentio þótti mikil skemmtan at hann brauz við at tala norrænu en komz þó lítt at. Einn tíma mælti Jón flæmingi við Laurentium: „Ek vildi at þú flyttir við minn herra at hann veitti mér Mariukirkju hér í býnum, því at hún er nú vacans.“ Laurentius svarar: „Hversu má þat vera þar sem þér kunnið ekki norrænu at tala?“ „Kann ek sem mér þarf,“ sagði Jón, „ok þat sem mér liggir á at tala.“ „Skipum nú þá,“ sagði Laurentius, „sem kominn sé föstuinngangr, þá verðr at tala fyrir sóknarfólki yðru hversu þat skal halda langföstuna.“ „Á þenna máta,“ sagði Jón flæmingi, „nú er komin lentin, hvern mann kristinn komi til kirkju, gjöri sína skripin, kasti burt konu sinni, maki engi sukk, nonne sufficit, domine?“ Þá hló Laurentius ok mælti: „Ekki skilr fólkit hvat lentin er.“ Sagði hann erkibyskupi ok gjörðu þeir at mikit gaman, en fengu Jóni nokkorn afdeiling sinnar beizlu því at hann var mjök brályndr ef ei var svá gjört sem hann vildi. (Biskupa sögur III, 243–44)

Now it will be told that Lárentíus stayed with Archbishop Jörundur in Niðarós and constantly studied the Church law that Master Jóhannes the Flemish read out to him. They were also good friends. Lárentíus was much amused when Jóhannes strove to speak Norse but made little progress. One day, Jón the Flemish said to Lárentíus: “I would like you to intercede with my lord, so he would let me have the Marian church here in town, because it is now *vacans*.” Lárentíus answered: “How could that be possible when you cannot speak Norse?” “I can say what I

⁴⁹ For a discussion of this episode from a linguistic and sociolinguistic perspective see Hall 2013, 6–14.

need,” said Jón, “and what I am supposed to say.” “Then let us assume,” said Lárentíus, “that it is the beginning of Lent and you must tell your parishioners how they shall observe the Lenten fast.” “In this way,” said Jón the Flemish: “Lent has come, every Christian shall go to church, do his confessing, throw out his wife, make no mess, *nonne sufficit, domine?*” Lárentíus laughed and said: “People do not understand the word *lentin*.” He told the archbishop this story and they were much amused by it, but they granted Jón his wish to some degree because he was very hot-tempered when people did not do what he wanted.

In this unusually comic chapter, the Icelander Lárentíus and the Norwegian archbishop laugh together at the foreigner who does not speak their common language. Significantly, the text emphasizes that Lárentíus and Jón are friends, and that the archbishop wants to prevent any disagreement with Jón, so the laughter does not mark hostility to the foreigner, but it nevertheless marks an awareness of a different cultural identity. Language is presented as an essential element of this identity.

In the other episode, Icelandic ships come to the harbour. Jón wants to greet the Icelanders and asks Lárentíus to teach him a phrase. Lárentíus intentionally teaches him a curse instead, but Jón believes that it is a polite greeting. The Icelander from the ship is upset by the greeting, and Jón understands that he has been tricked. The humour is based on a wordplay between the Norse and Latin language (ch. 15):

Einn tíma kómu mörg Íslandsförl til Niðaróss ok vóru á margir íslenzkir menn; vildi síra Laurentius þeim öllum nokkot til góða gjöra. Þar kom millum annarra sá maðr er Klængr steypir hét ok frændi Laurentii ok honum heimuligr. En sem Jón flæmingi sá þat, vildi hann gjöra honum nokkot athvarf ok talaði einn tíma við Laurentium á latínu ok mælti: „Kennið mér at heilsa á þennan yðar kompán upp á norrænu.“ Laurentio þótti mikit gaman at Jóni ok sagði: „Heilsaðu honum svá: Fagnaðarlauss kompán!“ „Ek undirstend,“ sagði Jón, „at þetta mun vera fögr heilsan, því at gaudium er fögnuðr, en laus er lof.“ Gengr síðan at Klængi steypir, klappandi honum á hans herðar ok mælti: „Fagnaðarlauss kompán!“ Hinn hvessti augun í móti ok þótti heilsunin ei vera svá fögr sem hinn ætlaði. Nú mælti Jón flæmingi við Laurentium: „Ek forstend nú at þú hefir dárat mik, því at þessi maðr varð reiðr við mik.“ (Biskupa sögur III, 244)

