

The Social Mythology of Medieval Icelandic Literature

Robert John Roy Avis

St John's College

University of Oxford

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Abstract

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This thesis argues that the corpus of Old Norse-Icelandic literature which pertains to Iceland contains an intertextual narrative of the formation of Icelandic identity. An analysis of this narrative provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between literature and identity, as well as the potency of the artistic use of the idea of the past. The thesis identifies three salient narratives of communal action which inform the development of a discrete Icelandic identity, and which are examined in turn in the first three chapters of the thesis. The first is the *landnám*, the process of settlement itself; the second, the origin and evolution of the law; and the third, the assimilation and adaptation of Christianity. Although the roots of these narratives are doubtless historical, the thesis argues that their primary roles in the literature are as social myths, narratives whose literal truth-value is immaterial, but whose cultural symbolism is of overriding importance. The fourth chapter examines the depiction of the Icelander abroad, and uses the idiom of the relationship between *þáttir* ('tale') and surrounding text in the compilation of sagas of Norwegian kings *Morkinskinna* to consider the wider implications of the relationship between Icelandic and Norwegian identities. Finally, the thesis concludes with an analysis of the role of *Sturlunga saga* within this intertextual narrative, and its function as a set of narratives mediating between an identity grounded in social autonomy and one grounded in literature. The *Íslendingasögur* or 'family sagas' constitute the core of

the thesis's primary sources, for their subject-matter is focussed on the literary depiction of the Icelandic society under scrutiny. In order to demonstrate a continuity of engagement with ideas of identity across genres, a sample of other Icelandic texts are examined which depict Iceland or Icelanders, especially when in interaction with non-Icelandic characters or polities.

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Abbreviations

- Cl-Vg* Cleasby, Richard, Gudbrand Vigfusson, and William A. Craigie. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957.
- Fritzner* Fritzner, Johan, and Finn Hødnebo. *Ordbog over Det gamle norske Sprog*. 4 vols. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1883–1972.
- Guta* Peel, Christine, ed. *Guta saga: The History of the Gotlanders*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1999.
- Gr. Ia, Ib* Vilhjálmur Finsen, ed. *Grágás: Islændernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid, udgivet efter det kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift*. 2 vols. Copenhagen: Brødrene Berlings Bogtrykkeri, 1852.
- Gr. II* Vilhjálmur Finsen, ed. *Grágás efter det Arnamagnæanske Haandskrift Nr. 334 Fol., Staðarhólsbók*. Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1879.
- ÍF 1* Jakob Benediktsson, ed. *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*. Íslenzk fornrit 1. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968.
- ÍF 2* Sigurður Nordal, ed. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. Íslenzk fornrit 2. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1932.
- ÍF 3* Sigurður Nordal, and Guðni Jónsson, eds. *Borgfirðinga sögur*. Íslenzk fornrit 3. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938.
- ÍF 4* Einar Ól. Sveinsson, and Matthías Þórðarson, eds. *Eyrbyggja saga*. Íslenzk fornrit 4. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1935.
- ÍF 5* Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed. *Laxdæla saga*. Íslenzk fornrit 5. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934.
- ÍF 6* Björn K. Þórólfsson, and Guðni Jónsson, eds. *Vestfirðinga sögur*. Íslenzk fornrit 6. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943.
- ÍF 7* Guðni Jónsson, ed. *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*. Íslenzk fornrit 7. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1936.
- ÍF 8* Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed. *Vatnsdæla saga*. Íslenzk fornrit 8. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939.
- ÍF 9* Jónas Kristjánsson, ed. *Eyfirðinga sögur*. Íslenzk fornrit 9. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1961.
- ÍF 10* Björn Sigfússon, ed. *Ljósvetninga saga með þáttum*. Íslenzk fornrit 10. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1940.
- ÍF 11* Jón Jóhannesson, ed. *Austfirðinga sögur*. Íslenzk fornrit 11. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1950.
- ÍF 12* Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed. *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Íslenzk fornrit 12. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954.
- ÍF 13* Þórhallur Vilmundarson, and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds. *Harðar saga*. Íslenzk fornrit 13. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1991.

- ÍF 14 Jóhannes Halldórsson, ed. *Kjalnesinga saga*. Íslenzk fornrit 14. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1959.
- ÍF 15 Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, and Peter Foote, eds. *Biskupa sögur I*. Íslenzk fornrit 15. 2 vols. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2003.
- ÍF 16 Ásdís Egilsdóttir, ed. *Biskupa sögur II*. Íslenzk fornrit 16. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002.
- ÍF 23 Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, eds. *Morkinskinna I*. Íslenzk fornrit 23. Reykjavík. Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2011.
- ÍF 24 Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, eds. *Morkinskinna II*. Íslenzk fornrit 24. Reykjavík. Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2011.
- ÍF 25 Ólafur Halldórsson, ed. *Færeyinga saga; Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd Munk Snorrason*. Íslenzk fornrit 25. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2006.
- ÍF 26 Snorri Sturluson. *Heimskringla I*. Íslenzk fornrit 26. Ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941.
- ÍF 29 Bjarni Einarsson, ed. *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sögum; Fagrskinna – Nóregs konunga tal*. Íslenzk fornrit 29. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1985.
- ÍF 34 Finnbogi Guðmundsson, ed. *Orkneyinga saga*. Íslenzk fornrit 34. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1965.
- KLNM *Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for nordisk middelalder: fra vikingetid til reformationstid*. 22 vols. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1956-1978.
- MSE Pulsiano, Phillip, et al., eds. *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*. New York, NY: Garland, 1993.
- ONP Nordisk Forskningsinstitut. *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog*. Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 1983-2011: <<http://www.onp.hum.ku.dk>>.
- Stur. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn, eds. *Sturlunga saga*. 2 vols. Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946.

Note: Throughout the body of this thesis, ‘q’ is used in spellings of normalized Old Norse terms; ‘ö’ is used in all Modern Icelandic words. Citations, in all cases, maintain the form used in the original.

1. Introduction

It is a commonplace in introductions to medieval Icelandic prose literature to remark that the word *saga* derives from the verb *segja*, ‘to say’. To whom, then, are the sagas said? Like all cultural artefacts, the sagas have spoken to generations of listeners and readers, who have interpreted them in different ways. These approaches are inevitably conditioned by the cultural milieu in which they are developed, and this analysis is certainly no different. Individual, communal, ethnic and national identities are tools used to structure the modern world, perhaps even more so at the beginning of the twenty-first century than during the century that preceded it. It is no surprise, therefore, that so attuned, the modern reader finds hints of these ideas in the cultural relics of the distant past. But whilst one is today more sensitive to these themes than past critics were, this thesis intends to demonstrate that whilst the modern terminology of ethnicity, identity and nationality may strike an ill and anachronistic note when used in conjunction with medieval literature, nevertheless obsessions with origins, human relationships, and the role of the individual within the collective are probably as old as humanity itself.

The desire to know more about oneself and the surrounding universe is a common element in many mythologies,¹ not least that body of texts most usually labelled so in the Old Norse-Icelandic context, the *Poetic* and *Prose Eddas*: ‘[v]itodð ér enn, eða hvat?’² Indeed the notion of an ‘Old Norse’ or ‘Scandinavian’ mythology is frequently equated with these stories of Ymir,

¹ The word ‘myth’ itself is derived from the Greek *μῦθος*, which can connote both speech and connected narrative. See ‘mythos, n.’ *OED Online*. March 2011. Oxford University Press. 24 May 2011 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/124705>>.

² Ursula Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969–2011) II: 14. ‘Do you still want to know, or what else?’ This forms a refrain throughout parts of the poem *Völuspá*, although different versions preserve differing numbers of iterations.

Yggdrasil, the gods and *Ragnarøk*.³ Mythologies do not, however, have to be about gods.

Numerous scholars have attempted to define *myth*, and few have come to the same conclusions. It must, inevitably, be considered a polyvalent term. At its broadest, Peter Heehs has suggested that ‘myth may be defined as any set of unexamined assumptions,’ which recalls the long-discussed opposition between *mythos* and *logos*.⁴ A common strand that may be discerned within a number of theories, however, is a desire to explain life through narrative. The idea of myth as ‘primitive science’ was formulated by Edward Tylor in the nineteenth century, and Robert Segal argues that this conception of myth as fundamentally rational anticipated Claude Lévi-Strauss.⁵ But this model, Segal argues, treats myths purely as protoscientific explanations of the world, and obscures one of their most important attributes: their narrative form. More recently, Bruce Lincoln has pithily defined myth as ‘ideology in narrative form.’⁶ In the context of this thesis, this provides a workable definition to which might be added Heather O’Donoghue’s observation that these narratives hold such significance for their audiences that they bear repetition, re-telling and indeed reformulation.⁷

The mythology contained within much of the prose literature of medieval Iceland is not that which pertains to the Scandinavian pantheon, but instead to Iceland itself. This is termed a ‘social

³ E.g. ‘*Gylfaginning* is the first part of Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*, and contains the most extensive and coherent account of Scandinavian mythology that exists from the Middle Ages.’ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) xi. The interrelations between *Eddaic* mythology and the *Íslendingasögur* and related texts has been examined by Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society. Volume 2: The Reception of Norse Myths in Medieval Iceland* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998).

⁴ Peter Heehs, ‘Myth, History, and Theory,’ *History and Theory* 33 (1994): 1. Heehs recapitulates this ancient dichotomy as between *mythos* as ‘the word as decisive, final pronouncement,’ and *logos* as ‘the word whose validity or truth can be argued and demonstrated’ (3).

⁵ See Robert A. Segal, *Theorizing About Myth* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999) 7-18.

⁶ Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999) xii.

⁷ Heather O’Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla: The Remarkable History of the Norse Myths* (London: I B Tauris, 2007) 6.

mythology' in this thesis; a regrettably clumsy formula, but, it is hoped, the least misleading. This is because the 'myth of Iceland' is not a unity, but a collection of stories, just like those found in the *Eddas*. In Lincoln's terms, it is a set of ideologies in narrative form. They often contradict one another, but they probably agree more often than they differ; and they explore beginnings, middles and endings, just as more overtly religious mythologies have long been held to do. This social mythology is, most importantly, of a profoundly intertextual nature. Although some texts, such as *Íslendingabók*, may appear to be distillations of this social mythology, none are complete expositions of it. Jürg Glauser has termed this the 'Mythencharakter' of Icelandic literature generally;⁸ Vésteinn Ólason argues that:

[I]t is precisely this connection between each saga and a central myth of master-narrative that unites them all and enhances their effect. All the sagas are like fragments of a single saga of destiny.⁹

Vésteinn's position requires a little moderation, however, for one aspect of this social mythology that must be grasped from the outset is that there is no 'master-narrative'. The social mythology of medieval Icelandic literature survives only amongst texts. One theme that shall emerge from this thesis is that the desire found within myth to find an answer, to hone a definition, to reach the 'master-narrative', is a desire whose fulfilment is infinitely postponed. *Saga*, then, is all the more apt,

⁸ Jürg Glauser, 'Begründungsgeschichten: der Mythencharakter der isländischen Literatur,' *Skandinavische Literaturgeschichte*, ed. Jürg Glauser (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2006) 40–50. See also Gerd Wolfgang Weber, 'Irreligiosität und Heldenzeitalter. Zum Mythencharakter der altisländischen Literatur,' *Speculum Norroenum*, eds. Ursula Dronke, Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, Gerd Wolfgang Weber and Hans Bekker-Nielsen (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981). This has also been posited by Martin Arnold: 'The matter of the past and the genesis of the Icelandic nation is, of course, at the centre of the whole *Íslendingasögur* genre and is comparable to a creation mythology.' Martin Arnold, *The Post-Classical Icelandic Family Saga* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003) 226.

⁹ Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas,' *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 112.

since these speaking texts are always discussing the idea of Iceland, but never agreeing precisely on what it is.

