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Haraldur Hreinsson

**Sagas and Secularity:**  
The (Re)Construction of Secular Literature in  
20<sup>th</sup>-century Iceland

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Leipzig University  
CASHSS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities"  
Nikolaistraße 8–10  
04109 Leipzig

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# Sagas and Secularity: The (Re)Construction of Secular Literature in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Iceland

## 1 Introduction

The Old Icelandic sagas enjoy a special place in Icelandic culture.<sup>1</sup> In recent decades, scholars have discussed how the sagas have contributed to the shaping of Icelandic national identity, and especially the role they played for the nationalist movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its struggle for Iceland's independence.<sup>2</sup> Icelandic society became rapidly modernised in the course of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as its focus shifted away from rural farming, and it became an industrialised fishing society with urbanising tendencies.<sup>3</sup> These comprehensive changes also had an impact on the religious sphere, and Icelandic society gradually became secularised.

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- 1 The term 'sagas' has to be qualified on several levels. In the academic field of saga studies, scholars distinguish between several different saga genres: kings' sagas, sagas of Icelanders, contemporary sagas, legendary sagas, translated chivalric sagas, indigenous chivalric sagas, hagiographic sagas. Massimiliano Bampi, "Genre," in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson, and Sverrir Jakobsson (London: Routledge, 2017), 4–5. Such a differentiated view of the medieval saga writings, however, does not correspond to how the term 'sagas' is used in popular discourse, where it is taken to refer in a general way to writings composed in Iceland during the Middle Ages, i.e. in the course of the 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. The surrounding intellectual debate of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which will be subject to analysis in the latter part of this article, was usually carried out with reference to the better-known sagas of the Icelanders, for example, *Njáls saga*, *Egils saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Fóstbræðra saga* or *Hrafnkels saga*, to name but a few. Furthermore, the perceived 'Icelandicness' of the sagas is probably a modern construction. The notion of an Icelandic national identity in the medieval period is a problematic one. At the time, Iceland was part of the larger Norse-speaking cultural zone, and the discussion about a collective identity amongst the people living in Iceland in the Middle Ages has, in recent years, been carried out in the more restricted terms of regional identities.
  - 2 Jesse L. Byock, "Modern Nationalism and the Medieval Sagas," in *Northern Antiquity: The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga* (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1994); Jón Karl Helgason, *Hetjan og höfundurinn: Brot úr íslenskri menningarsögu* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, Háskólaforlag Máls og menningar, 1998), and Jón Karl Helgason, "Continuity? The Icelandic Sagas in Postmedieval Times," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).
  - 3 Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 195–296.

The study of secularity in Iceland has so far largely been restricted to institutional differentiation, alongside legal aspects of the relationship between the state and the country's national church.<sup>4</sup> This paper will approach the formation of secularity in the country from a different angle. Adopting a research perspective shaped by both cultural history and sociology of culture, it will investigate the role of the Icelandic sagas, and the medieval culture which spawned them, in the development of secularity in Iceland. Instead of looking at the processes through which Christian religion came to be separated from other spheres of society, it will probe the discourses legitimising such a separation. It will pay special attention to the reception and understanding of the sagas and the medieval culture which produced them, and further ask how they provided a background against which a secular culture could be imagined, both in the past and for the present.

The historical analysis presented in this paper is carried out within the theoretical framework developed by the Multiple Secularities project at Leipzig University.<sup>5</sup> In the Multiple Secularities approach, the term 'secularity' enjoys a central place as a heuristic concept, defined as the "culturally and symbolically as well as institutionally anchored forms and arrangements of differentiation between religion and other social

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4 On the topic of secularisation in particular, see Pétur Pétursson, *Church and Social Change: A Study of the Secularization Process in Iceland since 1830*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Reykjavík: [s.n.], 2017) and Þórunn Valdimarsdóttir, and Pétur Pétursson, *Til móts við nútímann*, vol. 4 of *Kristni á Íslandi*, ed. Hjalti Hugason (Reykjavík: Alþingi, 2000).

5 The conceptual framework of the project has been explained in detail elsewhere by the directors of the project and other affiliated members, see Christoph Kleine, and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, "Research Programme of the HCAS 'Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities,'" Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities" 1, Leipzig University, 2016; Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, and Marian Burchardt, "Revisiting the Secular: Multiple Secularities and Pathways to Modernity," Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities" 2, Leipzig University, 2017; Christoph Kleine, and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, "Preliminary Findings and Outlook of the CASHSS 'Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities,'" Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities" 22, Leipzig University, 2020; Christoph Kleine, and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, "Comparative Secularities: Tracing Social and Epistemic Structure beyond the Modern West," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 33 (2021).

spheres.”<sup>6</sup> This paper explores how Icelandic medieval culture, especially as represented by Icelandic medieval ‘literature’, has become an important *locus* in which the religious came to be distinguished from a non-religious sphere of society. More concretely, this paper aims to show, from a discursive research perspective, how, at an important period in the social and political history of the country, medieval Icelandic literature, and the culture it represented, were framed in terms that can be described as secular.

The paper is divided into two parts. First, it will discuss how scholars have attempted to analyse Icelandic medieval society, with a special emphasis on the role of literature as a factor – or even a separate social field – contributing to its development. This survey serves as a backdrop for the analysis presented in the article’s second part; providing historical information, framed in relevant sociological vocabulary, on what aspects of Icelandic medieval society promoted and justified the construction of secular medieval literature in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It should be noted that, in both parts, the analysis takes place on the level of discourse, and is intended less as a contribution and more as a prelude to an actual historical analysis of Icelandic medieval society centring around the concept of secularity.<sup>7</sup>

For practical purposes, the analysis in the second part of this paper will be constrained to roughly the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and to the writings of intellectuals. This period was, in many respects, an important one for the development at hand. As will be explained in more detail below, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the scholarly perception and the intellectual orchestration of Iceland’s medieval heritage and saga writings changed significantly. One could even argue, as will be done below, that in a certain sense, the notion of medieval ‘literature’ was first introduced at this point – or was at least reintroduced after a long period of absence. As scholarship of recent years and decades has shown, such an interpretation

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6 Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, and Marian Burchardt, “Multiple Secularities: Toward a Cultural Sociology of Secular Modernities,” *Comparative Sociology* 11 (2012): 881. For an extensive discussion on the difference between ‘differentiation’ and ‘distinction’, as defined by the Multiple Secularities project, see Kleine, and Wohlrab-Sahr, “Comparative Secularities,” 52–62.

7 The historical debate on the actual socio-religious make-up of medieval Icelandic society is still ongoing. For a summary of the debate, see Haraldur Hreinsson, *Force of Words: A Cultural History of Christianity and Politics in Medieval Iceland (11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> Centuries)*, *The Northern World* 90 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 4–17.

played a prominent role for the nationalist movement of the time, when the struggle, first for increased political autonomy, and later for complete independence from the Danish kingdom, predominated in Icelandic culture and society. The sagas, and the medieval culture which produced them, not only provided Icelanders with a 'golden age' to fall back on in the ongoing process of building a national identity, but also became a source of national pride. This was thanks to a body of literary masterpieces, composed by authors comparable to other masters of the Western literary canon. Less attention has been paid to the ways in which the construction of the sagas as literature implied a particular historical narrative; one which assumes the continuous autonomy of Icelandic 'literature' from the Christian religion and the Christian church(es), from the late 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

Before engaging in the actual analysis, a note on the concept of literature and its usage in the discussion on the formation of secularity in Iceland is in order. With regard to differentiations and distinctions between the religious and the non-religious, 'literature' has been something of a *Grenzgänger*, crossing back and forth across this divide. Like other practices of artistic creation, literary production has often been described as having been 'inspired' in one way or another. In such cases, however, the nature of the inspiration can be framed in a variety of ways, and defined accordingly as religious or secular, depending on the nature and context of the writing. Throughout history, literary creation and the art of the word have been seen as both *divina scriptura* and *litteratura mundi* or *litteratura saecularis*, to use terminology dating back to patristic authors such as Tertullian and Jerome.<sup>8</sup> In the modern period, literature has, alongside other branches of the arts, increasingly come to be defined as autotelic, existing for its own sake, separate from other spheres of society. Along such lines, Northrop Frye defined literature as "an autonomous verbal structure" serving "the primary literary aim of producing a structure of words for its own sake."<sup>9</sup> Interesting as they may be, the present paper will not be concerned with questions of such general scope regarding the concept of literature. Instead,

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8 Eric Ziolkowski, *Religion and Literature: History and Method*, Brill Research Perspectives in Religion and the Arts 3.1 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 15.