One day, many Icelandic ships arrived at Niðarós with many Icelanders on board. The priest Lárentíus wished to do something good for them all. There was among others a man called Klængr the Caster, he was a kinsman of Lárentíus, and they were very close. When Jón the Flemish found out, he wanted to pay him some compliment, so he talked to Lárentíus in Latin and said: “Teach me to greet your friend in Norse.” Lárentíus wanted to make fun of Jón, so he said: “Greet him so: *Fagnaðarlauss kompán!*” “I understand,” said Jón, “that this must be a beautiful greeting, because *gaudium* is *fögnuðr*, and *laus* is *lof*.” He then approached Klængr the Caster, clapped him on his shoulders, and said: “*Fagnaðarlauss kompán!*” The man frowned at him and did not find the greeting as lovely as Jón assumed. Jón the Flemish then said to Lárentíus: “I understand now that you have fooled me, because this man got angry at me.”

In context of the previous scene, it is obvious that this is a friendly joke that does not reflect any hatred. These episodes reflect an awareness of a cultural difference between Norsemen and foreigners, but that does not mark any hostility to foreigners. Instead, the episodes illustrate the strong cultural bond that existed between Icelanders and Norwegians because they shared the same language (see Hall 2013, 22–23). This bond was intensified by regular contacts with foreigners, which became more common in the fourteenth century than before and increased the Norsemen’s awareness of the cultural contrasts between them and other Europeans.

Some other sources also present the Norse language (*dönsk tunga, norrænt mál*) as largely unified until about 1400; that is not to say that there were no dialects, but that the language was *perceived* as unified (Sverrir Jakobsson 2005, 195–96, 320–21; 2007a, 151). The perception of language must have been closely connected to the perception of identity, since there were hardly any clearly defined linguistic criteria for what were different languages and what were regional dialects of the same language. Some sources from the thirteenth century, such as the *Third*

Grammatical Treatise by Óláfr Þórðarson hvítaskáld, seem to make a distinction between East Norse (*danska*) and West Norse (*norræna*); in this context, West Norse means the language spoken by Icelanders and Norwegians (Leonard 2012, 210–11, 217–18). This distinction may have been motivated by increasing linguistic difference between the dialects, which would have been noticed by the wide-travelled Óláfr Þórðarson, who was also sensitive to the nuances of language due to his poetic skills. It may, however, also have stemmed from an increased awareness of a social community between Icelanders and Norwegians, which became much stronger in the Sturlung Age than the overall cultural community of all Norsemen had been.

It was most probably a combination of both linguistic and social factors that brought about the distinction, but *Lárentíus saga* shows that it was the unity among the speakers of *norræna* and their position in relation to other Europeans, rather than the question of West Norse versus East Norse identity, that was at the centre of attention in Iceland in the fourteenth century.⁵⁰ Similarly, as Sverrir Jakobsson has pointed out, other Icelandic texts also focus on the differences between the Norse language and other languages, such as those of the British Isles or Germany, often in a humorous manner, or they contain jokes about those who speak Norse badly because they come from abroad (Sverrir Jakobsson 2007a, 152).

For comparison, *Lárentíus saga* offers another humorous scene, in which a Flemish man presents entertainment pyrotechnics at the Norwegian royal court (ch. 10). This episode foregrounds cultural differences other than language:

Vóru þá með konungi Eiríki margir mikilsháttar men af ýmissum löndum þeir sem margs vóru kunnandi, millum hberra var einn maðr, Þrándr fisiler at nafni, ok kunningi margt klókt at leika meir með náttúrligri list en með nokkors kyns galdr; var hann flæmskr at kyni. Viðr þenna mann lagði síra Laurentius kærleika; sagði hann honum marga hluti, því at hann fór mjök eftir at nema fróðleik meðan hann var ungr, en fór þó aldri með galdr eðr forneskju. Í jólum lék Þrándr fisiler herbrest. Hann verðr svá skjallr at fáir einir menn standaz at heyra hann, með konum leysiz burðr, þeim sem með barni eru ok heyra hann, en karlmenn falla ór sætum á gólf niðr eðr verða ýmislig viðbrögð. (Biskupa sögur III, 237–38)

At King Eiríkr's court there were many extraordinary men from various lands who had all kinds of talents. Among them was a man called Þrándr the Marksman, who could perform many clever tricks with natural arts rather than with any kind of sorcery; he was of Flemish origin. The priest Lárentíus was fond of this man. He told him many things because he was very eager to gain knowledge in his youth, but he never practised magic or witchcraft. At Christmas, Þrándr the Marksman performed an explosion. It was so loud that few people could bear hearing it, women went into labour if they were pregnant when they heard it, but men fell on the floor from their seats or lurched in various ways.