Previous generations have, perhaps, had more ambition. If the earlier twentieth century saw the *buchprosa* versus *freiprosa* debate as critical to the interpretation of the *Íslendingasögur*,¹⁰ the later twentieth century saw a new, interdisciplinary approach that brought a far subtler range of ethnographic and anthropological tools to bear on the sagas in the hope of casting light on the society which produced them.¹¹ Whereas once the sagas were seen simply as the records of memories of the settlement period, now they are, quite sensibly, held to be as much about the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelandic society which produced them. Many of these approaches have been successful, although some have betrayed a tendency to confuse the literary reification of Icelandic society with the society itself. Jesse Byock has declared of the sagas that:

They are [...] the indigenous social documentation of a medieval people, and as such they contribute a wealth of information about the functioning of a tradition-bound island culture.¹²

¹⁰ This differentiation was first introduced by Andreas Heusler, *Die Anfänge der isländischen Saga* (Berlin: Verlag der königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1914). The *buchprosa* argument is best exemplified by Sigurður Nordal, *The Historical Element in the Icelandic Family Sagas*, 15th W P Ker Memorial Lecture (Glasgow: Jackson, Son & Company, 1957). Following Carol Clover's introduction of the concept of the 'immanent saga,' a reconciliation between these two approaches is beginning to be effected: see Carol Clover, 'The Long Prose Form,' *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 101 (1986) and Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*, trans. Nicholas James (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹¹ These approaches are addressed throughout this thesis; for an outline of their principal aims and methods, see Jenny Jochens, 'Marching to a Different Drummer: New Trends in Medieval Icelandic Scholarship. A Review Article,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35.1 (1993).

¹² Jesse L. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin, 2001) 158. Byock reached the same conclusion to a discussion of the use of the sagas as historical record in the earlier Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988) 49-50. His most egregious claim for the use of the sagas as sociological documents can be found in the circular statement that '[t]wo factors made saga literature a suitable vehicle for expressing the interests and anxieties of medieval Icelanders. First, a model of feud is at the core of saga construction. Second, the peculiarly Icelandic way in which feud operated was a vital rather than a destructive force within the medieval community.' Jesse L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982) 25.

To use the term ‘social documentation’ is a step too far. The sagas, and the *Íslendingasögur* most particularly, are to modern tastes surprisingly ‘realist’ at least in the context of contemporary medieval European literature. But one ought not to forget that literary realism is relative.

Christopher Columbus brought *Mandeville’s Travels* with him to the New World, and one might presume this was not just for light reading.¹³ There is a temptation to read those Icelandic sagas that form the core of the texts analysed here, those which pertain to the settlement and development of a community on Iceland between c. 874 and 1264, as ‘social documentation’ because they are what the modern reader feels such documentation ought to look like. This thesis will seek to argue that this is a conflation of myth with history. The difference between the two could be said to be that the truth or otherwise of myth is irrelevant to its power and significance. ‘Documentation’ implies a completed process; it sees the sagas as encapsulating a historical snapshot of a past society. This is not what the sagas do. They are, *and continue to be*, in dialogue with each other, and this dialogue concerns a social mythology whose dynamism is now all the more potent. It cannot be proved, but it is tempting to propose that they were mythic when they were produced, for it is not the passing of time that has rendered their truth-value immaterial.

They are mythic, for the Iceland and Icelanders depicted within the Old Norse-Icelandic literary corpus are by no means necessarily the same people as the Iceland and Icelanders of history.

Jan Assmann, whilst formulating the concept of ‘cultural memory’, has argued:

Für das kulturelle Gedächtnis zählt nicht faktische, sondern nur erinnerte Geschichte. Man könnte auch sagen, daß im kulturellen Gedächtnis faktische Geschichte in erinnerte und damit in Mythos transformiert wird.

¹³ M. C. Seymour, ed., *Mandeville’s Travels* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967) xx.

Mythos ist eine fundierende Geschichte, eine Geschichte, die erzählt wird, um eine Gegenwart vom Ursprung her zu erhellen.¹⁴

According to Assmann, then, the very act of remembering and thus by association writing the past inevitably transforms those narratives towards the mythic. Kirsten Hastrup's anthropological studies of Icelandic literature have led her, quite rightly, to recognize the illusory nature of its pretensions to historicity:

To put it bluntly, my conclusion is that the Icelandic Freestate, *as such*, is a literary product. By means of an optical illusion the authors of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelandic literature created an image of an original 'free state' as the essence of Icelandic social identity. The separate law was interpreted as political sovereignty, the noble heathen as statesman. Thus thirteenth-century reality was in its own way transferred to the past, and diachrony represented in synchrony. In this representation 'Icelandicness' bore the marks of legal integrity and statesmanship, of kinship, loyalty and manly honour, and of an aboriginal cultural autonomy. In this way the local Icelandic community, which had only become defined as an ethnicity in the early twelfth century, was in the thirteenth century retrospectively identified as a self-contained and well-bounded society from its very beginning. The Freestate emerged as an identity unit, purportedly existing from 930.¹⁵

The writing of history is never an objective process – the conceptual gap between event and linguistic sign is too great for there ever to be a true, unbiased 'record' – but whereas a modern history seeks to distinguish between event and interpretation in as objective a manner as possible, medieval historiography overtly recognizes that narratives of the past reincarnate that past – often in

¹⁴ Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich: C H Beck, 1992) 52. 'For cultural memory does not count factual history, but only remembered history. One could also say that within cultural memory factual history is transformed into recollection and then into myth. Myth is a foundation story, a story which is told in the present to elucidate origins.' For a consideration of the utility of the concept of cultural memory in the study of Old Norse literature, see Pernille Hermann, 'Concepts of Memory and Approaches to the Past in Medieval Icelandic Literature,' *Scandinavian Studies* 81.3 (2009).

¹⁵ Kirsten Hastrup, 'Defining a Society: The Icelandic Free State Between Two Worlds,' *Scandinavian Studies* 56 (1984): 250–51.

a new guise – at the point of recollection.¹⁶ There is one aspect of Hastrup’s analysis which has, however, often been the cause of significant dispute. This is the issue of the ‘nation’. As mentioned earlier in this introduction, the cultural milieu within which modern critics work is one in which social identities are often founded upon nationality or ethnicity, terms that are in themselves not unproblematic to analyse. There is a substantial literature devoted to the consideration of whether the idea of a pre-modern nation is meaningful.¹⁷ Because this thesis does not presume to comment on the history of medieval Iceland, but on various mythological narratives within its literature, this issue can to a certain extent be circumvented. But these various theories of nationhood do provide useful tools for literary analysis. Anthony D. Smith, for example, provides a valuable framework for understanding the nature of the social mythology this thesis seeks to examine:

Myths of descent usually reveal several components and layers of legend. There are myths of spatial and temporal origins, of migration, of ancestry and filiation, of the golden age, of decline and exile and rebirth. [...] In each, a kernel of ‘historical truth’ is decked out with fantasises and half-

¹⁶ Witness the full title of the Latin and subsequently Old English world history commonly referred to by the name of its author, the *Orosius: Historiarum adversum Paganos Libri Septem* (‘A History Against the Pagans in Seven Books’). ‘History’ here has absolutely no claim to objectivity; indeed the very purpose of history is as a rhetorical tool.

¹⁷ Benedict Anderson has famously advanced the idea of the nation as the ‘imagined community’. This model is indeed attractive for the Icelandic situation, for such a community is arguably formed through collective engagement with a common social mythology. But Anderson declares that this form of nation is dependent on ‘print capitalism’, which, through the mass-market press and the newspaper, brings together people who might never before have had anything in common; what it is that they find they have in common, he would argue, is nationality, impossible before modern communications. These modern methods then reinforce the imagined community through linguistic standardization and the promotion of a common vernacular literature. Others have argued that the idea of the nation can still be applicable, if in a more nuanced way, perhaps most prominently Anthony D. Smith, who seeks to trace the continuities between ethnic and national identities. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2006), Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). For a concise overview of the various competing definitions of nationalism, see James G. Kellas, *The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991) 34-50.

truths so as to provide a pleasing and coherent 'story' of the ways in which the community was formed and developed.¹⁸

Clearly, this framework is directly applicable to Icelandic social mythology. Origins, migration, a golden age (of law, emblemized by the conversion narrative), and decline are all present, and are present behind all of the myths examined in this thesis. Smith goes on to make a further observation that is especially useful in clarifying the difficulty critical examination of these themes has often posed:

The result is a patchwork of myth and legend, and an accretion of materials which requires often painful sifting to arrive at any approximation to a 'scientific' account of communal history. But then the object of this profusion of myth was not scientific 'objectivity', but emotional and aesthetic coherence to undergird social solidarity and social self-definition.¹⁹

The process of analysing the sagas, in this thesis, is a process of mythography. This is not the sole approach that may be used; it cannot be denied that the texts of the Old Norse-Icelandic canon may be seen to occupy a continuum, from the more factual to the more fanciful, without regard to when they were composed. Within certain scholarly contexts the greater historical veracity of some texts as against others is important. But this distinction, whilst perhaps of contemporary significance when these texts were authored, and indeed of relevance to an understanding of the generic differences that have been identified within the canon, is less important than it may first seem for the analysis to be undertaken here, as this introduction has shown.

It is appropriate at this stage to sketch the outlines of the corpus of texts under examination in this thesis. Broadly speaking, this thesis examines a variety of texts produced in medieval Iceland

¹⁸ Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* 25.

¹⁹ Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* 25.

which pertain to Iceland between the settlement and the mid-thirteenth century. This is a large corpus, and the examples chosen may seem unduly selective, but it would be near-impossible to analyse all the texts that might fit these specifications within the space below. It is hoped that some equilibrium between breadth and depth may be found, however, by examining a selection of texts in detail in chapters 2.i, 2.ii and 2.iii, before considering a composite text, *Morkinskinna*, in somewhat greater detail in chapter 3. There is one text, Ari inn fróði Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*, that will be referred to throughout. It is discussed in detail in chapter 2.i below. It is not merely because it is such an early text that *Íslendingabók* is important; it is also due to its innate literary qualities. It must be regarded as one of the first interventions or summaries of the social mythology of medieval Icelandic literature, although it was far from being the last or even the most complete. Nonetheless in some aspects it has not been bettered, especially in its skilful synthesis of pre- and post-conversion Icelandic society.

As will become clear below, the generic labels traditionally assigned to the Old Norse-Icelandic prose corpus are far from unproblematic, although it is reasonable to define the *Íslendingasögur* as prose texts, composed in the broadest possible terms between c. 1200 and c. 1450, whose subject matter is predominantly the inhabitants of various areas of the island of Iceland, often, but not always, with prefatory material about their ancestors, and usually with an epilogue detailing their descendants. They survive mostly in later, often post-medieval, manuscripts of which there are a great number.²⁰ Icelandic scribes sometimes collected *Íslendingasögur* together, perhaps most

²⁰ The earliest surviving manuscript fragment of an *Íslendingasögur* is likely to be the θ fragment containing part of *Egils saga*, dated to the mid-thirteenth century (*ÍF* 2: lvi; Bjarni Einarsson, ed., *Egils saga* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003) ix.) Many sagas, considered medieval, survive only in seventeenth- or even early eighteenth-century manuscripts, such as *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* whose

famously in the fourteenth-century *Möðruvallabók* compilation,²¹ but the organizational principles behind surviving compilations varied; *Hauksbók*, for instance, an important witness to *Landnámabók*, contained a wide range of material from *Breta sögur* to *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða*.²² *Landnámabók* is an important text because it exists as a microcosm of the wider intertextual relationships between medieval Icelandic texts. It ought to be observed, of course, that it sits in an uncomfortable space between ‘text’ and ‘tradition’, the variety in its various redactions being so great. There was undoubtedly much ‘cross-pollination’ between *Íslendingasögur* and *Landnámabók*, with the result that many of the ‘prologues’ to the sagas recall the vignettes of settlers found in *Landnámabók*, whilst the latter evinces miniature sagas concerning some settlers and barely a sentence for others. It has also been suggested that *Landnámabók* had a social function as an authenticating text regarding landownership, which fuelled its redeployment in varied manuscript contexts.²³

Landnámabók interacts not only with literature, then, but also with the law. But in a discussion of medieval Icelandic literature, this distinction fades to insignificance. The chief source for the law of medieval Iceland is commonly labelled *Grágás*, but, like *Landnámabók*, use of this term connotes a unity that is not evinced by the surviving witnesses. The two principal codices are

earliest witness is a paper copy of the later seventeenth century (*ÍF* 11: cix; *MSE* 674), although these often appear to have been copied in modern times from medieval manuscripts (relatively) recently lost.

²¹ This manuscript contains versions (not all complete) of *Njáls saga*, *Egils saga*, *Finnboga saga*, *Bandamanna saga*, *Kormáks saga*, *Víga-Glúms saga*, *Droplaugarsona saga*, *Ólkoфра saga*, *Hallfreðar saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, and *Fóstbræðra saga*. See *MSE* 426–27; *KLNM* XII: 185–86.

²² For an analysis of the potential intentions of the compiler and scribe, Haukr Erlendsson, see Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, ‘Literary, Codicological, and Political Perspectives on *Hauksbók*,’ *Gripla* 19 (2008).