9 Northrop Frye, "Ethical Criticism: Theory of Symbols," in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, with a foreword by Harold Bloom (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990 [1957]), 74.



it will focus on how the concept of literature was constructed in a particular historical context, namely early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Iceland, paying particular attention to the distinction between the religious and the secular.

The history of Icelandic culture and society is a phenomenon that is socially relevant to the study of secularity and literature in many ways. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the production of literature – first medieval, and later, additionally, modern – has figured prominently in public discourse, as a central component of Icelandic national identity. Such preoccupation with literature is, of course, not a phenomenon that is particular to Iceland, but should be seen in the context of a more widespread nationalisation of literature that took place in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> This development was strongly influenced by Johann Gottfried Herder’s philosophy of culture, and has even been referred to by scholars as the “Herderian revolution” or the “Herder Effect.”<sup>11</sup> Herder emphasised the uniqueness of the nation, reflected not only in its language and cultural traditions, but also in its distinct vision and way of thinking – a *Nationalcharakter* (“national character”), which manifested itself particularly clearly in a nation’s literary production.<sup>12</sup> In this period, the vernacular cultures of medieval Europe, which had been either forgotten or neglected for centuries, were acquiring a completely different place in the ongoing nation-building process. Medieval literary compositions, long forgotten, were reintroduced and interpreted as manifestations of the national character.<sup>13</sup> In many cases, such efforts required the recording and ‘textualising’ of oral folklore, which was compiled, edited, and ultimately introduced as ‘literature.’<sup>14</sup> In other

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10 Viktoria Šeina, “Nation-Building Canons: Historical and Methodological Considerations,” in *Literary Canon Formation as Nation-Building in Central Europe and the Baltics*, ed. Aistė Kučinskienė, Viktorija Šeina, and Brigita Speičytė, National Cultivation of Culture 24 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 8–11.

11 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. Malcolm B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), passim, e.g. 7.

12 Johann Gottfried Herder, “Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität,” in *Herders Werke in fünf Bänden*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1982), 5:160.

13 Viktoria Šeina, “Nation-Building Canons,” 3–7. Sometimes the same works were claimed by several nations. *Beowulf* was, for example, hailed as national literature by the English, Danes and Germans. Joep Leerssen, “Introduction: Philology and the European Construction of National Literatures,” *European Studies* 26 (2008): 23.

14 Šeina, “Nation-Building Canons,” 4.

instances, there was no recording needed, as the medieval material was already compiled in existing manuscripts. In this regard, Iceland offers itself as an interesting case in point, due to the high extent to which medieval manuscripts containing diverse material have been preserved. For various historical reasons, book production in medieval Iceland was unusually vigorous compared to other countries, which explains, along with their efforts towards collecting and preserving the manuscripts in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the large quantity of surviving medieval texts from Iceland, compared to other Nordic countries.

For these reasons, alongside others to be discussed in the course of this paper, the cultural and literary production of the Icelandic middle ages became central to the cultural nationalism which dominated Icelandic society and culture from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> It has even been argued that the medieval literary compositions acquired a particularly prominent place in Iceland because of the limited extent to which other elements of Iceland's material cultural heritage have been preserved; for example, there are no medieval buildings still standing.<sup>16</sup> This view was evident in a recent remark made by the author Pétur Gunnarsson in a television interview, in which he described the contrast between the outer appearance of the manuscript of one of the best-known sagas, the *Saga of Njáll* (*Njála*), and the work's cultural significance:

It looks like a rat which has been run over on the highway. This is just a shrivelled, twisted [...] something like a lump. Shrivelled, twisted lump. It is *Njála*. It is Notre Dame! They are the same age, *Njála* and Notre Dame. Although it almost burned down, Notre Dame still stands but *Njála* looks like this. Twisted and shrivelled, but the content we read of the manuscript is this classical text which lives on, age after age.<sup>17</sup>

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15 Byock, "Modern Nationalism and the Medieval Sagas"; Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, *Íslenska þjóðríkið: Uppruni og endimörk* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, Reykjavíkúrákademían, 2001), 173–90; Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur: Þjóðerni, kyngevri og vald á Íslandi 1900–1930* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2004), 41–75; Sigurjón Árni Eyjólfsson, *Trú, von og þjóð: Sjálfsmynd og staðleysur* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2014), 283–301.

16 Arguably the most influential articulation of this view can already be found in Sigurður Nordal, *Íslensk menning*, vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1942), which will be subject to further analysis in the second part of the present paper.

17 Interview (in Icelandic) with Pétur Gunnarsson on the television show *Handritin – veskú* on RÚV1, first aired April 22, 2021. This translation, and others from

In light of the above, it is clear that the formation of secularity, as evidenced by the separation between religion and literature, took place in close contact with the rise of romantic nationalism, as well as the Icelandic political struggle for greater autonomy, and later full independence, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With regard to the theoretical framework of the Multiple Secularities approach, it emerged in response to a particular “reference problem,” i.e. “the problem of social or national integration and development.”<sup>18</sup>

## 2 Historiographical Backdrop: The Particularity of Medieval Icelandic Culture and Sagas

Medieval Icelandic society during the period between 930 and 1262/64, variously referred to as the Icelandic Commonwealth or the Icelandic Free State (Icel. Þjóðveldi), has been portrayed, both historically and in popular culture, as having constituted a special chapter in European history. During this time, a political arrangement developed which, unlike elsewhere in Europe, did not rely on decisions made in the court of a king, but rather on the deliberation and, when the deliberation failed, violent feuding of the land-owning magnates.<sup>19</sup> In this same period, a literary culture emerged that brought forth the diverse body of writings, collectively referred to as ‘the sagas’, which describe the lives of the people living on the island.<sup>20</sup> Nowhere in the Nordic region – or for that matter in the medieval West – did there emerge a comparable body of writings, consisting of what has been described as “realistic prose stories, telling of the fates of common people.”<sup>21</sup> The place of religion in this society, and the role it played in political and cultural developments, remain subject to debate. It has, for

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Icelandic, Swedish, Norwegian, and Latin, are my own unless noted otherwise.

18 Wohlrab-Sahar, and Burchardt, “Revisiting the Secular,” 20.

19 Established scholarly accounts of the social and political situation include Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988); William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, Viking Collection 12 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1999).

20 For a recent overview of saga scholarship, including an up-to-date bibliography, see Ármann Jakobsson, and Sverrir Jakobsson, eds., *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (London: Routledge, 2017).

21 Gunnar Karlsson, *Goðamenning: Staða og áhrif goðorðsmanna í Þjóðveldi Íslendinga* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, háskólaforlag Máls og menningar, 2004), 430.

example, been suggested on serious historical grounds that the literary culture amounted to a relatively autonomous sphere in the Icelandic Free State, independent from other social spheres. This historical narrative, and the historiographical backdrop on which it rests, provide an important context for understanding the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century debate about the sagas, and for explaining the significance of the medieval literary heritage for the formation of secularity in Iceland.

### 2.1 The Case for an Icelandic Sonderweg

In the Icelandic context, the differentiation between religion and other social spheres has, as noted, in many respects developed along similar paths to those of other northern European societies. There are, nonetheless, particular aspects of this development which stand out as unique to Icelandic culture and society, when compared to other regions in Europe. It is not only the composition of the medieval writings known as the sagas which have been taken to constitute an Icelandic special case – at least in the medieval period – but also (and no less importantly) the non-monarchical political system in development since the 10<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup> From a macro-sociological perspective, the sociologist Jóhann Páll Árnason has addressed this question from within the broader theoretical framework of civilizational analysis.<sup>23</sup> Probing into the issue as to whether it is possible to speak of a distinct civilisation in Iceland (and elsewhere in medieval Scandinavia), Árnason argues that while Icelandic society in the High Middle Ages did not amount to a civilisation of its own, it did, however, constitute a “highly specific” episode or a variant within the history of Christian Western civilisation.<sup>24</sup> Making much use of the works of historian Gunnar Karlsson (1939–2019), Árnason suggests that the particular development that took place in medieval Iceland should be

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22 Michael Borgolte, *Europa entdeckt seine Vielfalt 1050–1250*, Handbuch der Geschichte Europas 3 (Stuttgart: Ulmer, 2002), 211–20, esp. 217.

23 Around a decade ago, Árnason published two articles on this topic: Jóhann Páll Árnason, “A Mutating Periphery: Medieval Encounters in the Far North,” *Gripla* 20 (2009), and Jóhann Páll Árnason, “Icelandic Anomalies,” in *Nordic Paths to Modernity*, ed. Jóhann Páll Árnason, and Björn Wittrock (New York, NY: Berghahn, 2012).