Significantly, the text again directly emphasizes the friendship between Lárentíus and the foreigner, but at the same time, it underlines the foreigner's "otherness" by comically exaggerating the effect of his tricks. In this case, the language aspect of identity is not directly thematized, but the man and his arts are presented as exotic and strange, and this subverts the standard perception of mainland Europe as the centre and the Norwegian-Icelandic realm as the periphery. The text is of course written from the Norsemen's point of view, so their perception

⁵⁰ At the same time, as Alaric Hall has pointed out, the fourteenth century was the time when the linguistic unity of the Icelandic and Norwegian variety of *norræna* was beginning to decrease, as the Norwegian variety was developing faster and more intensely than the Icelandic variety both lexicologically, phonologically, and morphologically; this was the beginning of the development that gradually brought the Norwegian language closer to the originally East Norse varieties than to Icelandic. The awareness of this process intensified the need of a narrative construction of the unity of *norræna* in a social environment in which shared Icelandic-Norwegian identity was of great importance for the self-image of the society (Hall 2013, 20–23) – that is probably the reason why the theme of language identity re-emerges in the fourteenth-century *Lárentíus saga*.

of foreigners as exotic is understandable, but the episode may also reflect the Norsemen's conscious subversive reaction to their awareness of their own peripheral position. This means that while the older contemporary sagas focus on the Icelanders' efforts to overcome their marginality in their relation to Norway, in the fourteenth century, as the horizon broadened, the focus seems to have turned to the Norwegian-Icelanders' collective efforts to overcome their marginality in their relation to mainland Europe.

6. 3. CONCLUSION: INDIVIDUALITY AND INTEGRATION

Despite their focus on hagiography or ecclesiastical history, the bishops' sagas also reveal significant aspects of the medieval Icelanders' identity and relationship to the rest of the world, which underwent a gradual but substantial change from the early thirteenth to the fourteenth century. The hagiographic sagas of the Icelandic saintly bishops illustrate the gradual development of the native saints' role in cultural memory and the construction and meaning of the cultural myth of "national saints".

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 gradually 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 Icelandic 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 and other lands is described only on the social level, not on the spiritual level. This implies that the sense of identity formed by these texts is mainly constructed within the borders of Iceland. The land's 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 saintly bishops assume the role of eternal representatives of Iceland. The likely reason for this development is that Iceland's relationship to Norway was intensely negotiated around the time of the establishment of the union, and it was viewed with some degree 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 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, who had embodied the Icelanders' spiritual accomplishment in the earlier narratives, were still regarded as the best identity bearers. The later narratives therefore subvert the idea of Iceland's marginality by an increased emphasis on Iceland's spiritual equality to Norway, in which the cultural myth of "national saints" is of essential importance.

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. The focus on the unity of

the Norwegian-Icelandic realm is also reflected in an increased interest in language identity in the fourteenth century. Icelanders and Norwegians are presented as speakers of the same language in contrast to speakers of other languages, who are perceived as foreigners. This underlines the idea of shared Norse or West-Norse identity, which does not imply, however, that Icelanders lost their individual identity by being integrated into the Norwegian kingdom – their individuality is highlighted by the previously discussed references to native Icelandic saints. Instead, the combination of the cultural myths reflects the opinion that integration and individuality are not mutually exclusive: the cultural myth of the national saints underlines individuality, while the cultural myth of language identity underlines integration, and they are intertwined without any significant contradiction. The resulting narrative discourse reflects the multi-layered medieval perception of identity, which allows for new layers to be added to the existing ones. Also, the humorous portrayal of foreigners does not seem to suggest that the West-Norse society was hostile to foreigners or wished to isolate itself from them. Some degree of distrust of foreign merchants may have existed in the society, but the humour is most likely to reflect the Norsemen's increased awareness of their peripheral position within the European social space, and to represent their tendency to subvert this marginality.

To sum up, 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.