²³ This legal purpose is in no way incompatible with the development of a social mythology. William Sayers argues that: ‘*Landnámabók* sought to shore up the legitimacy of land-holding by documenting origins not simply in a registry but also in the more compelling form of a story [...] This is clearly an idealization of the past, a fiction of unity of purpose before there was unity of consciousness, political or ethnic.’ William Sayers, ‘Management of the Celtic Fact in *Landnámabók*,’ *Scandinavian Studies* 66.2 (1994): 150.

Konungsbók and *Staðarhólsbók*, both dating to the mid- to late-thirteenth century, although there are many fragmentary manuscripts containing legal material.²⁴ The narrative contained in *Íslendingabók* describing the transcription of the oral law at the farmhouse of Hafliði Másson gives a false impression of the state of the Icelandic law-codes in their current state.²⁵ The surviving manuscripts cannot have been in use as practical guides for legal transactions for very long, since the Norwegian crown imposed a new code, *Járnsíða*, on Iceland in 1271, and another (with greater commonality with *Grágás*), *Jónsbók*, in 1281. Indeed they may never have been used as law-codes as such. Patricia Pires Boulhosa has observed:

[T]he quantity and variety of legal texts copied in Iceland from the thirteenth century onwards indicates that there was a constant interest in old as well as new laws.²⁶

These texts may well have been in circulation, therefore, for other reasons; it is certainly to be suggested here that the law-codes which captured something of the legal arrangements of the settlement era may have been of mythic interest, not least in their literary interaction with the sagas. This is examined in chapter 2.ii, but *Grágás* has the potential throughout this thesis to illuminate certain aspects of many sagas beyond those, such as *Njáls saga*, where legal matters play a central role.

There are other texts which pertain to the social mythology of Iceland beyond those described so far. Several of the chapters below will discuss what is best termed the ‘prehistory’ of

²⁴ Edited as *Gr. Ia*, *Ib* and *Gr. II* respectively. For a brief outline of the manuscript tradition see Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote and Richard Perkins, eds. and trans., *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás*, 2 vols. (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 1980–2000) I: 13–16.

²⁵ *ÍF* 1: 23. Ari may well be mythologizing the genesis of the written law himself here.

²⁶ Patricia Pires Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway: Mediaeval Sagas and Legal Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 2005) 49.

Icelandic social mythology, texts which seem to address similar issues of identity-formation and social evolution but which pertain directly to older societies, such as Norway or Gotland, or, even, humankind itself. These narratives are found in a variety of sources, from the poetic and prose *Eddas*, to, perhaps most significantly in the context of this analysis, sagas of Norwegian kings. Such texts are introduced below as they appear. Often, these same sagas of kings also interrogated Icelandic social mythology, usually through their interaction with Icelandic characters in the royal court, the focus of chapter 3. Recent scholarship has explored productively the relationship between manuscript, compiler, texts and audience with reference to the *konungasögur*, not least because they are witnesses to the unusual relationship between Iceland as literary producer and Norway as literary consumer.²⁷ It is hoped that the reading that follows is complementary to these approaches, although no claim to literary history is here being made.

Literary culture arrived in Iceland with Christianity, and therefore it is to be expected that a proportion of the literature deals with religious themes. Saints' lives, the *Heilagra manna sögur*, are contained in some of the earliest extant Icelandic medieval manuscripts. These often comprised translations of Latin saints' lives, but stories of vernacular saints also appear concerning the Icelandic bishops Jón Ögmundarson, Þorlákr Þórhallsson, and Guðmundr Arason. These bishops were canonized (at least on a local level), but there is naturally overlap with the *Biskupa sögur*, a collection

²⁷ For example, Ármann Jakobsson, *Staður í nýjum heimi: Konungasagan Morkinskinna* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2002), Alison Finlay, ed., *Fagrskinna: A Catalogue of the Kings of Norway* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, *The Development of Flateyjarbók: Iceland and the Norwegian Dynastic Crisis of 1389* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2005). Changing attitudes towards the nature of these composite manuscripts of royal biographies are aptly embodied by the re-editing of the so-called *Íslendingaþættir* of *Morkinskinna* in the new *Íslenzk fornrit* edition of this text, *ÍF* 23 and 24. Most of these short stories of Icelanders were already published in the series, but extracted from their context and treated as miniature sagas, edited 'into' a grand multi-volume edition of the *Íslendingasögur*. It is somewhat analogous to the long controversy, not discussed here, regarding the merits or otherwise of excising skaldic verse from its near-universal prose contexts. These issues are discussed in further detail in chapter 3 below.

of texts concerning the early bishops of Iceland, often taken to include *Kristni saga*, a narrative of the conversion, which includes material about the first bishops of Iceland and which is examined in detail in chapter 2.iii. Some of these texts concern individual bishops, as, for example, *Þorláks saga helga* and *Páls saga*, whilst others, such as *Hungrvaka*, treat multiple bishops and, in this case, place the episcopal see of Skálholt at the centre of the narrative. Many of these sagas have been classified as *samtíðarsögur*, ‘contemporary sagas’, because they do not have the retrospective scope of the *Íslendingasögur* which generally treat events at least a century previous, although they also owe much to continental models of hagiography. Thus this generic classification is in some respects rather dubious, and for reasons of space they will not be examined in detail here.

Some of the bishops of Iceland also play an important role in those other sagas classified as *samtíðarsögur*, the component narratives of the *Sturlunga saga* compilation. These are discussed in chapter 4 as something of an epilogue to the social mythology here examined. This is not to say they are later productions; given the vagaries of dating the sagas, no attempt will be made here to argue for any texts significantly influencing others other than in a bidirectional manner, and it is likely that the sagas of the *Sturlungaöld*, the period between c. 1200 and 1264, circulated in a common literary culture with all the other examples cited above. In terms of tracing the outlines of this social mythology, *Sturlunga saga* deserves close scrutiny because it closes a narrative; it provides the ‘decline’ Smith’s taxonomy of myths demands. The initial chapters of this thesis will seek to demonstrate how this social mythology constructs a country of the mind, whose demise, in the form of the loss of political independence to Norway, is the concern of parts of *Sturlunga saga*. One ought not overemphasize the significance of this political manoeuvre, and, as this thesis will show, what is

depicted as being lost in *Sturlunga saga* goes far beyond this piece of constitutional history, whose importance has naturally been inflated ever since.

Of course, the variety of literature in circulation in medieval Iceland is often understated. It would be remiss not to observe that, although excluded from this analysis because they do not pertain to Iceland directly, some of the most popular texts in medieval Iceland were the *fornaldarsögur*, legends of a pre-settlement and pre-Christian ‘North’. But likewise to be found within medieval Icelandic libraries were histories of Rome, *Rómverja saga*, and of Biblical history, in the form of *Veraldar saga*. The horizons of the authors of the texts examined here went far beyond Iceland and indeed Northern Europe. Nevertheless, the quantity of self-reflexive literature produced is indisputably one of the ‘exceptional’ characteristics of medieval Icelandic society, and it is those texts that most strongly exhibit this self-reflexivity that are examined below.

Throughout this thesis translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. It seems apt to open by echoing the words of the author of *Hungrvaka*:

[H]efi ek jafnat þessu til hornspánar at mer sýnisk forkunnar efni í vera, en ek veit at mjök þarf um at fegra, ok skal ek þaðan at um vera meðan ek em til færri um at bæta.²⁸

²⁸ *ÍF* 16: 5. ‘I have likened this [text] to a horn-spoon, for it seems to me there is great promise in it, but I know that it needs much embellishment, and so I shall therefore seek to improve it as long as I am able.’

Three Foundation Myths

2.i. *Landnám* – The Settlement

The common English translations of terms for medieval Icelandic society have become so widely used they often risk obscuring the meaning of the terms they purport to represent. *Djóðveldi*, the Icelandic term for the Icelandic polity before c. 1262, has been variously translated as ‘commonwealth’ or ‘freestate’, both of which are extremely problematic.¹ Similarly, *landnám* may be equally well translated as ‘land-takings’ rather than ‘the settlement’, as it is usually rendered.² The atomization of the event the plural translation enables is a useful route into the complexities the narrative of *landnám* presents for interpretation: no longer is it a single event, but rather a combination of events; no longer is it in a finished, complete state, but a verb with a progressive aspect. Whilst ‘settlement’ will often be used below for the sake of readability, the telling plurality of the term ought always to be kept in mind.³

¹ *Commonwealth* either carries connotations of collectivist economics which are not applicable to medieval Iceland, or of a loose confederation of states (peculiarly common in a post-imperial setting: witness the once-‘British’ Commonwealth of Nations and the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States). The term’s use was perhaps inspired by Cromwell’s Commonwealth, but that seems hardly a relevant comparison. Patricia Pires Boulhosa objects that the term has ‘implications of anti-monarchic attitudes’ which are anachronistic, although this issue is certainly more complex. See Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway* 101. *Freestate*, meanwhile, has distinctly colonial overtones – Congo Free State, Irish Free State, Orange Free State, and so on. Danish use of the term *Fristat* doubtless falls in with this colonialist pattern. This is without even addressing the controversy over whether a ‘state’ existed that could be ‘free’ in the first place. Use of the Icelandic term – as is already common with *Alþingi* – would seem the most sensible solution; ‘rule of the people’ would be something close to a direct translation.

² ‘land-nám,’ *Cl-Vg*.

³ Indeed in the fields of history and archaeology the conception of the settlement as a single event has already been dismantled; Kevin Smith argues that the very idea of ‘settlement period’ ought to be abandoned, and the settlement instead understood as a ‘time-transgressive process which spanned different periods of time in different regions as the colonists expanded their areas of settlement and adapted North Sea lifestyles to the challenges of Iceland’s North Atlantic environment.’ Kevin P. Smith, ‘*Landnám*: The Settlement of Iceland in Archaeological and Historical Perspective,’ *World Archaeology* 26.3 (1995): 340. Perhaps more than any other

The *landnám* is one of the three salient narratives of Icelandic identity, but it is itself composed of multiple narratives. Some of these narratives are easily identifiable: many of them are *Íslendingasögur*, and describe the experience of emigration and settlement with respect to certain characters. Put simply, these narratives correspond directly with specific texts. Other narratives of the *landnám* exist too, however: these intertextual narratives are harder initially to discern, but are no less valid. They do not exist as discrete texts, but are formed through intertextual dialogue. For example, the narrative of King Haraldr's tyranny is only tangential in most of the sagas, but his role across texts within a wider narrative of emigration is far more complex, as will be discussed below. Therefore this analysis of the literary depiction of the settlement of Iceland will consider a series of distinct elements, that coalesce under the label of *landnám*, and which are all collectively concerned with the first, transformative processes associated with leaving one land and arriving, for good, in another. Firstly, narratives of emigration and settlement other than that of Iceland will be examined. These narratives, most of which were in circulation near-contemporaneously with the *landnám* as literary products, take place in a mythic prehistory and are thus set apart from the dateable arrival of the first settlers to Iceland. Nevertheless, they illustrate paradigms of migration and community-formation which resonate within the Icelandic situation. This will then lead to a discussion of the manner in which Iceland as an empty territory ready to be populated is realized in the literature. Secondly, the figure of Haraldr hárfagri, the king of Norway whose rule is alleged to have precipitated the settlement of Iceland, will be assessed as an intertextual character whose role appears

foundation myth, then, the *landnám* is a product of literature; indeed during the finalization of this thesis archaeologists discovered evidence of human dwellings near Hafnir in Reykjanes, abandoned between c. 770 and 880 according to carbon dating techniques, which would imply far more human interaction with Iceland before 874 than has traditionally been seen to be the case. (Þorgils Jónsson, 'Ný sýn á upphaf landnáms,' *Fréttablaðið* 4 June 2011: 4.)

to be in a process of continuous refinement. Thirdly, the representation of the actual arrival in Iceland and the actions of the first settlers will be considered. In so doing, the focus of this investigation will move from the widest of intertextual narratives – that of migration in medieval Scandinavian literature in general terms – to a common individual character across texts – King Haraldr – until concluding with some specific instances of settlement narratives in some of the *Íslendingasögur*.