24 Jóhann Páll Árnason, “Mutating Periphery,” 32. In accordance with Icelandic name tradition, full names will be provided also in short citations.

explained with regard to the political arrangement, in which matters were solved by the political elite, through negotiation and feuding. No political order of the same type existed elsewhere in Europe. It is unlikely that a larger community without a singular ruler existed anywhere in Christian Europe.<sup>25</sup> In the words of Karlsson, the particularity of the Icelandic case is due to the “peculiar fusion of secular culture, concerned with personal pride, love, courtship, forest resources, judicial decrees and assemblies, and a clerical culture preoccupied with letters and book making.”<sup>26</sup> As Árnason’s hypothesis goes, this ‘fused’ culture produced its special works of literature in order to cope with the diverse challenges it was confronted with in the course of the High Middle Ages.<sup>27</sup>

Árnason, who has long been active in the scholarly debate on ‘multiple modernities’, has also addressed the distinctiveness of the Icelandic case (or the “Icelandic experience,” as he repeatedly calls it) from the point of view of modernisation theory. From such a point of view, placing Iceland in the broader context of a European modernising transformation, Árnason argues that the Icelanders belonged to a “New Society” of “transplanted ‘fragments of the larger whole of Europe,’ [while] separation made them lapse ‘into a kind of immobility.’”<sup>28</sup> He suggests that the “exceptional importance” of Iceland’s medieval heritage for the long-term process of nation formation “can hardly be doubted.”<sup>29</sup> The vernacular literary culture which came into being at that time was the most influential factor in this regard. The literary tradition combined Christian and Pagan elements, but, at the same time, a historiographical tradition emerged – culminating in the works of Snorri Sturluson – which produced writings of a more secular spirit than could be found anywhere else in the Christian medieval world.<sup>30</sup>

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25 Gunnar Karlsson, *Goðamening*, 456.

26 Gunnar Karlsson, *Goðamening*, 457.

27 Jóhann Páll Árnason, “Mutating Periphery,” 33.

28 Jóhann Páll Árnason, “Icelandic Anomalies,” 232.

29 Jóhann Páll Árnason, “Icelandic Anomalies,” 231.

30 Jóhann Páll Árnason, “Icelandic Anomalies,” 236. Early important works in that tradition include works such as the *Book of Icelanders* (*Íslendingabók*) written by Ari Þorgilsson *the Wise* (1067–1148) in 1122–1133 and the *Book of Settlements* (Icel. *Landnáma*), originally composed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The most important historical work by Snorri Sturluson is the collection of kings’ sagas called *Heimskringla*. A description of Icelandic medieval historiography, in terms of a search for truth for truth’s sake in seemingly positivistic terms, can be found in

Árnason – who appears very well versed in Icelandic literary history, both medieval and modern, but is nonetheless a non-specialist – takes a firm stance in the long-standing debate about the extent to which Christianity shaped medieval Iceland, by arguing that Icelandic medieval society and culture cannot be explained simply in terms of Western Christian medieval culture, but rather constituted something particular.<sup>31</sup> The literary culture of the Middle Ages testifies to this this particularity.

## 2.2 The Medieval Genesis: Literature as a Field

The question as to when a literary field first emerged in Icelandic society has been addressed by the literary scholar Torfi H. Tulinius, who has published extensively on medieval sagas and romances, as well as the socio-cultural situation which spawned such writings. In his book on *Egils saga*, one of the best-known Old Icelandic sagas, Tulinius argues that an autonomous literary field, in a Bourdieusian sense, existed in 13<sup>th</sup>-century Iceland.<sup>32</sup>

Based on Orri Vésteinsson's historical reconstruction of Icelandic society as steadily moving towards an increasingly complex and differentiated society in the centuries following Christianisation in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Tulinius assumes the existence of at least four distinct fields within Icelandic society: the field of the landed elite, the field of the Church, the field of the royal

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Sigurður Nordal, *Snorri Sturluson* (Reykjavík: Þór. B. Þorláksson, 1920).

- 31 Árnason is critical of the position, prominent from the 1960s until well into the 1990s, that Christian religion was a major force in the shaping of medieval Icelandic society and culture, as represented by the production of saga literature. As early as 1964, Lars Lönnroth had called for a farewell “to the image of the Icelandic farmer, who far from the European culture of clerics and courtiers, entertains himself by writing down old accounts from his home.” Lars Lönnroth, “Thesen om de två kulturerna: Kritiska studier i den isländska sagaskrivningens sociala förutsättningar,” *Scripta Islandica* 15 (1964): 97. Another proponent of this view was Hermann Pálsson (1921–2002), who in his writings on the medieval writing *Hrafnkels saga*, insisted that Icelandic medieval literature was, first and foremost, an offspring of “the Christian tradition of medieval Europe,” and that the content of the Icelandic family sagas “is seen through Christian eyes and intended for Christian ears.” Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's saga* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1971), 10.
- 32 First published as Torfi H. Tulinius, *Skáldið í skriftinni: Snorri Sturluson og Egils saga*, Íslensk menning (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2004). Citations here from a revised version in English, Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Enigma of Egill: The Saga, the Viking Poet, and Snorri Sturluson*, trans. Victoria Cribb, *Islandica* 57 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

Norwegian court and, finally, the field of literature. With regard to this last field, Tulinus makes direct reference to Bourdieu's theorising on the genesis of fields, in arguing for a separate field – or at least the beginnings of such a field – of literature in 13<sup>th</sup>-century Iceland.<sup>33</sup> The increased significance of literature in medieval Iceland was, in Tulinus' estimation, a part of “the genesis and major flowering of secular literature in the West.”<sup>34</sup> Surveying the available source material, Tulinus provides several cases in point.

Supporting the notion of an independent field of literature, Tulinus maintains, is the fact that there existed specific aesthetic criteria and norms, exclusively applicable to composition of so-called skaldic poetry, developed by Icelandic poets (Icel. *skáld*) in the Middle Ages. These rules were codified at the time in poetry manuals, indicating that there was already an existing discourse specific to the field.<sup>35</sup> Those who mastered these rules were called ‘great poets’ (*mikil skáld*), and enjoyed much recognition as such. Individuals successful in other fields of society – the politician Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) being a well-known example – were also concerned about their reputation as poets, suggesting “that poetry was an independent pursuit” and not merely an instrument for improving one's status in other fields.<sup>36</sup> There are also examples of individuals who enjoyed a highly respected status purely as a result of their poetic skills, despite their lack of power or influence in other fields.<sup>37</sup> Tulinus also highlights texts which can be taken to indicate the emergence of a “discourse of ultimate value,” as poetry was conceived of as a “craft beyond reproach,” and that a life in poetry is “unflawed,” bringing “true” wealth to the poet.<sup>38</sup>

While some of Tulinus' findings have come under criticism, for example the ascribing of the authorship of *Egils saga* to Snorri Sturluson, his analysis of the socio-cultural landscape in terms of a literary field

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33 As for the extent to which the production of saga literature can be shown to have belonged to the emerging field of literature, the source material is not as rich. Tulinus nonetheless argues that the composition of saga literature and poetry were closely linked. He points out, for example, that the few saga writers known by name were also poets, and many of the sagas have poets as their protagonists. Torfi H. Tulinus, *Enigma of Egill*, 207.

34 Torfi H. Tulinus, *Enigma of Egill*, 203.

35 *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson and the *Third Grammatical Treatise*.

36 Torfi H. Tulinus, *Enigma of Egill*, 205

37 Eyjólfur Brúnason serves as an example. Torfi H. Tulinus, *Enigma of Egill*, 206.

38 Torfi H. Tulinus, *Enigma of Egill*, 206–7.

remains uncontested.<sup>39</sup> It should be noted, however, that the cogency of Tulinius' argumentation rests on the extent to which one is willing to accept the application of Bourdieu's theorising on the literary field – which is generally perceived as a fundamentally modern phenomenon – to pre-modern societies.<sup>40</sup> According to Philip S. Gorski, a pioneer in applying Bourdieusian theory to historical work, “a field exists if, and to the degree that, it has an autonomous elite and an autonomous logic,” both of which Tulinius successfully illustrates as having existed around literary production in medieval Iceland.<sup>41</sup> However, the question as to the degree to which these two phenomena existed, and the related question as to how autonomous the field was, are not explicitly addressed.<sup>42</sup>

While Tulinius devotes considerable energy to describing the nature of the literary field, he nonetheless maintains that he is speaking only about “the beginnings of a separate literary field” existing in Iceland, noting that the means of production, distribution, and the principle of supply and demand did not apply for this particular historical context.<sup>43</sup> It could also be argued that framing the existence of a literary field in terms of “beginnings” is misleading, insofar as it might be taken to suggest a continuity. For, even if one accepts the hypothesis that there was a separate literary field in Iceland – irrespective of the degree of autonomy it may have possessed – it does not mean that it continued to exist in the following centuries. As will be illustrated in the next section of this paper, it seems more likely that such a

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39 For a slightly critical review of the original Icelandic version of the book, see Orri Vésteinsson, “Smá-saga: Um nýlegar rannsóknir í íslenskum miðaldafraeðum,” *Ritið* 5, no. 3 (2005): 166–67.