7. CONCLUSION

7. 1. CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

The contemporary sagas are valuable narrative sources that not only record events from a period of an important social transformation in Iceland, but also present an interpretation and evaluation of these events from the perspective of the leading social groups around 1300. They deal with various aspects of power, but also with more abstract concepts of identity and with the medieval Icelanders' relationship with the rest of the world. The narrative discourse of the contemporary sagas connects recent events to the past and to the saga tradition, which is itself a conscious reconstruction of the past within cultural memory. That way, the discourse presents the historical development as a continuous process. Nevertheless, 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. Icelanders always visited the Norwegian royal court as travellers, court poets, or royal retainers, but the character of these contacts changed when the Icelandic chieftains started seeking the Norwegian rulers' direct support in their conflicts. This tendency was a consequence of power concentration in Iceland and of the intense internal power struggle during its final stage. Internal conflicts always existed in Iceland, but before the Sturlung Age, some Icelandic chieftains were regarded as powerful enough to act as a superior authority in other chieftains' conflicts. During the Sturlung Age, however, the most influential chieftains refused to acknowledge each other's authority, as they were all rivalling for power, so they needed a higher authority that they could turn to for support or arbitration. For this reason, Icelanders first acknowledged the Norwegian king's authority in practice and subsequently 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 in 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, but the overall structure of the society and of the settlement consisting of individual farms was retained. Furthermore, the process of power centralization took place simultaneously in Iceland and Norway, and the differences between the political development in both lands were not as significant as they are presented in some of the kings' sagas. Up until the time of the establishment of the union, the Norwegian king remained a member of a complex network of power relations, in which equilibrium was maintained by constant negotiation and compromise. Much of the real political power stayed in the hands of the local Norwegian aristocrats, on whose support the king depended. In the first

half of the thirteenth century, the Norwegian royal rule was still unstable and King Hákon Hákonarson faced internal opposition until 1240. For this reason, the participants in the Norwegian power struggle involved Icelanders in their own competition for power as allies who could strengthen their power base. These alliances between political leaders across the borders inseparably united the political spheres of both lands, so the union was not an abrupt transformation of the political relations, but rather an official acknowledgement of the existing situation. Even after the formal establishment of the union, 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. Gizurr derived his influence as a jarl from his original power base that he had built up as a chieftain, and Árni used conflict resolution on the local level as a means of securing the farmers' loyalty. 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 in the earlier times, it received less attention in the narratives that constructed the Icelanders' collective identity. The medieval Icelanders' identity was always defined in relation to Scandinavia and especially to Norway, with elements of both connection and individuality, but the theme of contact was not always equally important. The earlier contemporary sagas, which were probably written in the first half of the thirteenth century in their original separate versions, as well as the earlier bishops' sagas, deal with internal Icelandic matters, and the questions of contact receive little attention in them. That does not mean that these texts express opposition to contact with other social spaces or propagate isolation, but they construct the collective identity of Icelanders primarily within the borders of Iceland. The contemporary sagas dealing with the Sturlung Age or written in the second half of the thirteenth century or later, 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. Similarly, the later bishops' sagas are characterized by an increased focus on Iceland's position within the Christian world. The theme of integration then becomes even more dominant in the bishops' sagas dealing with the time after the formal establishment of the union. The political union did not mean that the integration on the social and cultural level was completed – it was a long process that received ever more attention in context of the construction of identity. The new social structures within the union intensified the Icelanders' awareness of their relationship to the rest of the world and broadened the horizon within which they constructed 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. Social identity defined each person as a member of a kin group, of a social class, of a network of leaders and allies, and of a state in the legal sense – a community sharing the same law. Geographically, each Icelander belonged within a certain district, region, quarter, Iceland as a whole, and the

Nordic area as a whole. Culturally, Icelanders defined themselves as Christians and as inhabitants of the Norse cultural space with its language and history. These layers of identity were shared with Norway because Christianity had been introduced to Iceland through Norway and the island had been under the influence of Norwegian ecclesiastical institutions ever since; both lands also shared the same language and partly the same history. At the same time, Iceland also had its individual history and cultural identity with its own cultural myths and narrative traditions. 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.

7. 2. THE CONTEMPORARY SAGAS AND CULTURAL MEMORY

In most of the existing research on Icelandic history and identity, the contemporary sagas have received either too little attention, or they have been interpreted with too much focus on the ideas of freedom and national independence in the modern sense. In line with these ideas, 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.