One of the most important sources for any analysis of the Icelandic settlement is

Landnámabók. Jakob Benediktsson has described it as:

[A] book that was in the making for centuries; it is like a medieval church that one generation after another goes on building and altering, until it becomes very different from what the first builders had planned.⁴

This analogy is applicable to the narrative of the *landnám* itself, which is constructed across a wide corpus of Old Norse-Icelandic texts: it very much lacks an architect. The actual process of the historical settlement of Iceland remains obscure. Instead a large number of witnesses exist to the textual echoes this event caused, reflected, modulated, and adapted by many authors over a great many years. This loosening of the ties between text and the events purportedly described does not diminish the literary value of the *landnám*: indeed for the purposes of this analysis it even allots to them greater significance. Doubtless because of this, the *landnám* has become a polyvalent sign across saga literature. As Laura Taylor has noted:

Social practices such as the institution of marriage, the patterns of feud and subsequent vengeance and the technicality of the duel are represented in saga literature with a remarkable homogeneity. The consensus of these representations indicates a confidence and an ease with the details of their

⁴ Jakob Benediktsson, 'Landnámabók: Some Remarks on its Value as a Historical Source,' *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 17.4 (1969): 292.

description. But land and landownership do not share this homogeneity of representation: there is no consensus on the reconstruction of the past.⁵

The fact that this lack of consensus nevertheless generated so many repeated reengagements with the literature is a testament to its importance as a key component of Icelandic literary identity.

1. Precedents and prehistory

An interest in origins is practically universal to the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus – genealogies, so ubiquitous across generic categories, amply demonstrate this. Whilst this chapter’s focus is naturally on the literary depiction of the origins of the *Icelandic* settlement, it would be remiss not to address some of the accounts of the creation of other societies that occur within the literature of medieval Iceland. This is because these repeated engagements with concepts of discovery and settlement cannot be seen in isolation. Margaret Clunies Ross has argued, with reference to the pre-Christian mythology of Scandinavia, that ‘myths and mythic schemas were still powerful cognitive tools to think and live by during the period when most medieval Icelandic literature took shape.’⁶ This analysis seeks to broaden this concept of myth, and to take into account both extant social myths of origins – for example that of Norway – and the ‘new’ myth of Icelandic settlement that literature pertaining to Iceland reifies. The settlement of Iceland necessarily recalled ancient, mythic precedents. A distinction must be made between cosmological creation-myths and the myths of communal, ethnic, social, or national origins: the focus here is on the emergence of discrete, named communities, however anachronistic such entities may be historically.

⁵ Laura Taylor, ‘The Representation of Land and Landownership in Medieval Icelandic Texts,’ DPhil, University of Oxford, 2005, 3.

⁶ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* 2 23.

There are a number of texts which pertain to the origins of Norway. These clearly have a double significance: they do more than speak to myths of origin generally, since Norway also has a special status as Iceland's 'mother country', a complex relationship that is discussed in more detail in chapter 3 below. The most substantial account of Norwegian origins is Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga saga*, the 'prologue', essentially, to the *konungasögur* of *Heimskringla*. Alongside this stands the prologue to *Orkneyinga saga*, commonly referred to as *Fundinn Noregr*, which consists of the first three chapters of the text, and the similar but not identical *Hversu Noregr byggðist* found in *Flateyjarbók*. Another text that demonstrates useful parallels is *Guta saga*, a medieval Scandinavian settlement myth written in Old Gutnish rather than Old Norse, which might seem at the first instance less directly applicable. However, as the story of an insular settlement, it is in some respects closer to the Icelandic settlement myth and provides a useful analogue.⁷ This Icelandic myth is contained in multiple contexts, but chiefly *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*, along with a substantial number of the *Íslendingasögur*. These texts are drawn from across spatial and temporal boundaries: whilst *Íslendingabók* dates to the first third of the twelfth century,⁸ *Heimskringla* and *Guta saga* have both been dated to the first half of the thirteenth century.⁹ Whilst Snorri Sturluson states his admiration for Ari inn fróði's work in the preface to *Heimskringla* (and, in all probability, was

⁷ Despite the Scandinavian focus of this discussion, one should not be misled into thinking that the Icelandic settlement myths arose in a vacuum free from non-Scandinavian precedents. Jakob Benediktsson has noted the Biblical analogue to Flóki's ravens in *Landnámabók*, and Hermann Pálsson sees parallels to the story of Þorir Grímsson in *Landnámabók* in the Greek myth of Cadmus and in Virgil's *Aeneid*, and notes that redactions of these texts were available in medieval Icelandic (in *Stjórn* and *Breta sögur* respectively). See *ÍF* 1: 36 n. 5, Hermann Pálsson, 'A Foundation Myth in *Landnámabók*,' *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 12 (1988). Nevertheless, unlike Geoffrey of Monmouth's attempt to place the origins of the English with Brutus at Troy, the Icelandic myth of origin is firmly located in Northern Europe, so it is from here that the primary analogues will be drawn.

⁸ Siân Grønlie, ed., *Íslendingabók, Kristni saga: The Book of the Icelanders, the Story of the Conversion* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006) xiii.

⁹ *ÍF* 26: xxix; *Guta* xiii.

familiar with some form of *Landnámabók*),¹⁰ there is no evidence of an awareness of *Guta saga* in Iceland. Nevertheless, a comparison of these texts will illuminate a common act of writing the origin of a cultural community, an act essential to an understanding of the literature of a specific group of people in time and space.

Guta saga and *Ynglinga saga* both contain much fantastic content. In *Guta saga* it is recounted that before the arrival of fire, Gotland ‘dagum sank ok natum var uppi’.¹¹ *Ynglinga saga* contains one of the more famous mythical accounts of the creation of the Scandinavian landscape:

Þá sendi hann [Óðinn] Gefjun norðr yfir sundit í landaleitan. Þá kom hon til Gylfa, ok gaf hann henni eitt plógsland. Þá fór hon í Jötunheima ok gat þar fjóra sonu við jötni nokkurum. Hon brá þeim í yxnalíki ok færði þá fyrir plóginn ok dró landit út á hafit ok vestr gegnt Óðinsey, ok er þat klluð Selund.¹²

It is surely not without significance that this moment of seismic landscaping is couched in the transactional, legal language of land-taking and landownership (‘gaf hann henni eitt plógsland’, for instance). Taking land, quite literally, thus stands at the head of an origin myth whose setting is as far back in legendary prehistory as is possible, when the earth itself had yet to find its final form. These narratives of Gotland and Seeland, located in a mythic past, contain territories whose very physicality is unstable. This is not, of course, quite the case for Iceland, its tectonic instability notwithstanding. But like Iceland, the community of Gotland is first established by settlement from

¹⁰ ‘[O]k þykkir mér hans sagn öll merkiligust,’ *ÍF* 26: 6. (‘And his whole story seems to me most noteworthy.’) Of course, it is not clear whether Snorri is referring specifically to *Íslendingabók* or to other works by Ari now lost.

¹¹ *Guta* 2. ‘sank by day and rose up by night.’

¹² *ÍF* 26: 14-15. ‘Then he (Óðinn) sent Gefjun north over the sound in search of land. She then came to Gylfi, and he gave her an acre of land. Then she went to Giant-land and bore four sons with a certain giant. She drew them into the shape of oxen and yoked them to the plow and dragged the land out west into the sea opposite Óðinsey, and that was called Zealand.’ An expanded form of the story is also present in the *Prose Edda*: see Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning* 7.

abroad. The discoverer of Gotland, Þieluar, is not established within a genealogical sequence; in this respect, he is not dissimilar from Naddoddr víkingr who first named Iceland ‘Snæland’ according to *Landnámabók*.¹³ Nor, significantly, is Þieluar granted a prior ethnicity. Stephen A. Mitchell interprets this as follows:

The implicit value of having Þieluar appear from no specific point of origin is, of course, that the Gotlanders then owe no *a priori* allegiance to any of the national kingdoms. By thus beginning the tale *in media res*, the redactor avoids any possible constraints on the future loyalties and political freedom of the Gotlanders.¹⁴

This is a considerable point of deviation from the settlement myth of Iceland, in which Norway’s significance looms large. Nevertheless, Þieluar establishes a dynasty whose genealogy is inscribed on the new land itself. His three grandsons split their father’s inheritance and thus the origin of Gotland’s three districts is established. This marks the creation of the community of Gotland, as distinct from the geographical feature. Þieluar’s role as the father of Gotland-as-social-construct is cemented by his role in stabilizing the very island itself, and preventing it from sinking back into the sea: ‘En þann maðr quam fyrsti eldi a land, ok síþan sank þet aldri’.¹⁵ Settlement – the creation of a community – here has a direct physical effect on the land itself; Gotland becomes inhabitable, indeed simply thinkable as the physical dimension of a community, through the Promethean action of the first settler.¹⁶ This action transforms the land from the malleable, non-physical, mythic

¹³ *ÍF* 1: 34.

¹⁴ Stephen A. Mitchell, ‘On the Composition and Function of *Guta Saga*,’ *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 99 (1984): 171.

¹⁵ *Guta* 2. ‘And that man first brought fire to the land, and it never sank afterwards.’

¹⁶ Bringing fire to a new space later becomes integrated into the Icelandic myth of land-taking. See p. 56 below, and for a detailed analysis of the sources, see *KLNM* III: 579-81.

landscape found in the story of the creation of Zealand into a more concrete model, closer to the tangible landscape of Iceland.

Migrations have a special status in these myths of origin. The first hint of collective identity in Icelandic literature is related to the common situation of the settlers as emigrants from a different, established community: here Norway assumes her role as the ‘mother country’. But even if it might have been true that the early occupants of Iceland were simply Norwegians abroad, the literary precedents depict migration as an inherently transformative act. Snorri Sturluson’s *Ynglinga saga*, within *Heimskringla*, postdates *Íslendingabók* by a considerable number of years, but its source material, *Ynglingatal*, is dated to the late ninth century,¹⁷ although it only survives embedded within much later texts.¹⁸ Snorri’s saga includes an account of a forced westward migration which recalls the conventional myth of Icelandic emigration following the aggressive centralization of Haraldr hárfagri’s reign, but with the greater complication of direct familial identification between oppressor and emigrants. The Swedish king Ingjaldr burns down his hall containing six rival kings whom he had invited to a feast, and:

Eptir þetta lagði Ingjaldr konungr undir sik öll þessi ríki, er konungar höfðu átt, ok tók skatta af.¹⁹

This aggressive accumulation of authority over former petty kingdoms and the levying of taxes on his new acquisitions is strikingly redolent of the portrait of Haraldr hárfagri which is discussed in the

¹⁷ *MSE* 665.

¹⁸ The dating of *Ynglingatal* is somewhat contentious: Walter Åkerlund has argued for an earlier date, whilst more recently Claus Krag has put forward a date close to the composition of *Ynglinga saga*. The weight of critical opinion seems to lie with the former view. See Walter Åkerlund, *Studier over Ynglingatal* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1939), Claus Krag, *Ynglingatal og Ynglingesaga: En studie i historiske kilder* (Oslo: Norges allmenvitenskapelige forskningsråd, 1991), and more recently Bergsveinn Birgisson, ‘Inn i skaldens sinn: Kognitive, estetiske og historiske skatter i den norrøne skaldediktningen,’ PhD, University of Bergen, 2008.

¹⁹ *ÍF* 26: 67. ‘After that King Ingjaldr brought under his control all these kingdoms, which the kings had ruled, and made them pay tribute.’

following section. The narrative of emigration in *Ynglinga saga* is stretched over the reign of more than one king, however: although Ingjaldr pursued territory and tax in a similar manner to Haraldr, he was not ultimately successful, and burned himself in his hall when he realized that resisting the Danish King Ívarr would be futile. Ívarr, a greater consolidator of power than Ingjaldr or, perhaps, Haraldr, went on according to Snorri to rule Denmark and Sweden, precipitating the flight of the Ynglingar from their traditional power-base around Uppsala westwards, in the direction of Norway. The similarities in these two narratives only go so far: Snorri's interest is primarily in the genealogical history of a certain supposed family, the Ynglingar, rather than in the history of a people; and the degree of identification between Óláfr trételgja's new province and a discrete identity from the Swedes is complicated by the very fact that Óláfr, the architect of emigration, was himself the son of Ingjaldr, the first oppressive and centralizing tyrant. Myths of exodus, of course, are not exclusive to a Scandinavian cultural context; indeed the Bible surely provides many archetypes.²⁰ These are not, therefore, directly related narratives, but instead *Ynglinga saga* and its primary source *Ynglingatal* provide a number of analogues for one of the most important aspects of the Icelandic foundation myth: its definition of itself against an 'other', namely, centralized kingship. Whether medieval Iceland before 1262 really was a state or just a rebellious province of Norway is an irrelevance in the face of a literary tradition which repeatedly alludes to the transformative power of emigration.²¹

²⁰ Both in the Israelites' migration to Egypt at the invitation of Pharaoh, and of course in their departure from Egypt in the book of Exodus.