40 Although few scholars have made use of Bourdieu's theories to argue for the existence of pre-modern literary fields, there is a marked interest among historians in applying his field theory to other contexts. For an important recent contribution to the history of medieval Europe, see Sita Steckel, “Historicizing the Religious Field: Adapting Theories of the Religious Field for the Study of Medieval and Early Modern Europe,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 99 (2019).

41 Philip S. Gorski, “Bourdieuian Theory and Historical Analysis: Maps, Mechanisms, and Methods,” in *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis*, ed. Phillip S. Gorski (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 329.

42 The autonomy and heteronomy of a field are decided by the extent to which the field relies on other fields for its existence. Gorski, “Bourdieuian Theory and Historical Analysis,” 329–30.

43 Torfi H. Tulinius, *Enigma of Egill*, 203–4.



field subsequently ceased to exist, as other fields in society came to dominate whatever remained of an independent literary field.

### 2.3 Continuity or Rupture?

The so-called classical saga literature and other writings produced and reproduced during the medieval and early modern period did not find their way to the printing press until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>44</sup> Even so, such writings – broadly termed ‘popular literature’ – continued to circulate in manuscript form, and their content was mediated to people around Iceland in various ways, most importantly through the social convention of the evening wake (*kvöldvaka*).<sup>45</sup> As a social practice, the evening wake refers to the gathering of the household in the communal living room, in the hours in which “the lamp was lit” – i.e. after sunset in the wintertime.<sup>46</sup> Such evening entertainment was also part of life in the fishing stations (*verstöðvar*), where fishermen, whose primary occupation was still as farm labourers, would come together early in the spring for the fishing period.<sup>47</sup> During this time, the people would attend to different kinds of evening tasks (mostly related to the working of wool), while a member of the household

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44 The sagas were transmitted orally and through transcripts. Jón Karl Helgason, “Continuity?,” 65. On the first printed editions of the sagas, see Ármann Jakobsson, “Íslendingasögur í mótun: um fyrstu heildarútgáfu Íslendingasagnanna, samhengi hennar og áhrif,” *Andvari* 142 (2017): 110.

45 Most prominent among the material performed at the evening wake were literary works categorised under the broad term ‘romance’. An important subset of this group of texts consists of sagas of knights (*riddarasögur*). In the Icelandic context, these include both translations of courtly literature and original works, similar in content and structure, which have interchangeably been referred to as ‘sagas of knights’, ‘lie-sagas’ (*lygisögur*) or, through its frequent use in German speaking scholarship, *Märchensagas*. Another subgroup of the romances is the ‘legendary sagas’ (*fornaldarsögur*), a disparate group of writings about the heroes of the Germanic legendary past. Original compositions of such writings continued into the modern period. Mixed in with these kinds of writings were texts which would come to constitute the canon of Icelandic classical literature: the sagas of the Icelanders and the kings’ sagas. Well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the texts read at the evening wake were preserved in manuscript form. Once a greater diversity of books had been printed, these also found their way into the evening entertainment. Matthew Driscoll, *The Unwashed Children of Eve: The Production, Dissemination and Reception of Popular Literature in Post-Reformation Iceland* (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1997), 4–6, 44.

46 Driscoll, *Unwashed Children of Eve*, 38 and 40.

47 Driscoll, *Unwashed Children of Eve*, 41.

would read aloud from a chosen text.<sup>48</sup> The performance did not have to be restricted to a mere reading but, as scholars have suggested, could serve to inspire an oral improvisation of the text's content. Another significant form of mediation was the *rímur*, a genre of poetry indigenous to post-classical Iceland, into the form of which the content of the diverse literature was reformulated.<sup>49</sup> For centuries, therefore, the saga writings constituted an important and popular part of people's evening entertainment.<sup>50</sup>

Over half a century ago, Hermann Pálsson argued, on the basis of his readings of several prologues and other passages from medieval sagas, that the semi-public readings from the sagas did not go against the wishes of the late medieval Catholic Church. While some medieval clerics are known to have raised doubts about the reading of such material, the general opinion seems to have been that the saga writings had a positive influence on the moral integrity of the audience.<sup>51</sup> From the Church's point of view, the sagas served the purpose of "useful entertainment," to borrow one of Pálsson's phrases, as they introduced the audience to the challenges of human existence, and provided examples of admirable behaviour, acceptable to the Christian authorities.<sup>52</sup> Later, the literary scholar Vésteinn Ólason emphasised how the saga literature provided Icelanders in the late Middle Ages with role models in a less religious way than Pálsson had presumed.<sup>53</sup> Their protagonists – the 'saga heroes' – exemplified strength and courage in adversity, threatened by inimical forces, or by the harsh environmental surroundings that result from Iceland's location in the North Atlantic. Later research, most importantly that of Jón Karl Helgason, has suggested that such an understanding of the popular reception of the saga writings can be

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48 Driscoll, *Unwashed Children of Eve*, 40.

49 Pétur Húni Björnsson, "Rímur um Rímur: Hvað má lesa úr elstu rímum um rímahefðina?," (MA-thesis, University of Iceland, 2020).

50 Hermann Pálsson, *Sagnaskemmtun Íslendinga* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1962), 163–64; Jón Karl Helgason, "Continuity?," 66.

51 Hermann Pálsson, *Sagnaskemmtun Íslendinga*, 145. Pálsson makes special mention of two priests who had doubts about the positive influence of the sagas, Grímur Hólmsteinsson. (d. 1298) and Einar Hafliðason (1307–1393). Hermann Pálsson, *Sagnaskemmtun Íslendinga*, 150–51.

52 Hermann Pálsson, *Sagnaskemmtun Íslendinga*, 145.

53 Vésteinn Ólason, "Bóksögur," in *Munnmenntir og bókmenning*, Vol. 6 of *Íslensk þjóðmenning*, ed. Frosti F. Jóhannsson (Reykjavík: Þjóðsaga, 1989), 209.

taken to apply to later centuries as well, at least as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>54</sup> The historian Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon came to a similar conclusion in an article where he explains that in the adversity of their daily life, the virtues of the saga heroes – honour, courage, heroism – were of paramount importance to the moral development of children, after they had been made accessible in printed editions in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>55</sup> Even though the content of the sagas had been mediated orally through the centuries, Magnússon maintains that the appearance of printed editions marked a watershed, even to the extent that it ushered in the decline of the Lutheran church, and contributed in a significant way to the secularisation of Icelandic society.<sup>56</sup>

As Pálsson suggests, there is potentially evidence indicating that the medieval Catholic church was not opposed to the less explicitly religious sagas. Equally, scholars broadly agree that at least some of the sagas were composed within an ecclesiastical setting in this period. In the late Middle Ages, particularly after the Lutheran Reformation (a period that has been termed the ‘post-medieval period’), the circumstances surrounding the production and diffusion of the sagas changed, as did the ecclesiastical authorities’ attitude towards the saga literature.<sup>57</sup>

After the introduction of the printing press around the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, the literary landscape inevitably changed. From then until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Lutheran Church monopolised the printing press, and the church authorities consistently opposed traditional secular literature.<sup>58</sup> In a preface to a new hymnal (*Ein nij Psalma Bok*) from 1589, Guðbrandur Þorláksson (1541–1627), bishop of the Northern Hólar bishopric, and the most influential religious leader of his age, stated that he hoped that the book would put an end to “useless songs of trolls and poetry of the ancients,” which were read and performed for entertainment purposes “more after

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54 Jón Karl Helgason, “Continuity?,” 65–78; Jón Karl Helgason, *Hetjan og höfundurinn*, 15–49.

55 Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, “Siðferðilegar fyrirmyndir á 19. öld,” *Nýsaga* 7 (1995): 65–70. For a detailed discussion of the printed editions of the saga literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, see Ármann Jakobsson, “Íslendingasögur í mótun,” 111–15.

56 Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, “Siðferðilegar fyrirmyndir á 19. öld,” 59, 70.

57 See, for example, the title of a collection of articles, edited by Andrew Wawn, *Northern Antiquity: The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga* (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1994).