The myth of origin has two main levels: the myth of shared Norse origin from the pagan gods and their legendary heroic descendants, and the myth of individual Icelandic origin that emphasizes the process of the settlement, the creation of the new society’s central institutions, and the idea that these processes marked the beginning of the land’s own history. These two levels do not contradict each other: they reflect the fact that Icelanders proudly acknowledged both the history that they shared with other Norsemen and their own individual history. The myth of the Norse origin explains how the legendary ancestors arrived in Scandinavia, and the

myth of the Icelandic origin explains how the settlers established a new society on an island northwest of Scandinavia. The cultural myth thus illustrates the migration of people from more central to more peripheral parts of the world, so it also emphasizes the historical and genealogical connection between the periphery and the centre.

The cultural myth of the Free State highlights the internal mechanisms that maintain order in a non-centralized, kingless society, but it does not express opposition to kingship. It shows that while the Icelandic chieftains were not subjected to kings, they can often be portrayed either as possessing aristocratic qualities or in contact with the Norwegian royal court. The focus on the aristocratic qualities of the Icelandic social leaders implies that the Icelandic chieftains were proud of their power that was independent of royal rule, but they were also aware of the fact that the absence of a monarch was an element of their society's otherness. They felt a need to compensate for this otherness by creating narratives that pointed out their equality to kings in terms of intellect, natural authority, and other personal qualities.

The cultural myth of otherness and contact is found mainly in stories of Icelanders travelling to Norway, which often deal with various cultural stereotypes based on the differences between the rural Iceland and the more urbanized Norwegian society. Nevertheless, the "otherness" of Icelanders in Norway is not conceptualized in the sense of nationality, but rather in the sense of a dichotomy between the centre and periphery of the same social space. Icelanders can be ridiculed in Norway for their poverty, lack of refined manners, or alleged ineptitude in the same manner as villagers are often ridiculed by the inhabitants of cities in many different cultures. This cultural myth reveals the Icelanders' awareness of their marginality most directly, but at the same time, it also subverts the idea of their marginality by pointing out that the stereotypes are unsubstantiated, and that Icelanders can always prove that they are equally worthy as Norwegians in all respects.

These and other cultural myths were an inseparable part of the medieval Icelanders' cultural memory, and they were essential for the construction of their identity. 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 myth of origin receives a third level in the contemporary sagas: it turns into the foundation myth of the unified Norwegian-Icelandic realm. The main difference is that the original foundation myth of Iceland focuses on Iceland's individuality – especially on its own history and specific social system – while also acknowledging the similarities between Iceland and other Nordic lands, but the foundation myth of the union focuses on the similarities while also acknowledging Iceland's individuality. Integration and individuality are not presented as being contradictory, but rather as being complementary, and each is represented by a specific cultural myth. The fourteenth-century myth of language identity, unlike the twelfth-century myth of language identity presented in the *First Grammatical Treatise*, underlines Iceland's connection to Norway. The myth of the Icelandic "national saints", on the other hand, underlines Iceland's individuality – but the suggested relationship is one of equality, not one of opposition. These two cultural myths are dominant in the latest contemporary saga, *Lárentíus*

saga biskups, which deals with the fourteenth century. At that time, the political unification of the Norwegian-Icelandic realm was already largely completed, and the most significant social concern was Iceland's relationship to the rest of the world on the social and cultural level.

The cultural myth of the Free State in stories of the Saga Age expresses the Icelanders' pride of their history when the kingless society was ruled by chieftains with aristocratic qualities. In the contemporary sagas, this myth is re-evaluated because the thirteenth-century Icelanders had to admit that their political system was archaic in comparison with the European kingdoms, and that it further contributed to their "otherness" and marginality. Icelanders therefore became open to accepting royal power. While the sagas of the more distant past present the Icelanders' journeys to the Norwegian royal court mainly as "rites of passage" for young ambitious men, the contemporary sagas depict direct political alliances between Norwegian rulers and Icelandic chieftains and present the king in the position of a judge and mediator in conflicts between rivals in the Icelandic power struggle. In research, this development that culminated with the formal acceptance of Norwegian royal rule in Iceland has traditionally been interpreted as a tragic loss of independence or as a passive submission to a foreign monarch. In the present study it has been argued, however, that the contemporary sagas do not portray the relationship between Iceland and the Norwegian monarchy as the rulers' one-sided expansive politics passively tolerated by the Icelanders. Instead, they show how the politics of both lands became interconnected through alliances formed on both parties' initiative. The formal acceptance of royal rule is then described rather as an official confirmation of the existing situation than as an abrupt change. It is not presented as a loss of independence, but rather as integration into a larger whole that provided the Icelandic society with the benefits of centralized rule. Significantly, Iceland's integration into the broader Norse social space is presented as the Icelanders' own active effort, although the texts do not deny the important role of the Norwegian rulers either.