²¹ One should observe that these migrations follow a westward trajectory, a concept which appears integrated into an Icelandic perception of space: the east is Norway, the west new territory: Greenland, Markland and Vínland. There are further instructive analogues to the establishment of a migration myth in Iceland in the

Fundinn Noregr presents a different mythic origin of Norway, one which, as Elizabeth Ashman Rowe has observed, seems especially interested in onomastics.²² Its name is something of a misnomer; it does not recount the discovery of Norway as a new land in the same way that Naddoddr víkingr finds Iceland, but rather the conquest of Norway by Nórr (who again has his origins to the east; he is a descendant of Fornjótr, king of Finnland and Kvenland), to which he lends his name.²³ It is a myth of the origins of a *name*, rather than of a people or a land; but it does clearly anticipate Haraldr hárfagri's (re)unification of Norway:

Þaðan sneri Nórr aptr norðr til ríkis þess, er hann hafði undir sik lagt; þat kallaði hann Nórveg. Réð hann því ríki, meðan hann lifði, en synir hans eptir hann, ok skiptu þeir landi með sér. Ok tóku svá ríkin at smættask sem konungarnir tóku at fjölgask, ok greindusk svá í fylki.²⁴

The division of land upon the owner's death amongst his sons is, of course, one of the fundamental conventions of social practice that is observable across the canon. It mirrors the creation of the districts of Gotland discussed above. But it also emblemizes a tension that this system of inheritance has always caused – the potential for ever greater fragmentation, which pulls in the

sagas relating to the settlement of Greenland, *Grænlandinga saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða*, whilst an analogue to the ambiguous relationship between Iceland and Norway is also found in *Færeyinga saga*.

²² Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, 'Origin Legends and Foundation Myths in *Flateyjarbók*,' *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2003) 204. Rowe's article compares *Fundinn Noregr* with *Hversu Noregr byggðisk*.

²³ The text clearly evinces a fascination with the origins of names. Elizabeth Ashman Rowe posits a persuasive theory on the reasons for the many slight differences between these two texts in her examination of *Flateyjarbók*. She sees *Hversu Noregr byggðisk* as participating in a medieval Icelandic dialogue regarding the purity of royal bloodlines: of the proto-Norway the text describes, she asserts that '[t]he stability of such a society is thus doubly guaranteed: "natural" family ties reinforce the feudal allegiance of the aristocracy to the king, [...] and the identity between one's name and one's essential nature ensures that a man with the name of "earl" can never be transformed into a man with the name of "king."' This is in reference to her observation that '*Jarlar* are created when Nórr's grandson Guðbrandr refuses to be called "king" and gives himself the name "earl" instead.' Rowe, 'Origin Legends and Foundation Myths in *Flateyjarbók*,' 204-05.

²⁴ *ÍF* 34: 6. 'From there Nórr turned back north to the realm he had conquered: he called it Norway. He ruled over the kingdom for the rest of his life, and his sons after him, and they divided the land between them. And so the country diminished in size as the number of rulers grew, and so came to be divided into districts.'

opposite direction to Nórr's successful subjugation of the incumbent Norwegian kings. It is this atomization of 'Norway' that Haraldr hárfagri is seen to counter in the Icelandic settlement myth. The origin of the divisions of Gotland and Norway are notably different from the account in *Íslendingabók* of the creation of Iceland's quarters (*fjórðungar*), which is due more to a desire to improve the effectiveness of the legal system.²⁵ Despite the fact that Icelandic landownership continued the practice of dividing estates amongst heirs, the fact that it is not landownership but legal jurisdiction that precipitates the emergence of the basic administrative units of Iceland is a vindication of the perceived importance of the legal system in the establishment of the community, discussed in detail in chapter 2.ii below.

Having briefly examined these stories of the origins of peoples, the texts must be established within their literary context. All the texts discussed above, with the possible exception of *Guta saga* (which does have a linguistic companion in the law-code *Guta lag*), continue to exist within a corpus of texts relating to the same communities. In her analysis of *Ynglinga saga*, Marlene Ciklamini describes the function of the text within *Heimskringla* thus:

To provide mythical models of events and human behavior for intellectual guidance in the more familiar but confusing historic era. Interestingly, themes and motifs from *Ynglinga saga* recur throughout Snorri's account of the historic era, which suggests that *Ynglinga saga* served not only as an introduction to the historical part of the saga, but also as a thematic presentation of mythic and social verities.²⁶

²⁵ 'Þá talði Þórðr gellir tólu umb at lögbergi, hvé illa mǫnnum gegndi at fara í ókunn þing at sækja of víg eða harma sína' *ÍF* 1: 12. ('Then Þórðr gellir made a speech at the law-rock, about how unsatisfactory it was for people to go to an unfamiliar assembly to seek redress for killings or injuries done against them.')

²⁶ Marlene Ciklamini, 'Ynglinga saga: Its Function and its Appeal,' *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 8 (1975): 90. Ciklamini's concept of the mythic past forming a simpler, more straightforward framework for interpreting the more chaotic present will be revisited in chapter 4.

This conception of *Ynglinga saga* as a functional prologue that informs the text it precedes may be read as a microcosm of the literary function of texts such as *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* in relation to the narratives of Iceland and Icelanders pertaining to the period from the emergence of the *Þjóðveldi* into the thirteenth century. *Íslendingabók* is an especially important text since it is the earliest surviving in the vernacular.²⁷ The myths of the origin of a community developed and explored within it are reified as the ‘first text’ of a literary corpus which consistently interacts with the social constructs enumerated in *Íslendingabók*: settlement, conversion, and the politico-legal system that the *Alþingi* and its subordinate assemblies embody. *Guta saga* provides an analogous text in which mythic origin directly precedes an explication of how Gotland became a vassal of Sweden: as such, it presents a dramatically compressed story of a community that Icelandic literature plays out over many texts and several centuries. Whilst they are certainly not accurate as accounts of the foundations of real societies, they are of fundamental importance as accounts of the foundation of the *literary* manifestations of these societies.

Having established the literary precedents for the settlement of Iceland, the next step is to examine the manner in which the texts of Icelandic settlement situate both the island and the settlers before they come into contact. The literary *landnám* comprises a number of separate events, far from all of which are depicted in the *Íslendingasögur* and their generic companions, but which are instead contained in the archetypes of the settlement myth, *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*. The discovery of Iceland itself is naturally a logical precursor of any process of settlement, but it is only

²⁷ Grønlie, ed., *Íslendingabók, Kristni saga* ix. Some critics have suggested elements of *Landnámabók* may be earlier, but this hardly affects an interpretation of the canon left to posterity. See Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, *Studier i Landnámabók: Kritiska Bidrag till den Isländska Fristatstidens Historia* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1974) 203.

expounded upon at any length in *Landnámabók*. The text begins by immediately placing its own description of the origins of the Icelandic community within a wider, consciously *textual* tradition:

Í Aldarfarsbók þeiri, er Beda prestr heilagur gerði, er getit eylands þess, er Thile heitir ok á bókum er sagt, at liggi sex dægra sigling í norðr frá Bretlandi; þar sagði hann eigi koma dag á vetr ok eigi nótt á sumar, þá er dagr er sem lengstr.²⁸

The very first location allotted to Iceland is one within a book, not a physical space. The introductory passage as a whole serves to plot Iceland at a number of contextual coordinates: within not just a book, but an *authorized* book, with the reference to Bede as ‘prestr heilagur’; within a longer, ultimately classical tradition of an extreme northern location by way of the name ‘Thule’; at a geographical location related both to the sailing ability of the vessels of Bede’s time and to Britain; and environmentally with the inclusion of information on the impact on daylight of the island’s northern latitude.²⁹ Immediately after these contexts, Iceland’s discovery is given a temporal context by its relation to the reigns of various rulers across Europe, in something approaching a hierarchy of importance: from ‘Adriánus páfi í Róma ok Jóhannes eptir hann,’ through the Holy Roman and Byzantine emperors, to the kings of Norway, Sweden and then Denmark, before finishing with

²⁸ *ÍF* 1: 31. ‘In *Aldarfarsbók* [‘Book of the course of times’, either *De temporibus* or *De temporum ratione*] which the holy priest Bede wrote, he mentions an island called Thule, and in other books it says that it lies six days’ sailing north from Britain. He said that no daylight comes there in winter nor night in summer, on the day which is longest.’ Quotations from *Landnámabók* are drawn from the *Sturlubók* redaction unless otherwise indicated.

²⁹ This desire to establish the precise location of Iceland has mythic precedents in the *Eddas*, where the search for knowledge is not purely for new narratives, but for conceptual coordinates; Carolyne Larrington suggests that *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál* seek to locate the gods ‘in a knowable and mappable elsewhere, contiguous with and capable of permeating the human world.’ Carolyne Larrington, *Vafþrúðnismál and Grímnismál: Cosmic History, Cosmic Geography*, *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, eds. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (London: Routledge, 2002) 74.

‘Elfráðr enn ríki í Englandi’ and the king of Dublin and jarl of Orkney.³⁰ This sequence demonstrates a thoroughly church-centric attitude towards the hierarchy of European powers, but it also evinces a more parochial concern with Iceland’s immediate neighbours. Once the popes and emperors are out of the way, Iceland is established well within the space which the sagas explore, north-western Europe, where there is a far greater density of political information – down even to the current jarl of Orkney. But the presence of these great realms sets the stage for their later literary role, as the twin foci of foreign expeditions: pilgrimage to Rome and service to the Byzantine Emperor in Miklagarðr (Constantinople).

Landnámabók then goes on to describe the first exploratory trips to Iceland. The land subsequently discovered in the following passages of *Landnámabók* almost universally receives the praise of those who witness it. Naddoddr víkingr and his party ‘lofuðu mjök landit’, as does Garðarr Svávarsson, who ‘fór þá til Nóregs ok lofaði mjök landit.’³¹ The hospitality of the Icelandic landscape does seem to be an important part of this myth; this could well be connected to the dwindling ability of that same land to support a large population following its deforestation and the likely concomitant soil erosion that took place after the settlement.³² It is notable that the first two names for Iceland, Naddoddr’s ‘Snæland’ and Garðarr’s ‘Garðarshólmr’ fail to stick. Whilst Iceland’s physical stability is not in question as Gotland’s was, its linguistic identity is still fluid. Despite this, the first two

³⁰ *ÍF* 1: 32. ‘Pope Adrian in Rome and John after him,’ ‘Alfred the Great in England.’ These names presumably refer to Popes Adrian II (867–72) and John VIII (872–82). Alfred’s reign was from 871–99.

³¹ *ÍF* 1: 34–36. ‘gave much praise to the land’, ‘then set out to Norway and gave great praise to the land.’

³² Could there be a nostalgic reimagination of a bounteous landscape in the compiler’s note at the end of the story of Garðarr that ‘var þá skógr milli fjalls ok fjöru’? *ÍF* 1: 36. (‘There was then forest from mountain to shore,’ a description also found in *Íslendingabók*, *ÍF* 1: 5.) Of course, the fecundity of new territory is a literary trope that Eiríkr rauði recognized in his eponymous saga when he decided to name Greenland so, ‘því at hann kvað menn þat mjök mundu fýsa þangat, ef landit hétí vel,’ *ÍF* 4: 201. (‘Because, he said, people would be keener to go there if the land had a good name.’)

explorers do work within the text to solidify Iceland as a conceptual unit. Naddoddr discovers a territory, but at this stage it is simply a ‘land mikit’. *Landnámabók*’s sparse prose powerfully evokes the image of Naddoddr arriving from the east and looking westwards at an as-yet unbounded territory:

Deir gengu upp í Austfjörðum á fjall eitt hátt ok sásk um víða, ef þeir sæi reyki eða nokkur líkindi til þess, at landit væri byggt, ok sá þeir þat ekki.³³

Garðarr’s trip transforms the idea of Iceland because he establishes it to be an island (and so enables it to be written onto Bede’s classically-inspired Thule).³⁴ The last exploratory trip to Iceland before Ingólfr Arnarson’s first settlement is that of Flóki Vilgerðarson, who is said to be searching for Garðarshólmr, and it is he who names the island *Ísland*, a territory which fails to impress him. These three journeys form a neat triadic structure, but it is curious why it is Flóki’s trip which is presented as effecting the permanent linguistic transformation of the new island into *Ísland*. Perhaps it is because of the scriptural weight he carries, should he be modelled on Noah when he dispatches ravens to ascertain whether there is land.³⁵

An extended narrative of Ingólfr Arnarson’s settlement follows, but *Landnámabók* does not, strictly speaking, describe him as the first settler. When Garðarr had over-wintered in Iceland, a strange story is recounted about one of his crew:

Um várit, er hann var búinn til hafs, sleit frá honum mann á báti, er hét Náttfari, ok þræl ok ambátt. Hann byggði þar síðan, er heitir Náttfaravík.³⁶

³³ *ÍF* 1: 34. ‘They climbed a high mountain in the east fjords and scanned the whole landscape to see if they might spot smoke or any other evidence that the land was settled, but they saw nothing.’