58 Driscoll, *Unwashed Children of Eve*, 1. The first printing press not run by church authorities was that of Hrapppsey, founded in 1773.

the vexing fashion of the heathen men than Christian.” He believed such practices were more widespread amongst the “common people” of Iceland than in any other Christian country.<sup>59</sup> Bishop Guðbrandur kept up his fight against traditional literary production, and, in 1612, he published a book of verses (*Ny Wiisna Bok*), in which he made an attempt to Christianise the old home-grown type of poetry called *rímur*.<sup>60</sup> Other clergymen would follow Bishop Guðbrandur’s lead, and even well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century one still finds churchmen expressing their worries about the preponderance of traditional literature. There are some interesting exceptions to this tendency. In 1756, two books were printed in the Hólar printing press, both containing material on the Icelanders of former times. The printing of the books was criticised by pastors around the country, and was generally poorly received, possibly because of the common opinion that entertainment material was not suitable for the printed medium, which should be reserved for Christian literature.<sup>61</sup>

While literary scholars continue to discuss questions of genre and other issues regarding the classification of literature, the distinction between secular and religious literature has established itself as an uncontested convention in classifying Icelandic literature. Compared to the scholarly discussion on different literary genres, there is, however, limited discussion on what constitutes secular literature and what constitutes religious literature. In the five-volume edition of Icelandic literary history, the distinction between the religious and the literary is made based on the content of the writings.<sup>62</sup> Writings on religious topics – almost exclusively

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59 Guðbrandur Þorláksson, “Formale,” in *Ein ny Psalmabok, Med morgum Andligum Psalmum, Kristelegum Lofsaunguom og Vijsum, skcikanlega til samans sett og Auke nog endurbætt* (Hólar in Hjaltadalur: [s.n.], 1589).

60 *Ein Ny Wiisna Bok: Med mórgum andlegum Viisum og Kuædum Psalmum, Lof sønguom og Ríjnum. teknum wr heilagre Ritningu. Almuga Foke til gagns og goda Prentud, og þeim ødrum sem slijkar Vijsur elska vilia, og jdka Gude Almattugum til Lofs og Dyrdar, enn sier og ødrum til Gagns og Skiemtunar* (Hólar in Hjaltadalur: [s.n.], 1612), no page numbers.

61 Driscoll, *Unwashed Children of Eve*, 15.

62 See the volumes of *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, 5 vols. (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1992–2006). It should be noted that in the post-production of this paper a new overview work on Icelandic literary history was published which could unfortunately not be taken into account. See Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, Ármann Jakobsson, Ásta Kristín Benediktsdóttir, Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, and Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson, *Íslenskar bókmenntir: Saga og samhengi* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2021).

Christian – are counted as religious, while writings on practically everything else are deemed to be secular. It should also be noted that all the writings – secular and religious alike – discussed in the around 4000 pages of Icelandic literary history are broadly categorised as ‘literature’.

From the Late Middle Ages, the classical saga literature did not enjoy any particular popularity above other types of literature. It was read and known, but no more than other literature circulating after the so-called classical period. People’s awareness of the texts in question was not related to the position of the saga literature as literature. The Icelandic sagas constituted a source of information about the past, but most importantly they constituted a part – and not necessarily a particularly prominent one – of the Icelandic population’s repertoire of after-dark entertainment. The content of the sagas was taken to be ‘true’ – i.e. they were understood to contain reliable information about events and people from the country’s past. As noted, scholars have argued and illustrated how such ‘historical’ figures – heroes and anti-heroes – contributed to the shaping of people’s identity and, as some have argued, became important role models for coping with the hardships of life. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, this perception of the sagas began to change drastically.

### 3 Sagas and Secularity: The (Re)Construction of Icelandic Medieval Literature

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as romantic nationalist currents were on the rise, claims to national autonomy, accompanied by issues concerning nationhood and national identity, were frequently raised in Icelandic public discussion. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this tendency would only intensify as things began to gradually change in the political realm and the idea of independence from Denmark did not seem as far-fetched as it had for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, Iceland’s medieval literary culture came to enjoy an increasingly prominent place in public intellectual discussion.<sup>63</sup> There are direct links between the rise of nationalism and the increased interest in the saga writings as the sagas were believed to contain

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63 This does not mean that nothing of particular significance happened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, some of the pioneers of modern saga studies – e.g. Konrad Maurer (1823–1902), Björn M. Ólsen (1850–1919) and Finnur Jónsson (1858–1934) – published some of their most important works then.

important information about what it meant to be an Icelander.<sup>64</sup> Such concerns can be seen in the writings of the natural scientist Helgi Pjeturss (1872–1949), and Guðmundur Finnbogason (1873–1944), professor of philosophy at the University of Iceland.

Irrespective of such questions, there was also much activity in the field of Icelandic literary history and in the field of ‘literature’ more generally. The shifts taking place in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – marked by the founding of the University of Iceland in 1911, with a chair devoted to Icelandic literary history, as well as the appearance of the idea of the ‘great author’ – have recently been described as amounting to a reshaping of the artistic system.<sup>65</sup> Although they have not received much attention, these shifts had a significant impact on the formation of secularity in the country.

Of considerable importance to the reshaping of the Icelandic literary field was a radical change in how scholars in the field of Germanic and Nordic studies understood the nature and origin of the saga writings. This shift was already underway in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Risking simplification, this change entailed the historical value of the sagas being called into question, while emphasis was instead put on the sagas being the artistic constructs of capable authors. In its earlier stages, this development was part of another scholarly debate related to the sagas – that on the degree to which the medieval accounts were based on oral traditions.<sup>66</sup> After decades of debate on the extent in which the oral component of the saga material could be considered to be a) reflected in the preserved versions of the text and b) factually accurate, the opinion won out that the Icelandic sagas should be understood first and foremost as literary constructs crafted by skilled authors and in some cases works of genius. Without ignoring the contribution of early promoters of these ideas, such as the German legal historian Konrad Maurer (1823–1902) and Björn M. Ólsen (1850–1919), the first professor of Icelandic language and literary

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64 See Byock, “Modern Nationalism and the Medieval Sagas.”

65 Pröstur Helgason, *Opna svæðið: Tímaritið Birtingur og íslenskur módernismi* (Reykjavík: Bókmennta – og listfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, Háskólaútgáfan, 2020), 58.

66 This debate is generally described in terms of its opposite poles, i.e. the *Freiprosalehre* and the *Buchprosatheorie*, as framed in Andreas Heusler, *Die Anfänge der isländischen Saga* (Berlin: Verlag der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1914).

history of the University of Iceland, it was the scholars of the so-called ‘Icelandic School’ of Nordic studies who determined the sagas to be works of literature. In this sense, it can be argued that they ‘discovered’ or ‘rediscovered’ Icelandic medieval literature.<sup>67</sup> Through their various publications on medieval Icelandic literary culture, and the publishing of influential critical editions of the Icelandic sagas – not least thanks to their introductions to these editions – these scholars were successful in redefining the sagas in terms of ‘literature’.

Senior among the early proponents of the ‘Icelandic School’ and its most important ideologue was Sigurður Nordal (1886–1974), professor of Icelandic language and literature at the University of Iceland, and a leading intellectual in Iceland in his time. Although Nordal’s early writings already show clear indications of where his scholarship was heading, his best-known contributions to the Icelandic School’s programme, as it were, are his introduction to the critical edition of *Egils saga* (1933), and a small monograph on *Hrafnkels saga* (1940).<sup>68</sup> Also important in this context is Nordal’s now famous introduction to an anthology of ‘Icelandic literature’, in which he argued in favour of the idea of Icelandic literature being an unbroken literary tradition, spanning from at least the 9<sup>th</sup> century to the time of his writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>69</sup> Other important intellectuals who have been counted among the Icelandic School are Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, scholar of medieval literature, and the writer Halldór Laxness –although the latter’s contributions to the Icelandic public discussion should by no means be understood as having been restricted to the programme of the Icelandic School.

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67 While there is still debate regarding which scholars should be counted as the initiators of this movement, there is little doubt as to when and through which scholarly efforts it rose to prominence. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinnsson, “Íslenski skólinn,” *Skírnir* 165 (Spring 1991). Cf. Jón Karl Helgason, *Hetjan og höfundurinn*, 120–22.

68 Sigurður Nordal, “Formáli,” in *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslensk fornrit 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933); Sigurður Nordal, *Hrafnkatla*, with a summary in German, *Studia Islandica* 7 (Reykjavík: Ísafoldarprentsmiðja, 1940). An important early work on the subject is Nordal, *Snorri Sturluson*, esp. 129–249.

69 Sigurður Nordal, “Samhengjið í íslenskum bókmenntum,” in *Íslensk lestrarbók 1400–1900*, ed. Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavík: Bókaverzlun Sigufúsar Eymundssonar, 1924), 9–32.