The contemporary sagas do not conceal the fact that the "free" Icelandic society faced serious difficulties, especially in connection with the fierce internal power struggle. Due to the open depiction of increased violence and instability during the Sturlung Age, scholars have often interpreted the contemporary sagas as portrayals of a moral decline and social breakdown. In the present study it has been argued, however, that the contemporary sagas do not evaluate the Sturlung Age as a period of moral or social downfall. Instead, they only criticize individual misdeeds committed by individual chieftains. The accounts of such misdeeds are counterbalanced by positive models of behaviour with a focus on peacefulness and moderation. The historical reality of the Sturlung Age was dramatic because it was a period of social transformation, which inevitably involved destabilization and violent power struggles. Such a period of history cannot be entirely idealized in a truthful historical narrative. Nevertheless, the overall portrayal of the society in the contemporary sagas is realistic and balanced – the texts avoid excessive idealization, but they do not condemn the social development either. Like the stories of the Saga Age, the contemporary sagas still focus on the internal mechanisms that maintain order and harmony in the society, so they create an image of a history that can serve as a source of identity despite its imperfections.

The cultural myth of otherness and contact is an essential element of the narrative of the process by which a peripheral society overcomes its marginality. In the thirteenth-century texts dealing with local history, this myth is constructed within the relatively narrow boundaries of

the Norwegian-Icelandic social space, within which Norway is defined as the centre and Iceland as the periphery. 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 a periphery. This was a consequence of the Icelanders' increased awareness of their position within the broader social space of Europe and the world, which was brought about by their integration into the Norwegian kingdom and by increasingly frequent contacts with foreigners from non-Norse lands. Icelanders now constructed their identity within these broader boundaries, still with elements of both individuality and integration.

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. Within cultural memory, the present situation constantly interacts with ideas of the past, because the past and the present can never exist separately in cultural memory, only in a mutual connection, or rather in a dialogical relationship (see Vésteinn Ólason 1998). The past is endowed with new meanings in context of the present, but at the same time, it also shapes the perception of the present, because it provides certain models or patterns that frame the present and integrate it into the society's self-image. When an event takes place, its meaning is not evident yet; the event can be endowed with a meaning or with various possible meanings only by being integrated into the "narrative of the past", which is a part of the given society's cultural memory.

In twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland, this narrative of the past consisted first and foremost of the memory of the legendary Norse past, the settlement of Iceland, the Saga Age, and early Icelandic ecclesiastical history. This memory of the distant past was already narrativized – endowed with meanings and interpretations that went beyond simple chronological or causal relations – in oral tradition when it was put to writing in *Íslendingabók*, *Landnámabók*, and the sagas of Icelanders. These events were already clearly defined as "the past" and fully integrated into cultural memory. On the other hand, the process of the narrativization of recent events started only shortly before they were written down in the contemporary sagas, and some of the events were possibly defined as "the past" only in the process of writing or compilation. For this reason, the contemporary sagas are unique sources for analysing the process by which recent events become integrated into the "narrative of the past" and into cultural memory.

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.

7. 3. 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. It connects these events to already existing narratives of the past and expresses values that have a universal significance within the society's cultural memory.

The contemporary sagas create a dialogue with the past by employing narrative types known from sagas dealing with the distant past, but often also by modifying the horizons of expectations created by the individual narrative types. There are two main methods of such modification: the first is changing the structural pattern of the given narrative type at the decisive moment in the plot, and the second is combining two narrative types with different horizons of expectations within one text. Distance from the horizon of expectations is frequent especially in case of the narrative types that are inherently tragic. The distance from the expected tragedy draws increased attention to the generally positive evaluation of the events, although their negative aspects are also admitted in the texts.