³⁴ It is important for the fate of the Icelandic settlements in Greenland that that territory was never circumnavigated. It thus always retained a sense of ‘other’ and of ill-definition, which may have led to the failure of any Old Norse-Icelandic literature to demonstrate the existence of a distinctly ‘Greenlandic’ identity.

³⁵ See *ÍF* 1: 36 n. 5.

³⁶ *ÍF* 1: 36. ‘In the spring, when he had put to sea, a man called Náttfari split off from him in a boat, with a slave and a bondwoman. He settled there afterwards at a place called Náttfaravík.’ The *Hauksbók* redaction

Náttfari here appears to have a claim to be the first settler of Iceland. He reappears later in the text, albeit in rather unhappy circumstances:

Náttfari, er með Garðari hafði út farit, eignaði sér áðr Reykjadal ok hafði merkt á viðum, en Eyvindr rak hann á braut ok lét hann hafa Náttfaravík.³⁷

Jakob Benediktsson suggests that perhaps Náttfari's method of staking his claim through marking trees was invalid, and so Eyvindr was justified in taking his land.³⁸ However, the corresponding passage in *Reykðæla saga* seems very much to place the demands of the later, free-born settler over his enslaved predecessor:

Náttfari sá, er Garðari hafði út fylgt, hafði eignat sér Reykjadal áðr ok markat til á viði, hversu vítt hann skyldi eiga. En er Eyvindr fann hann, gerði hann honum tvá kosti, at hann skyldi eiga Náttfaravík, ella alls ekki. Þangat fór Náttfari.³⁹

It is true that Náttfari's method of enforcing his land-claim is unconventional, but then again there is no consistency in the representation of this process. It seems much more likely that Náttfari's claim founders upon the fact that, as a slave, his land claim is contingent on the permission of later, free-born settlers. This is in sharp contrast to the slave Vífill, who is freed by Ingólfr and given his own land at Vífilstóptir, and who 'varð skilríkr maðr,'⁴⁰ presumably because he was given his freedom according to procedure, rather than cutting himself off from his owner as Náttfari quite literally did.

does not mention that Náttfari had any companions in the boat but is unequivocal about his own status as a slave: he is named as 'Náttfari þræll' (*ÍF* 1: 35).

³⁷ *ÍF* 1: 276. 'Náttfari, who had come out [to Iceland] with Garðarr, had already claimed Reykjadalr and marked the trees, but Eyvindr [Þorsteinsson] drove him away, letting him have Náttfaravík.' The *Hauskbók* redaction omits Eyvindr's magnanimity and has Náttfari simply driven off his land (*ÍF* 1: 277).

³⁸ 'E[f] t[il] v[ill] hefur sú landnámsaðferð að merkja á viðum ekki verið talin gild.' *ÍF* 1: 277 n. 6.

³⁹ *ÍF* 10: 151. 'Náttfari, the one who had accompanied Garðarr out [to Iceland], had already claimed Reykjadalr and marked the trees around the area he claimed. But when Eyvindr found him, he gave him two choices: that he should have Náttfaravík, or else nothing at all. Thus Náttfari went there.'

⁴⁰ *ÍF* 1: 45. 'became an honest man.'

Laura Taylor has also analysed this incident, and suggests that Náttfari's unorthodox separation from Garðarr may have given him the status of a runaway slave, and further that there might be something unseemly in running away with an *ambátt* ('slave-woman').⁴¹ If this story predates *Íslendingabók*, perhaps its awkwardness in fitting within the narrative structure of Iceland's settlement leads to Náttfari's absence from inscription into *Íslendingabók* as part of the Icelandic settlement myth. Instead he becomes a character of local interest, mentioned only in the saga above and in *Landnámabók*. *Íslendingabók* is unequivocal: 'Ingólfr hét maðr nórœnn, es sannliga es sagt at fœri fyrst þaðan til Íslands.'⁴² It is quite possible – even likely – that the redactors of *Landnámabók* and *Reykðæla saga* saw no contradiction between the prior settlement of Náttfari and Ingólfr's status as the first settler. Náttfari's origins precluded his incorporation into the myth of Icelandic community formation. The *Þórðarbók* redaction of *Landnámabók* contains the following oft-quoted statement:

Þat er margra manna mál, at þat sé óskyldr fróðleikr at rita landnám. En vér þykjumsk heldr svara kunna útlendum mǫnnum, þá er þeir bregða oss því, at vér séim komnir af þrælum eða illmendum, ef vér vitum víst vára kynferðir sannar, svá ok þeim mǫnnum, er vita vilja forn fræði eða rekja ættartǫlur, at taka heldr at upphafi til en hǫggvask í mitt mál, enda eru svá allar vitrar þjóðir, at vita vilja upphaf sinna landsbyggða eða hvers(u) hvergi til hefjask eða kynslóðir.⁴³

⁴¹ Taylor, 'Land and Landownership,' 23–28.

⁴² *ÍF* 1: 5. 'Ingólfr was the name of a Norwegian man, and it is truly told that he first went from there to Iceland.'

⁴³ *ÍF* 1: 336 n. 1. 'It has often been said that writing about the settlement is irrelevant information. But it seems to us we can better answer foreigners when they reproach us for being descendants of slaves or wicked men if we know for certain the proof of our ancestry. And for those people who want to know about ancient learning or to trace genealogies, it is better to start at the beginning than to be running into the middle of the matter, and besides, it is true of all wise peoples that they want to know about the beginning of their society and how each of their races originated.' *Þórðarbók* (AM 112 and 116 fol.) is a seventeenth-century redaction of *Landnámabók* compiled by the churchman Þórður Jónsson. Jakob Benediktsson argues that this passage, which survives only in *Þórðarbók*, could well have been written by the author of the lost *Styrmisbók* (see *ÍF* 1: cii-civ); further discussion of the various versions of *Landnámabók* may be found below in section 2.i.2.

It would clearly not do for the official first settler of Iceland to be a slave. Instead Náttfari finds a place for himself within the extended narrative of settlement in *Landnámabók*, but is never integrated into the condensed story of the polity in *Íslendingabók* or the wider saga narrative of settlement.⁴⁴ Instead he is integrated into the landscape in a manner recalling Auðr's comb, whose loss precipitated the naming of a headland 'Kambsnes' as she journeyed across her *landnám*.⁴⁵

The Icelandic settlement has clear mythic precedents, which more than anything else stress the transformative potential of emigration. A westward bias can also be discerned: in this respect the Icelandic settlement myth falls into a continuum established by the locating of the earliest mythic kings of Norway to the east, in Sweden. However, as well as these culturally indigenous, mythic precedents, an examination of one of the chief exponents of the settlement myth, *Landnámabók*, demonstrates a desire to locate Iceland and its settlers within other frames of reference, such as European learning, religion, and royalty. Finally, the first glimpses of Iceland recounted in the texts demonstrate the transformative potential of the encounter between the foreign explorer and the undefined landscape. Iceland is gradually transformed from a 'mikit land' to a circumscribed island, and stories such as that of Náttfari begin to populate this new textual landscape with topographical signifiers. The unknown is thus translated into the known. However, whilst the territory of Iceland gains some form of definition at this stage, the community does not. The 'collective social action' Hastrup asserts as necessary for the emergence of community and identity cannot take place with so

⁴⁴ *Kjalnesinga saga* provides a typical example of Ingólfr's reputation: 'Helgi átti Þórnýju, dóttur Ingólfs í Vík, er fyrst byggði Ísland' *ÍF* 14: 3. ('Helgi married Þórný, the daughter of Ingólfr of Vík, who first settled Iceland.')

⁴⁵ See p. 53 below.

few settlers.⁴⁶ The reasons behind *mass* emigration to Iceland now demand examination. Whilst historians and anthropologists have posited numerous theories for the migration westwards, the focus here must stay on the the reasons for such a great undertaking found in the literature. Whilst *Landnámabók* advances several causes for the settlement, the actions of one character in particular resonate most within the corpus as a whole.

2. A flight from tyranny

Few characters loom larger in the myth of the settlement of Iceland than King Haraldr hárfagri. His overbearing behaviour, be it through heavy taxation or outright persecution, is cited as a reason for emigration to Iceland in *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*, as well as in the opening sections of a number of *Íslendingasögur*, including four of the most studied, *Egils saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Grettis saga*.⁴⁷ Haraldr hárfagri has also long provided an interface between the treatment of royal biographies as part of a ‘historical’ tradition – exemplified for Haraldr, arguably, by Snorri Sturluson in his *Heimskringla*,⁴⁸ and corroborated by *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* – and the

⁴⁶ Kirsten Hastrup, *Island of Anthropology: Studies in Past and Present Iceland* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1990) 79.

⁴⁷ In addition to these the following sagas contain redactions of some form of the myth of Haraldr’s tyranny: *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Harðar saga*, *Flóamanna saga* and *Víglundar saga*. Additionally, King Haraldr is mentioned in the openings of *Kormáks saga*, *Svarfdæla saga* and *Hrafnkels saga*, but mainly as a historical reference-point.

⁴⁸ It is worthwhile bearing in mind *Heimskringla*’s account of the discovery of Iceland whilst analysing the sources below: ‘Eptir orrostu þessa fekk Haraldr konungr enga mótstöðu í Nóregi. Váru þá fallnir allir inir mestu fjándmenn hans, en sumir flýðir ór landi, ok var þat allmikill mannfjöldi, því at þá byggðusk stór eyðilönd. Þá byggðisk Jamtaland ok Helsingjaland, ok var þó áðr hvárt tveggja nokkut byggt af Norðmönnum. Í þeim ófriði, er Haraldr konungr gekk til lands í Nóregi, þá fundusk ok byggðusk útlönd, Færeyjar ok Ísland. Þá var ok mikil ferð til Hjaltlands, ok margir ríkismenn af Nóregi flýðu útlaga fyrir Haraldi konungi ok fóru í vestríking, váru í Orkneyjum ok Suðreyjum á vetrum, en á sumrum herjuðu þeir í Nóreg ok gerðu þar mikinn landsskaða. Margir váru þeir ok ríkismenn, er gengu til handa Haraldi konungi ok gerðusk hans menn ok byggðu lönd með honum’ *ÍF* 26: 117-18. (‘After this battle [Hafsfjörðr] King Haraldr received no more resistance in Norway. All his greatest enemies had now fallen, and others fled the country: and that was a great multitude, because then great wastelands were settled. Jamtaland and Helsingjaland were then populated,

Íslendingasögur, whose fictive elements have long been acknowledged.⁴⁹ But it ought to be noted that depending on one's definition of the *Íslendingasögur* canon, a majority of sagas do *not* mention Haraldr. By far the most significant example is, of course, *Njáls saga*, which mentions Haraldr hárfagri only in genealogies of later kings. Furthermore, Haraldr's status as a historical figure has been questioned. Sverrir Jakobsson argues that 'Harald hárfagres historiske stilling minner nesten enda mer om Arthur,' and believes many of the stories about him were confused with those of the later king Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarsson.⁵⁰ The Battle of Hafrsfjörðr, which saw Haraldr's status as a Norwegian overlord confirmed and is cited by several sagas and *Landnámabók* as the cause of a number of migrations, probably occurred well after the settlement had begun, and may even have been a defensive battle.⁵¹

although they had both already been somewhat settled by Norwegians. During the strife when King Haraldr was taking territory in Norway, the Faeroes and Iceland were discovered overseas and settled. There was also a great exodus to the Shetlands, and many powerful men outlawed by King Haraldr fled from Norway and went raiding in the west. They were in Orkney and the Hebrides for the winter, but in the summer they harried in Norway and did much damage to the land. But there were also many great men who placed themselves at King Haraldr's disposal and became his men and settled the country with him.')

⁴⁹ This view is encapsulated by Jesse Byock: 'Yet clearly it was the growth of royal authority in Norway to which Icelandic writers attributed the decisions of many of their forefathers to leave that country. And Haraldr's autocratic actions may indeed have impelled some men to seek a fresh start in a newly discovered land.' Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* 54-55.