In the second part of this paper, the moment of the (re)discovery of the Icelandic literary field and literature will be explored in more detail with regard to how Icelandic medieval literature, and the culture which produced it, came to be constructed in terms of the distinction between the religious and the secular. From a discursive research perspective, the following will examine the discussion that took place in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century amongst Icelandic intellectuals. In an article from 2000, literary historian Helga Kress analysed many of the same sources from a gender perspective, illustrating how these early 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholars constructed the sagas and the saga authors in a way “that builds up the scholars’ identity as educated Icelandic men, belonging to a masculine culture on an international scale.”<sup>70</sup> In a similar way, it is interesting to see that many of the traditional and classical virtues conventionally attributed to a secular, modern man are also clearly visible in the writings of these authors, as they discuss medieval culture and literature. The following analysis will revolve around four discursive themes which frequently appear in the intellectual discourse of the period, namely rationalism, realism and objectivity, individualism, and fatalism. Each of these themes contribute in their own way to how the medieval sagas – and by extension the concept of Icelandic literature – was distinguished from the religious sphere, especially Christianity.

### 3.1 Rationalism

The notion that medieval Icelandic culture was characterised by rationalism goes back a long way. It already appeared in the writings of the scholar and apologist Arngrímur Jónsson the Learned (1568–1648). In a writing called *Crymogæa*, a description of Iceland printed in Latin in 1609, he alludes to a medieval period of increased reason, even a golden age of sorts, after belief in heathen deities had started to dwindle. This decline had occurred as Christianity was introduced for the first time. In the anti-Catholic spirit of his time, however, Arngrímur the Learned emphasised that this had been a form of Christianity that had not been tainted by Roman Catholicism

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70 Helga Kress, “Mikið skáld og hámenntaður maður,” in *Speglanir: Konur í íslenskri bókmenntahefð og bókmenntasögu* (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, Rannsóknastofa í kvennafræðum, 2000), 393. See also Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn samni Íslendingur*, 94–8.



or “the sour dough of the papacy,” as he put it. He said that it was “with growing reason” that men abandoned their belief in the heathen deities, and entered into this interim period of a more “pure Christianity,” before the Roman Church established itself in Iceland.<sup>71</sup>

The idea that the Nordic medieval world view had come to be characterised by reason, rather than belief in the deities, was visible in the works of scholars of medieval Iceland in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Sigurður Nordal’s major work, *Íslenzk menning (Icelandic Culture)*, he explains that stories of men who refused to worship the gods, believed in their own might and power, and had ‘godless’ as their epithet, point to a decline in heathen belief, while Christianity had not yet become a leading force in religious affairs in the country.<sup>72</sup> Nordal had already discussed ‘rationalism’ in the context of Icelandic medieval culture in a book published in 1920. This book on Snorri Sturluson, however, covers a later period of Icelandic history. In it, he states:

The truth is, that, in addition to the fact that the Icelander’s view of life before and after 1200 was vague and incoherent, and their entire life force surprisingly weak [...], there existed direct atheism and mistrust of clerics and their teachings.<sup>73</sup>

Another author who discussed the prominent place of reason in the medieval Icelandic culture that produced the sagas was Helgi Pjeturss, an influential natural scientist in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and later prolific esoteric writer.<sup>74</sup> In an article published in 1906, on the “religious

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71 “Interdum etiam forsan præcedente tempore, cum Deorum Ethnicorum æstimatio, ductu rationis, cæpit imminui,” Arngrímur Jónsson, *Crymogæa sive rerum Islandicarum – Libri III* (Hamburg: Philippus ab Ohr, 1609), 77. It should also be noted that, in the anti-Catholic spirit of his time, he described the medieval period as a time of “a more pure Christianity” (*synceriores viguisse*) because it had not come “infected by the sour dough of the papacy” (*fermento [...] infecta est*). Arngrímur Jónsson, *Crymogæa*, 106.

72 Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenzk menning*, 180. More details on the context and intended purpose of *Íslenzk menning*, see Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur*, 105–6.

73 Sigurður Nordal, *Snorri Sturluson*, 66.

74 For more on Helgi Pjeturss, see the following article by Pétur Pétursson, “Nýalismí og dulspeki: Hugmyndafræði íslenskrar borgarastéttar á öðrum

history of the Old Icelanders,” Pjeturss makes much of the difference between the “old Icelandic culture” which existed in the country before the arrival of Christianity, and the Christian culture which succeeded it. Although he does not directly assert that the Icelanders of heathendom could be described as irreligious (*trúlausir*), he states that their deities did not enjoy a very elevated status. Other factors, such as courage and valour, were more important to the world view of the Old Icelanders. The medieval Icelanders – whom Pjeturss repeatedly calls “Vikings,” which, from a historical perspective, can only apply to a fragment of the medieval Icelandic population – possessed considerable “spiritual freedom,” though they had not “come far enough” to resist the degradation which came with Christianity.<sup>75</sup> At that point, reason had to give in to superstition. In fact, the article could be described as an account of how Christianity and the church smothered the free spirit of the Viking age – as exemplified in medieval literature. This is made plain in the following passage, in which Pjeturss blames the most successful leaders of the Church, with their struggle against the Icelandic political elite:

And would ‘the glow of Iceland’s age of fame,’ our ancient literature, not have been dimmer, if the spirit which emerged in the holy men Jón and Þorlákr, in Guðmundr Arason and bishop Árni (not to mention the foreign bishops), had already blinded the good Icelandic reason in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, as it would later do?<sup>76</sup>

This article by Helgi Pjeturss seems to have been well received. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, one of the proponents of the Icelandic School, and Guðmundur Finnbogason, Iceland’s first professor in the field of philosophy, both prominent intellectuals in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, specifically

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og þriðja áratug 20. aldar,” *Ritröð guðfræðistofnunar* 35 (2012), as well as that of Benedikt Hjartarson, “‘Magnan af annarlegu viti’ Um strangvísindalega dulspeki Helga Pjeturss,” *Ritið* 1 (2017).

75 Helgi Pjeturss was strongly influenced by the evolutionary theory of neo-Lamarckism, as has been rigorously discussed by Benedikt Hjartarson, “‘Magnan af annarlegu viti,’” 149–57. At the same time, he also seems to have made use of Herbert Spencer’s social Darwinism. In this particular article, he refers to “the great” Herbert Spencer, and compares his critics to a lamp fuelled by whale oil, next to Spencer’s bright electric light. Helgi Pjeturss, “Úr trúarsögu Forn-Íslendinga,” *Skírnir* 80 (1906): 69 and 71.

76 Helgi Pjeturss, “Úr trúarsögu Forn-Íslendinga,” 62.

reference it as a source in their writings. In his book on the national identity of the Icelanders, Finnbogason states that the world view of medieval Icelanders is encompassed in the “cold and calm reason” of *Hávamál*, a well-known didactic poem dating to the Viking Age (800–1066).<sup>77</sup> He further explains the world view of *Hávamál* in the following passage:

The moral instructions of *Hávamál* are entirely concerned with the consequences of our actions in this life. Its ethics do not rely on any religious view, but solely human nature, as is manifested in experience. Life reaches a higher degree of perfection, the more we follow the commands of reason and maintain the golden mean, which is the hallmark of true health.<sup>78</sup>

In his book on the Sturlung Era, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, maintains that in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, religious and spiritual life was “calm and tempered” and there was “neither fanaticism nor vehemence.”<sup>79</sup>

### 3.2 Realism and Objectivity

Scholars usually refer to the stylistic ‘realism’ and, to a certain extent, ‘objectivity’ of the medieval saga writings as ‘saga realism.’<sup>80</sup> While these are strictly stylistic concepts, some scholars – notably those analysed here – use the term to refer to both the stylistic approach employed in the medieval sagas, and the world view of the authors and their culture. For these scholars, the stylistic realism reflects the authors’ world view.

Such a fusion of stylistic concepts and world view can be seen in the writings of Björn M. Ólsen (1850–1919), a prominent member of the Icelandic intellectual elite in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ólsen was the first rector of the University of Iceland, and professor of Icelandic grammar and literary history. His work on the medieval Icelandic sagas has been

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77 Guðmundur Finnbogason, *Íslendingar: Nokkur drög að þjóðarlýsingu* (Reykjavík: Bókadeild menningarsjóðs, 1933), 54.

78 Guðmundur Finnbogason, *Íslendingar*, 52.

79 Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Sturlungaöld: Drög um íslenska menningu á þrettánda öld* (Reykjavík: Nokkrir Reykvíkingar, 1940), 119.