The most significant inherently tragic narrative type in the sagas dealing with Icelandic history is the conflict story. Its main tragic aspect is that the escalation of the conflict is not prevented before serious violence, usually the killing of one or several of the main characters, is committed. The cycle of violence and vengeance is, however, eventually terminated by reconciliation, often with the help of mediators. This focus on reconciliation and mediation emphasizes the society's ability to renew peace even after the inevitable bloodshed, so the overall image of the society is not an image of a breakdown or decline. The typical structural pattern of the conflict story shapes many sagas of Icelanders and some contemporary sagas, but other contemporary sagas create a distance from it by depicting a situation in which the mediator terminates the conflict already before the killing of either protagonist. In *Dorgils saga ok Hafliða*, which deals with the early twelfth century, the mediators are Icelanders, but in sagas dealing with the thirteenth century, it is the Norwegian king who plays the role of the mediator. *Dórðar saga kakala*, which takes place during the Sturlung Age, shows how the king is the only authority powerful enough to prevent bloodshed in the rivalry between Iceland's two most ambitious chieftains. *Árna saga biskups*, which takes place after the establishment of the union between Iceland and Norway, depicts an inherently non-violent conflict, but its structure emphasizes the importance of strong royal rule for preventing disputes and disunity within the land. The fact that all these sagas employ the same narrative type and create a similar distance from it constitutes a parallel between them. This parallel enhances the meaning of each story by connecting it to stories from other periods of the Icelandic history. The sum of all the stories shows that although the historical circumstances change, the presence of mediators remains essential for social stability. Due to the natural social development in Iceland, the authority of local mediators becomes insufficient, and that leads to the need for royal rule, which is eventually accepted first in practice and then formally. The formal acceptance of royal rule minimizes violence in the society, but the king is still needed as a mediator in political conflicts

that threaten the social order. This meaning, constructed by the sum of all the stories of one narrative type, transcends the meanings of the individual events, but without contradicting them.

The same is true of a related narrative type, the peaceful chieftain's story. It is also inherently tragic because it usually shows that the protagonist becomes a victim of violence despite his effort for peace. Nevertheless, its emphasis on the protagonist's peacefulness highlights the presence of morally positive values in the society. Some contemporary sagas retain the tragic ending, others disrupt the horizon of expectations by presenting a peaceful chieftain who does not become a victim of violence. The *Sturlunga* compilation constitutes a parallel between the peaceful chieftains' stories in *Sturlu saga*, *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, the story of Þórðr Sturluson in *Íslendinga saga*, and the second half of *Þorgils saga skarða*. Although some of these narratives fulfil the horizon of expectations and others disrupt it, their deeper meaning is constructed in the compilation by all the stories together. The sum of all the stories of this narrative type illustrates the development of Icelandic political leaders from the peaceful but highly individualistic and excessively ambitious Sturla Þórðarson the elder to Þorgils Böðvarsson, who values the unity of the society higher than his personal ambition. On the level of the individual stories, it is the protagonist's fate that is central; on the level of the sum of all the stories of this narrative type, on the other hand, the central theme is the social development. The value of peacefulness and moderation remains essential to the society, but they are enhanced by a new value, the social unity. That means that the development does not cause a loss of the original values but adds new values to the existing ones.

On the opposite end of the spectrum of narrative types there are the inherently optimistic ones, which focus on the process of the protagonist's integration into the society or on his active effort to increase his social prestige. The main inherently optimistic narrative types are the travel story, the court poet's story, and the royal retainer's story, which all have a similar structure and meaning. These stories describe an Icelander's journey abroad and his metaphoric journey from alienation and marginality to acceptance and prestige. In this sense, the narrative types reflect the significance of Iceland's contact with a broader social space. The narrative types create a connection between stories from the kings' sagas, stories about the Sturlung Age, and *Lárentius saga biskups*, which takes place in the fourteenth century. The protagonists of all these stories look for social prestige abroad, while still appreciating their Icelandic origin and individuality. They embody the qualities that the medieval Icelanders may have regarded as typical for themselves: bravery, eloquence, decisiveness, and determination that borders on recklessness but can be useful if it is used well. Each individual story presents a protagonist in contact with a broader social space, which refines his behaviour and fully develops the best qualities that he already possesses. The sum of all the stories expresses the idea that the whole Icelandic society can be integrated into a broader social space without losing its identity and that it can be appreciated by the rest of the world for its own individual qualities, which can be refined and developed by contact with other societies.

In all these cases, the narrative types create parallels between stories that take place in different times and situations. 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. The continuity is marked by the repetition of the same patterns, while the differences that manifest themselves within these patterns are a sign of development. 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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