⁵⁰ Sverrir Jakobsson, "'Erindringen om en mægtig Personlighed" Den norsk-islandske historiske tradisjon om Harald Hårfagre i et kildekritisk perspektiv,' *Historisk tidsskrift* 81.2-3 (2002): 218, 228. 'Haraldr hárfagri's historical position recalls [King] Arthur more than anything.' For comment on this hypothesis, see Peter Sawyer, 'Ohthere's Destinations: Norway, Denmark and England,' *Ohthere's Voyages: A Late 9th-century Account of Voyages Along the Coasts of Norway and Denmark and its Cultural Context*, eds. Janet Bately and Anton Englert (Roskilde: Viking Ship Museum, 2007) 136-39.

⁵¹ For details of the dating of the battle – potentially to around 900 – see Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) 89. Claus Krag notes that 'if we work from the verses [*Haraldskvæði*] that are a contemporary source, the situation (not the outcome of the battle) appears to have been different: here it is Harald in his south-west Norwegian kingdom who was attacked by rivals that came from the east, probably with Danish support' (his emphasis). Claus Krag, 'The Creation of Norway,' *The Viking World*, eds. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008) 646-47.

The author of *Grettis saga* was fully conscious of the significant roles King Haraldr and this battle in particular play in saga narratives, as may be seen when relating his redaction of the Battle of Hafrsfjörðr, an event that several sagas portray as the final victory of Haraldr’s campaign of unification:

[H]öfðu þeir hváirtveggju mikit lið. Þessi orrosta hefir einhver verit mest í Nóregi; koma hér ok flestar sögur við, því at frá þeim er jafnan flest sagt, er sagan er helzt frá gǫr.⁵²

According to the myth explored below, Haraldr’s tyranny is thus the most common reason that the ancestors of the Icelandic saga-authors left Norway to establish a new community on Iceland. *Harðar saga* provides a condensed summary of the key features of the role of Haraldr in the settlement narrative:

Á dögum Haralds ins hárfagra byggðist mest Ísland, því at menn þoldu eigi ánauð hans ok ofríki, einkanliga þeir, sem váru stórrar ættar ok mikillar lundar, en áttu góða kosti, ok vildu þeir heldr flýja eignir sínar en þola ágang ok ójafnað, eigi heldr konungr en öðrum manni.⁵³

The two paired sets of terms used here to describe King Haraldr’s rule, *ánaud-ofriki* and *ágang-ójafnað*, are key to a powerful myth that permeates the representation of Icelandic society in all its manifestations, beyond simply the narrative of the settlement. These four terms themselves are worthy of closer examination. All are formed of a root with an independent meaning and a modifying prefix; one finds ‘on-distress’ (with an instrumental sense of causing distress to occur –

⁵² *ÍF* 7: 5. ‘They both had large armies. This battle was one of the biggest in Norway; it appears in most sagas, because most is told of such things that the sagas relate.’ It is no longer true that a majority of surviving sagas relate the Battle of Hafrsfjörðr, but this is further evidence of the ubiquity of the myth of Haraldr’s tyranny within the vernacular tradition.

⁵³ *ÍF* 13: 3. ‘In the days of Haraldr hárfagri most of Iceland was settled, because people would not tolerate his oppression and tyranny, especially those who were of important families and proud minds, and who had good prospects, and they would rather abandon their property than suffer aggression and injustice, either from a king or anyone else.’

nauð is cognate with the English *need*), ‘over-power’, ‘on/in-going’ (cf. *oppression*, *invasion*) and ‘unequal’. They are altered terms, words that when the language user pauses to think contain other meanings – sometimes complementary, sometimes oppositional – which broaden their semantic range. This thus correlates with the view advanced here that Haraldr hárfagri becomes a symbol of all that Icelandic identity ostensibly rejects. The Iceland the literature here presents is one where aggression may be countered by collective action; where power is sufficiently dispersed that consensus and arbitration are required to resolve disputes; and where some form of equality before the law is supposed to exist. The lexical terms used thus render Haraldr’s reign, predating the existence of an Icelandic society, already a modified, even corrupted form of the new society it spawned. To read the sequence of events in a strictly linear manner is to miss the point: Haraldr’s oppression gives the Icelanders the chance to demonstrate what they already are. The fact that it is *einkanliga* those of *stórrar ættar* who decided to forsake their material goods for the principle of a more equitable society is the basis of a powerful myth of the aristocratic origins of the Icelanders that persisted well into the twentieth century.

The temporal distance of the likely author of *Harðar saga* from the settlement itself is probably another two hundred years greater from the event than Ari was when he wrote *Íslendingabók*, for which he at least attempts to establish legitimate sources.⁵⁴ It is thus straightforward to interpret this redaction of the myth as being a retrospective projection of the values Icelandic society deemed itself to possess: nobility coupled with fairness, independence of

⁵⁴ For the likely date of *Íslendingabók* see above; the form of *Harðar saga* that survives to the present cannot have been written earlier than the fourteenth century on linguistic grounds, but an earlier version may have existed. See *MSE* 269.

means coupled with independence of thought.⁵⁵ Ari's account is itself the earliest document of the process of foundation-myth formation, but *Harðar saga* evinces a later form of this myth, further adapted as a prologue to a consciously literary text and greatly simplified.

There is, then, no better microcosm of the creation and mutation of the settlement story than the example of Haraldr, and it is a worthwhile exercise to trace his varying presentation in the literature. It begins ambiguously: Ari's redaction of the story of emigration does mention Haraldr as something of an antagonist, but in far subtler way than later versions of the story:

En þá varð fjr manna mikil mjök út hingat yr Norvegi, til þess unz konungrinn Haraldr bannaði, af því at hónum þótti landauðn nema. Þá sættusk þeir á þat, at hverr maðr skyldi gjalda konungi fimm aura, sá es eigi væri frá því skiliðr ok þaðan færi hingat.⁵⁶

King Haraldr appears to have long been associated with heavy taxation, but a sense of true tyranny is absent from Ari's work. Furthermore, Haraldr is a more powerful king than in the *Harðar saga* redaction since his authority continues to obtain with respect to the process of moving to Iceland itself. Rather than a defiant flight from tyranny, the reader is given no reason to believe that the

⁵⁵ The issue of the aristocratic nature of the early settlers is complex: whilst it must in part be an attempt to emphasize the ancestral prestige of Icelandic society, it may well have some basis in fact regarding the *leaders* of the settlement: Laura Taylor notes that early emigrants moving their households wholesale would need to have been reasonably wealthy to afford to do so (Taylor, 'Land and Landownership,' 64.) The existence of a hierarchical society in the new country arranged around the *goðorð* is to some extent legitimized by the association with settlers of social rank in their previous home. Nonetheless, large numbers of Icelandic settlers were certainly not Norwegian aristocrats, on the basis of covert textual reference and overt archaeological and anthropological studies.

⁵⁶ *ÍF* 1: 5-6. 'And then a very great number of people travelled out here from Norway, until King Haraldr prohibited this, because it seemed to him to amount to the depopulation of the land. Then they agreed that everyone who was not exempted should pay the king five ounces of silver who came over here from there.'

Norwegian emigrants did not happily pay this tax, and Ari goes on to state that ‘[þ]au hafa upphöf verit at gjaldi því es nú es kallat landaurar,’ which implies some form of continuous practice.⁵⁷

Landnámabók presents a far more complex and contradictory image of King Haraldr, one that varies widely within the text’s many redactions. The king is mentioned reasonably frequently within the text, but out of a total of about four hundred emigrations to Iceland, King Haraldr is directly implicated in only around a tenth of these journeys. Furthermore, his involvement varies widely. The objectively tyrannical is certainly to be found, as in *Landnámabók*’s redaction of the death of Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson and the emigration of his father and brother:

Haraldr konungr hárfagri lét drepa Þórólfr norðr í Álqst á Sandnesi af rógi Hildiríðarsona; þat vildi Haraldr konungr eigi bæta. Þá bjöggu þeir Grímr ok Kveld-Úlfr kaupskip ok ætluðu til Íslands, því at þeir höfðu þar spurt til Ingólfs vinar síns.⁵⁸

Skalla-Grímr and Kveld-Úlfr subsequently avenge Þórólfr’s death by taking back his ship, seized by Haraldr, and killing its crew, which included some of the king’s relations. It is notable that Haraldr’s refusal to compensate for Þórólfr’s death is cited, for this prefigures the many feuds throughout the *Íslendingasögur* canon. It also demonstrates the direct opposition between the ‘new’ model of centralized, absolute kingship which King Haraldr comes to represent in prefaces such as that to *Harðar saga* above, and the concept of some form of universal equality before the law that is presupposed in the demand for compensation for the death of a relative. A much expanded story of the slander and death of Þórólfr, who was ironically working as a tax collector for Haraldr in

⁵⁷ *ÍF* 1: 6. ‘This was the beginning of the tax which is now called *landaurar*,’ which appears later to be the other way around: a payment by Icelanders on arriving in Norway.

⁵⁸ *ÍF* 1: 68. ‘King Haraldr hárfagri had Þórólfr killed in the north at Álqst in Sandnes because of the slander of the Hildiríðarsynir: for that King Haraldr would not pay compensation. Then Grímr and Kveld-Úlfr prepared a merchant ship with the intention of sailing to Iceland, since they’d heard it said that their friend Ingólfr was there.’

Finmark, may be found in *Egils saga*.⁵⁹ The relationship between *Egils saga* and *Landnámabók* is a typical example of the intertextual dialogue that existed between a great many sagas and *Landnámabók*. The quotation above is from *Sturlubók*,⁶⁰ the redaction of the text attributed to Sturla Þórðarson, who is very likely to have had access to the lost, earlier *Styrmisbók* and a version of *Egils saga* itself.⁶¹ Given the uneven length of the accounts of the settlers in *Landnámabók*, the fleshing-out of the story of Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grímr's emigration was almost certainly done with material from the saga. *Styrmisbók* probably held no more information for these migrants than any of the others, although Jakob Benediktsson observes that of Kveld-Úlfr's father, Brunda-Bjálfi ('In-heat-Bjálfi'), '[í] Egils s[ögu] er hann kallaður Bjálfi, og kynni viðurnefnið að vera úr Styrmisbók.'⁶² This potentially obscene nickname may have been deliberately omitted by the author of *Egils saga* who wished, after all, to cast Egill Skalla-Grímsson and his ancestors in a generally positive light. *Landnámabók* and the *Íslendingasögur* exist in a permanent state of dialogue: *Styrmisbók* was quite probably the source of the characters, genealogies and place-names of many sagas, whilst later redactions of the book of settlements drew on the sagas to flesh out the material, probably towards the interests of the compilers.

⁵⁹ In relation to the narrative in *Egils saga* Laura Taylor observes that King Haraldr's rapacious centralization may be 'seen as making his own landtake, but with other people's land.' Taylor, 'Land and Landownership,' 54.

⁶⁰ The conventional name for AM 107 fol., which is a copy made by Jón Erlendsson of a vellum manuscript which was destroyed in Copenhagen during the fire of 1728. Jakob Benediktsson's introduction to his edition contains an invaluable analysis of the complexities of the textual history of *Landnámabók*: *ÍF* 1: 1-cliv.

⁶¹ For the story of Þórólfr, see *ÍF* 2: 18-57. An account of the likely relationship between the saga and *Landnámabók* can be found in Sigurður Nordal's introduction to the above text, xxxi-xxxvi.

⁶² *ÍF* 1: 69 n. 2. 'In *Egils saga* he is called Bjálfi, and the nickname is known to be from *Styrmisbók*.'

There is also evidence within the textual history of *Landnámabók* that Haraldr's role was either amplified or reduced by some redactors over that in their sources. In *Hauksbók*,⁶³ one reads:

Dýri hét maðr, er fór af Sunnmœri til Íslands at ráði Rognvalds jarls.⁶⁴

But the same entry in *Sturlubók* reads:

Dýri hét maðr ágætr; hann fór af Sunnmœri til Íslands at ráði Rognvalds jarls, en fyrir ofríki Haralds konungs hárfagra.⁶⁵

Two substantial changes have been made here. Firstly, Dýri has become an *ágætr* ('famous, excellent') man; secondly, he is now leaving not only because he has been advised to by Rognvaldr jarl, but also because of the *ofríki* of King Haraldr – a term which, as in *Harðar saga* above, later comes to characterize Haraldr's role in the settlement myth. But not only is Haraldr sometimes added as the reason for an emigration; he may also be found to supplant another. Concerning the settlement of Qrn, *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók* have the following:

Qrn hét maðr ágætr; hann var frændi Geirmundar heljarskinns; hann fór af Rogalandi fyrir ofríki Haralds konungs. Hann nam land í Arnarfirði svá vítt sem hann vildi.⁶⁶

But in *Melabók*,⁶⁷ considered a closer witness to *Styrmisbók*, one may find:

⁶³ The conventional name for a manuscript owned and partially written by Haukr Erlendsson, probably dating to the very beginning of the fourteenth century. It is now in three parts; the now-fragmentary section containing parts of *Landnámabók* is designated AM 371, 4to, but Jón Erlendsson saw the manuscript in a more complete form, and parts of the text only survive in his transcription, AM 105 fol. The parts of *Hauksbók* which survive are thus the oldest surviving witnesses to the text. See also p. 9 above.