80 For a concise overview of the history of research on realism and the sagas of the Icelanders, see Daniel Sävborg, “Style,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (London: Routledge, 2017), 119–20. While the chapter is primarily concerned with literary stylistics, it also addresses and attempts to clarify the conceptual messiness which has characterised the discussion on the topic.

interpreted as constituting an early indication of the direction which the Icelandic School would later take.<sup>81</sup> In his discussion of the ‘objectivity’ of the sagas of the Icelanders, he makes much of the “main rule of Icelandic narrative art, that the account should be completely objective.” This applies both to the descriptions of the characters and events of the sagas, and to distinct aspects such as the descriptions of the pagan religion. “In this complete objectivity of the storytellers, one encounters a particular view of life,” Ólsen maintains.<sup>82</sup> As reflected in the following passage, this view of life was unique, or at least special, and manifested itself in a “spiritual freedom” and “open-mindedness” which was rare in the Middle Ages:

We can see from this that they [the saga authors] were spiritually free men, humane and open-minded in their judgment, and free from the clerical fierceness which characterises the Middle Ages. The tolerance towards the pagan religion that one finds there is rarely found in the writings of medieval authors, but is reminiscent of the writings of the renaissance humanists. The same tolerance, the same freedom of spirit, the same humanity is found in the myths of Snorri’s Edda.<sup>83</sup>

Although Ólsen was of the opinion that the saga authors were Christian believers, he perceived this form of Christianity to be unlike anything else one would encounter in medieval Europe. Amongst those authors who agreed that the saga authors could be called Christian, there was a widespread agreement that this must, at least, have been a special and particular kind of ‘Icelandic Christianity’ that was sober, modest, tolerant, humane, and down-to-earth. In a book about Snorri Sturluson, Ólsen’s student Sigurður Nordal would go even further in assuming the objectivity of the saga authors, stating that the

magnates who wrote did not have faith which could make them biased, nor principle of law, to make them deal out temporary judgments. No ambition of state, nor party loyalty could get between them and their narrative material.<sup>84</sup>

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81 For references, see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, “Íslenski skólinn,” 103–7.

82 Björn M. Ólsen, “Um Íslendingasögur: Kaflar úr háskólafrirlestrum,” in *Safn til sögu Íslands og íslenzkra bókmennta að fornu og nýju*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, and Sigfús Blöndal (Reykjavík: Gutenberg, 1937), 77.

83 Björn M. Ólsen, “Um Íslendingasögur,” 80.

84 Sigurður Nordal, *Snorri Sturluson*, 256.

Yet another representative of the Icelandic School, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, discusses what he calls the “heroic realism” of the sagas in a lexical entry (written in Danish) on the medieval Icelandic sagas (which fall slightly outside the temporal scope of this study). He uses this concept to describe the sagas’ attitude to reality, as reflected in their treatment of the narrative material. Their content is supposed to be “interesting, saga-like: worthy of telling about” but at the same time there is a clear demand for realism, as regards both events and individuals. In the sagas, one can find a synthesis of realism and a particular ‘idealism’. This ‘idealism’, to quote Sveinsson, is “secular, and Nordic.”<sup>85</sup>

### 3.3 Individualism

The ideal of the autonomous individual is prominent in discussion of Icelandic medieval culture and literature.<sup>86</sup> This appears clearly in the writings of Sigurður Nordal, for example in his book about Snorri Sturluson, in which he describes the cultural context in which the medieval politician was writing:

Christianity was an empty name, it lacked both religious education and strong religious movements. Therefore, the ethics of heathendom, which came into being in parallel with the [pagan] religion, and was derived from the same roots, but was not dependent on its teachings, could live on during the first centuries of Christianity. This ethics, which was shaped in the fight of everyone against everyone, made the individual into the centre of existence.<sup>87</sup>

Decades later, in his book on Icelandic culture, Nordal proceeded along the same lines, making special mention of the “rise of the individual,” which, in his opinion, consisted of two related shifts: first, the release of the individual from mob mentality and, second, their release from the fear of moody deities and monsters.<sup>88</sup> Nordal takes the protagonist from *Egils saga*, the viking-poet Egill Skallagrímsson, as a prime example of this. Egill

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85 Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, s.v. “Íslendingasögur,” *Kulturhistorisk lexikon for nordisk middelalder fra vikingetid til reformationstid (KLNM)*, vol. 7 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1962), 509.

86 For a discussion on individualism in the context of the nationalistic movement in 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Iceland from a gender perspective, see Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur*, 85–90.

87 Sigurður Nordal, *Snorri Sturluson*, 253.

88 Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenzk menning*, 225.

is “too much of an individual” and will, therefore, not prioritise his kindred and family.<sup>89</sup> His poetry reflects his most important interests: “the growing might and independence of the individual, rising against nature, gods, and men.” Nordal’s interpretation of Egill’s mentality resembles the ways in which he describes the world view of the composers of *Hávamál*:

The poem is composed by men who found themselves on a very similar level to Egill, proclaiming a new vision and new ideals: those of the Viking, the far-traveller, the free individual, who thinks mostly about himself, and relies primarily on his wit and might.<sup>90</sup>

This assessment of *Hávamál*’s world view comes close to the interpretation of Guðmundur Finnbogason, who also makes much of the ideals of individualism. In his analysis of the Icelander’s view of life, Finnbogason makes individual autonomy the prerequisite for happiness:

An important ideal of our ancestors was: You lead yourself [Sjalfr leið sjalfan þik], which harmonises well with the idea that the first priority for happiness is to be autonomous, and that it is better to take care of one’s own farm, no matter how wretched it may be, rather than have to rely on the support of others.<sup>91</sup>

Finnbogason’s emphasis on the independence of the individual also resonates through Einar Ólafur Sveinsson’s book on the Sturlung Era. In that time, “it was the man himself who led himself,” and such a mentality was characterised by the “awareness of one’s own freedom, the feeling of being worth something, of being in power over one’s own affairs and others.”<sup>92</sup> Years later, Sveinsson would expand on this topic with regard to the sagas of the Icelanders:

In general, the ethics of the sagas of the Icelanders are marked by the spirit of self-elation. They often show individualism (contrary to the spirit of solidarity reflected in the law). They are the manifestation of the aristocratic democracy of the free state: each free man can become the hero of a saga: ability and achievement matter more than social standing.<sup>93</sup>

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89 Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenzk menning*, 171.

90 Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenzk menning*, 174.

91 Guðmundur Finnbogason, *Íslendingar*, 44.

92 Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Sturlungaöld*, 63.

93 Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, s.v. “Íslendingasögur,” 509–10.

### 3.4 Fatalism

In the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in Germany and the Nordic countries, fatalism, as an approach to life, became prominent in the discussion of the medieval view of life in the north.<sup>94</sup> Many descriptions reflect the opinion, noted above, that during the transition period in which the heathen religion receded without Christianity yet gaining the ground to fully replace it, as it later would, there existed a view of life which assumed neither the support of heathen deities nor salvation in Christ. This outlook was repeatedly described in terms of ‘fatalism’, a term which has been conceptualised in diverse ways.<sup>95</sup>

In his book on Icelandic culture, Nordal discusses fatalism in considerable detail. He describes how a fatalistic world view came to serve as a point of contact between the old heathen customs and Christianity. He states that “for Icelandic culture, it was of utmost importance how fatalism manifested itself when heathendom was coming to an end, and lived on in the Christian tradition.”<sup>96</sup> Nordal contextualises the emergence of fatalism historically, and explains how, as Icelanders converted to Christianity, they began thinking of ‘fate’ as “an inscrutable and impersonal power which governed over both gods and people.”<sup>97</sup> The medieval ideas of fate had, in Nordal’s opinion, continued significance for modern people:

There is one thing Nordic ancients will never be accused of: that they were dupes fooled by existence, who looked away from bitter reality or sought faulty shelter in castles of air. The brutal honesty of such a vision is the biggest reason why their thoughts and accounts are still meaningful.<sup>98</sup>

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94 Debora Dusse, “Grundzüge der Erforschung germanischer Religion in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus,” in *Die völkisch-religiöse Bewegung im Nationalsozialismus: Eine Beziehungs- und Konfliktgeschichte*, ed. Uwe Puschner, and Clemens Vollnhals, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Schriften des Hannah-Arendt-Instituts für Totalitarismusforschung 47 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 431.

95 An example of an attempt to systematise the medieval Nordic concept of fate can be found in a speech, originally given in Danish by the writer Gunnar Gunnarsson, later translated into German as *Nordischer Schicksalsgedanke: Eine Rede*, trans. Helmut de Boor (München: Langen Müller, 1936).

96 Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenzk menning*, 178.

97 Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenzk menning*, 178–79.

98 Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenzk menning*, 185.

As Nordal presents it, before Icelanders converted to Christianity, fatalism constituted a world view which had lost much of its religious components. In that regard, his version of this history stands as an example of what Charles Taylor has called a “subtraction story,” in which a previously religious framework loses its religion.<sup>99</sup> The belief in the deities declined and fatalism – though it can be framed in terms of certain religious or mythical discourses, for instance that of the three *norns* (witches) of fate – did not require any religious framing or organised rituals.<sup>100</sup> Thus, Nordal explicitly states that fatalism was “the explanation of existence, or the resignation from trying to explain existence, which is left when all other explanations have proven inadequate,” a point he paints more dramatically in the following passage:<sup>101</sup>

Men could stop believing in trolls, but not the cold. They could desist from believing in Urðr, but not death. The anger of the gods, but not bad harvest. Similarly, one could stop thinking about ghosts, *norns*, luck and bad luck, to strengthen oneself as much as possible in order to make one’s own luck. But it would always become more evident that one was competing against something more powerful. The more the belief in the heathen deities would decline, the stronger and more mysterious fate would become.<sup>102</sup>

Nordal points out that this understanding of fate called for a particular view of life, namely that which has been described as belief in one’s own might and power. According to him, there was nothing in this world which could be played against the force of fate “other than the might and power of oneself, as far as it went.”<sup>103</sup> This view of the world demanded persistence, courage, and serenity in adversity, to face the state of things shaped by fate.

In a well-known article, “Notes on the Old Sagas,” the writer Halldór Laxness contended that “the Viking Age’s belief in reason,” which he defined with the term fatalism (Icel. *Örлагatru*), became the foundation for the view of life in which the Icelandic medieval writings are grounded.<sup>104</sup> Laxness,

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99 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard Belknap, 2007), 26.

100 Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenzk menning*, 179.

101 Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenzk menning*, 182.

102 Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenzk menning*, 179.

103 Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenzk menning*, 181.

104 Halldór Laxness, “Minnisgreinar um fornsögur,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 8 (1945).



who was later awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1955, was by this stage already a well-known public intellectual, and had published many of his most important novels. At the time he wrote the article, which reflects his increasing interest in Iceland's medieval cultural heritage, he was already in the process of preparing his own editions of some of the sagas, with modern spelling.<sup>105</sup> His interest in the sagas culminated in his novel *Gerpla* (published in 1952), his own version of a saga, which is loosely based on the medieval *Fóstbræðra saga*. In "Notes on the Old Sagas," Laxness expressed the view that the pre-Christian view of life lived on after Christianity had arrived on the island, and that the 'saga literature' was a manifestation thereof:

This literature is an invaluable source for Icelandic culture in the thirteenth century. It is a source for a heathen view of life which still lives a good life in Iceland, despite a legally enacted superficial Christianity at a time when the ultimate power of the pope, *plenitudo potestatis*, did not come into doubt anywhere in the West.<sup>106</sup>

It should be noted that Laxness would later drastically revise his view on the medieval Icelandic sagas, and began to allow for more Christian influence on the saga writings.<sup>107</sup> In this particular article, however, Laxness maintained that fatalism entailed "the denial of Christian ethics."<sup>108</sup> Nordic fatalism is, in Laxness' opinion, unrelated to Christian ideas. He argues that according to the Christian understanding of divine providence, it is impossible for God and the good to not prevail, while "fatalism is inherently pessimistic."<sup>109</sup> He further explains this attitude in the following passage:

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105 Laxness' editions of the sagas caused an uproar in public discourse, and even angered the then minister of education, Jónas Jónsson of Hrifla (1885–1968), who ultimately took Laxness to court on the grounds that only the Icelandic state was allowed to publish the medieval sagas. For a detailed discussion of the saga affair, see Jón Karl Helgason, *Hetjan og höfundurinn*, 115–67.

106 Halldór Laxness, "Minnisgreinar um fornsögur," here 36.

107 See, for example, Halldór Laxness, "Harmleikur Dana á sextánda öld," in *Og árin líða* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1984). Laxness' attitude towards the sagas has been described in a number of articles: Ástráður Eysteinnsson, "Er Halldór Laxness höfundur Fóstbræðrasögu? Um höfundargildi, textatengsl og þýðingu í sambandi Laxness við fornsögurnar," *Skáldskaparmál* 1 (1990); Vésteinn Ólason, "Halldór Kiljan Laxness og forn sagnahefð: Fornsögurnar og ættjarðarástin," *Ný saga* 10 (1998); Jóhann Páll Árnason, "Halldór Laxness og heimur fornsagnanna," *Skírnir* 185 (2011).

108 Halldór Laxness, "Minnisgreinar um fornsögur," 34.

109 Halldór Laxness, "Minnisgreinar um fornsögur," 31.

The spirit of these works is, despite their Christian façade here and there, either one of immorality or of moral pessimism. Thus, horrendous events can take place, which are unthinkable in Christian literature from other regions in Europe; the best men, such as Gunnar of Hlíðarendi, the Sons of Njáll and Flosi, do the most horrible deeds, and the worst men begin to do good deeds, even though they have not been seen to regret or repent.<sup>110</sup>

These writings are to a large extent in harmony with the ideas of Sigurður Nordal and the Icelandic School, although Laxness went further than many of the proponents of the Icelandic School, especially regarding the question of Christian influence on the sagas.

#### 4 Concluding Remarks

The above discussion has thrown light on the historical arguments in which medieval Icelandic ‘literature’ has been described as distinct from the Christian religion, and how it has been argued to have constituted an independent sphere in society – autonomous from, or at least unaffected by, religion, in particular the Christian religion. It has shown that, in 20<sup>th</sup>-century historiography of medieval Iceland, there is a clear tendency to describe ‘literature’ as a continuous secular project throughout the history of Icelandic culture.

The first part of this paper explored how scholars who have analysed Icelandic medieval society from a socio-historical point of view, most importantly Jóhann Páll Árnason and Torfi Tulinius, have argued that the production of the literary works known as the sagas reflected the special character of Icelandic society. Both scholars frame such a view within a particular socio-historical framework. In Árnason’s opinion, the fact that writings emerged in medieval Iceland that were of a more secular spirit than anywhere else in the Christian medieval world, stands as evidence for viewing the culture of the Icelandic Free State as a highly specific episode in the history of the West. In a more detailed engagement with the literary products of the time, Tulinius argues that this particularity can be described in terms of an independent poetic or literary field – or at least the beginnings of such a field – in the sense of Bourdieu.

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<sup>110</sup> Halldór Laxness, “Minnisgreinar um fornsögur,” 35.

Part two of this paper contains an inspection of the historical period – roughly the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – during which Icelandic intellectuals came to consistently speak of medieval Icelandic culture and literature in terms of a distinction between the religious and the non-religious. Through analysis of the works of influential authors writing about medieval Icelandic literature at the time, the paper demonstrates how characteristics and ideals of a secular outlook became central to how the saga authors, the sagas, and their entire cultural context were described. The discussion is organised around four discursive themes: 1) rationalism, 2) realism and objectivity, 3) individualism, and 4) fatalism. Each of these themes contribute in their own way to how the medieval sagas – and, by extension, the concept of Icelandic literature – was distinguished from the religious sphere, and from Christianity in particular.

There are, at least, two ways to interpret the information outlined in this paper. On the one hand, one could accept the historical analysis of authors such as Gunnar Karlsson, Árnason and Tulinius. In doing so, one would entertain the notion that medieval Icelandic society contained a literary sphere which was so independent from other spheres that it could be seen as secular, and even described in terms of social differentiation. If this were the case, the intellectual discourse of the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could be seen as an early manifestation of such theorising, grounded in comparable historical analysis of the same socio-cultural context. Early 20<sup>th</sup>-century authors, such as Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, could, from such a point of view, be credited with having re-discovered ‘literature’ as a secular project of sorts – which then came to be described with more sociological  *finesse*  in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century by authors such as Árnason and Tulinius.

On the other hand, one could question the conclusions of Árnason and Tulinius, seeing them as reproducing a distinction that was constructed in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century discourse and which had been inherent to the nationalist historical paradigm. It goes without saying that such doubts would have to be supported by a more extensive, critical analysis of these scholars’ interpretations of the historical evidence, which is beyond the scope of the present paper.

In other words, the question as to whether there was something about medieval Icelandic society and literary culture which warrants a reading in terms of a distinction and differentiation between the religious and

the secular remains open. In that sense, this paper has only scratched the surface, and should be seen as the first step of more extensive research, where the actual historical context and not only later interpretations of it must be analysed in view of the heuristic concept of secularity. To such ends, the Multiple Secularities approach seems promising for future research on medieval Icelandic cultural history, offering new perspectives on well-known sources and old bones of contention, such as the relationship between the emerging church and the political elite, where the word 'secular' has been used without much consistency or precision.



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