⁶⁴ ÍF 1: 181. 'There was a man called Dýri, who travelled from Sunnmœrr to Iceland on the advice of Rognvaldr jarl.'

⁶⁵ ÍF 1: 180. 'There was a famous man called Dýri; he travelled from Sunnmœrr to Iceland on the advice of Rognvaldr jarl, and because of the oppression of King Haraldr hárfagri.'

⁶⁶ ÍF 1: 176. 'Qrn was the name of a famous man. He was a friend of Geirmundr heljarskinn. He set out from Rogaland because of the oppression of King Haraldr. He took land as widely as he wished in Arnarfjörðr.'

⁶⁷ The conventional name for AM 445b, 4to, which dates to the early fifteenth century, and now consists of only two, non-sequential leaves.

Qrn hét maðr ágætr; hann varð missátttr við Hákon jarl Grótgardsson ok fór af því til Íslands [ok] nam Arnarfjörð allan, áðr Örlygr kæmi út.⁶⁸

It is extremely hard to disentangle the relationship between the various redactions of *Landnámabók*, or to point definitively to one drawing on or adapting another's reading, not least because other versions of the text which may have been in circulation are now lost. The analysis set out here is not a palaeographical or historiographical one. It might be noted that *Landnámabók* provides a rather apt Icelandic example of Paul Zumthor's concept of *mouvance*, which denies the greater authenticity of any one version over another.⁶⁹ The editorial history of *Landnámabók* has, perhaps, rather misled scholars into conceiving of it as something approaching a single work. *Hauksbók* is a later variant than *Sturlubók*, but one that also had access to some form of *Styrmisbók*. At the end of his redaction, Haukr Erlendsson declares:

En þessa bók ritaða (ek) [...] eptir þeiri bók, sem ritat hafði herra Sturla lögmaðr, hinn fróðasti maðr, ok eptir þeiri bók annarri, er ritat hafði Styrmir hinn fróði, ok hafða ek þat ór hvarri, sem framar greindi, en mikill þorri var þat, er þær sögðu eins báðar, ok því er þat ekki at undra, þó (at) þessi Landnámabók sé lengri en nokkur önnur.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ *ÍF* 1: 177. 'Qrn was the name of a famous man. He fell out with Hákon jarl Grótgardsson and so went out to Iceland and took all of Arnarfjörðr, before Örlygr came out [to Iceland].'

⁶⁹ This was originally expounded in Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972). Zumthor argues that '[l]'œuvre, [...] est par définition dynamique' (73), and exists across manuscript witnesses. Zumthor also discusses the usefulness of the idea of 'tradition', and remarks that '[l]a tradition concerne l'avenir plus que le passé dont, historiquement, elle provient. Elle projette ce passé sur l'avenir, et fonctionne en prospective' (81). ('[The] work [...] is by definition dynamic,' '[the] tradition is as concerned with the future as with the past from which, historically, it originates. It projects this past onto the future, and works with a forward-looking aspect.') This observation may be seen to be especially pertinent to the 'tradition' of the settlement, which, in Zumthor's words, interacts far more closely with the present than the past from which it came, and exists in a constant state of 'rewriting'. It is certainly acknowledged that this analysis itself is participating in the further rewriting of the settlement and its textual microcosm, *Landnámabók*.

⁷⁰ *ÍF* 1: 395-97. 'And I wrote this book on the basis of that book which was written by Sturla the lawman, the wisest man, and also after that book which was written by Styrmir the wise, and I have selected from both of them, but in the greater part they say the same, and because of this it is no wonder that this *Landnámabók* is longer than any other.'

If one is to take this at face value, Haukr selected the more partisan *Sturlubók* version over the unadorned *Styrmisbók* version of the story of Dýri. Either way, the use of the phrase ‘ofríki Haralds konungs’ in both of these examples points not to the emergence, but to the crystallization of a narrative of settlement in *Sturlubók* and its derivatives in which King Haraldr played a particularly important role.⁷¹ Even this might be considered tendentious, but for the purposes of this investigation into the literary reflexes of the settlement the clear presence of an intersection between a tradition of exile through tyranny and a literary catalogue of the settlers of Iceland presents an example of the construction of a literary foundation myth in action. Ascribing a reason for the differences in Haraldr’s representation across the redactions is even more speculative: Sturla Þórðarson, as Snorri Sturluson’s nephew, was embroiled in the chaotic *Sturlungaöld*, but cannot have felt consistently antipathetic to Norway since he spent much time in exile there, wrote histories for the Norwegian court, and even attained knightly rank.⁷²

The fluidity of Haraldr’s representation is not confined to *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók*. He is, fundamentally, a literary character. Haraldr’s epithet is derived from his vow to unite Norway, a legend recounted in, amongst others, *Egils saga*:

[H]ann hafði þess heit strengt, at láta eigi skera hár sitt né kemba, fyrr en hann væri einvaldskonungr yfir Nóregi; hann var kallaðr Haraldr lúfa.⁷³

⁷¹ It is important not be misled in seeing *all* of Haraldr’s tyranny emerging only in *Sturlubók* and its later forms; *Melabók*, which preserves the story of Qrn’s emigration without Haraldr’s oppression, nevertheless preserves a tale of migration in which Haraldr plays a negative role which is *not* present in the other redactions. Úlfr hinn skjálgi is described as leaving Rogaland ‘fyrir ófrið Haralds hins hárfagra’ (*ÍF* 1: 161. ‘[B]ecause of the strife of Haraldr hárfagri.’) *Ófrið* is not quite the same class of word as *ofríki*, however: it concerns a lack of peace, which was unarguable even to those who might be sympathetic to Haraldr, as opposed to the strongly negative connotations of *ofríki*.

⁷² *MSE* 614.

⁷³ *ÍF* 2: 7. ‘He made this solemn vow, that he would not have his hair cut nor combed before he had sole rule over Norway; he was [thus] called Haraldr tousle-hair.’

After his successful subjugation of all Norway, so the story goes, *lúfa* becomes *hárfagri* (fine-hair).

Snorri's *Heimskringla* further elaborates the story of the vow by having Haraldr seek the hand of Gyða, the daughter of a rival king, Eiríkr of Hǫrðaland. She agrees to marry him only if he conquers all Norway, and he then makes the more commonly cited vow to neither cut nor comb his hair until this is completed.⁷⁴ This story exists within a thoroughly literary, rather than historical, tradition: as Sverrir Jakobsson observes, there are no reliable contemporary sources for Haraldr hárfagri,⁷⁵ and the hair-legend's most obvious analogue – or even source – is thoroughly mythic. Upon the death of Baldr at the hands of Hǫðr in *Vǫluspá*, a brother to Baldr and son of Óðinn, Váli, 'var [...] borinn snemma' ('was born quickly'). The poem continues:

Þó hann æva hendr né hǫfuð kembði,
áðr á bál um bar Baldrs andscota.⁷⁶

Haraldr's oath on his body to unite Norway speaks to one mythic tradition: one might well argue, therefore, that his tyranny and oppression of those who did not submit to his authority speaks to another mythic tradition, that of the Icelandic *landnám*.

⁷⁴ *ÍF* 26: 96-97.

⁷⁵ 'Men dette vet samtidskildene ikke noe om.' Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Erindringen om en mægtig Personlighed,' 216.

⁷⁶ Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn, eds., *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten denkmälern*, 4th ed., vol. 1 (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1962) 8, stanza 33. 'He never washed his hands nor combed his head before he bore Baldr's enemy to the funeral pyre.' He is named as Váli and the same vow is recounted in *Baldrs draumar*. See Neckel and Kuhn, eds., *Edda* 278, stanza 11. Ursula Dronke considers this an initiation rite: 'With initiation come the vows of deprivation before a great deed – no civilized washing of hands or combing of hair till the act is done.' Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda* II: 140. She links this to Jan de Vries's concept of initiation as figurative rebirth (Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1956) § 336.) Whilst unwashed hands certainly appear to signify a ritual withdrawal from civilization, de Vries's treatment of the cutting of hair is problematic, since it often connotes unmaning and, he argues, features in the process of the adoption of males into new families and the treatment of enemies or sacrificial victims (§§ 139, 282). He does, however, argue that 'das lang herabwallende Haar war der Sitz einer besonderen Macht' ('long, flowing hair was the location of a special power,' § 202) and that this was the source of long hair as a status symbol in war, which perhaps has greater resonances with the story of Haraldr.

It is no surprise that Haraldr is essentially a plot device in the *Íslendingasögur*: he exists to precipitate the emigration and, perhaps more importantly, to provide an opportunity for the early settlers to demonstrate certain qualities which are later absorbed into Icelandic literary identity. Haraldr possesses the ability, as seen in *Laxdæla saga*, to transform ignominious defeat into principled flight. Ketill flatnefr Bjarnarson summarizes the situation his followers are in after Haraldr makes it clear that he expects his submission:

Sannspurðan hefi ek fjáðskap Haralds konungs til vár; sýnisk mér svá, at vér munim eigi þaðan trausts bíða; lízk mér svá, sem oss sé tveir kostir gørvir, at flýja land eða vera drepnir hverr í sínu rúmi.⁷⁷

Ketill goes on to say that he would prefer to have ‘slíkan dauðdaga sem frændr mínir’,⁷⁸ but that he would not want to put the rest of his kin in difficulty by leaving them without a patriarch. In this account, therefore, collective action is privileged: the saga-author reconstructs a debate that cannot but recall the style of argument found in the *Íslendingasögur* to take place at the stereotypical assembly, be it the *Alþingi* or a regional assembly. Ketill’s speech is introduced such that ‘stefnir hann þing við frændr sína.’⁷⁹ *Þing* can, of course, simply mean meeting, but its semantic weight in the Icelandic context cannot but colour any reading. Whilst many accounts of emigration concern the individual decisions of settlers to leave because they could not come to terms with Haraldr, such as some of the entries in *Landnámabók* discussed above, here the extended family unit takes on the connotations of an incipient Icelandic community. As observed earlier, Kirsten Hastrup has commented on early Icelandic society that:

⁷⁷ *ÍF* 5: 4. ‘I have reliable evidence of the enmity of King Haraldr towards us; it seems to me that we should not expect any protection from that direction. It looks to me that we have two choices: to flee the country or each to be killed in our homes.’

⁷⁸ *ÍF* 5: 4. ‘The same kind of death as my kinsmen.’

⁷⁹ *ÍF* 5: 4. ‘He called his kinsmen to an assembly.’

At first there was only a community of settlers, but after a few generations this community was turned into a society by way of collective social action.⁸⁰

Here collective social action is projected back upon proto-Icelandic society; they are Icelanders, but they are not yet aware of it. Whilst Hastrup is referring here to the conversion, which is discussed in chapters 2.ii and 2.iii, collective action is here being retrospectively implied to have inspired the emigration. Ketill's son Björn then joins the debate, with a quite remarkable speech:

Ek vil gera at dæmum gøfugra manna ok flýja land þetta; þykkjumk ek ekki af því vaxa, þótt ek bíða heiman þræla Haralds konungs, ok elti þeir oss af eignum várum, eða þiggja af þeim dauða með öllu.⁸¹

It is, of course, vital to the myth of the nobility of the settlers that flight from a martial foe whom they failed to resist is transformed into a *gøfugr* ('noble') emigration. The saga makes sure that a precedent already exists: noble men have already fled to Iceland, so there is no shame in joining them, even if the saga is silent as to who these people are.

The version of Ketill's principled retreat from Norway found in *Laxdæla saga* is somewhat complicated when read in the light of *Eyrbyggja saga*. The saga provides a more specific reason for Ketill's decision to leave. The saga opens with a rather elliptic reference to Haraldr's *ofríki*:

Þetta var í þann tíma, er Haraldr konungr inn hárfagri gekk til ríkis í Nóregi. Fyrir þeim ófriði flýðu margir gøfgir menn óðul sín af Nóregi.⁸²

It is notable that cause and effect are not syntactically linked. Indeed these initial *emigrés* go on to return to Norway on raiding expeditions, so Haraldr decides to send an army to dispose of these

⁸⁰ Hastrup, *Island of Anthropology* 79.

⁸¹ *ÍF* 5: 4. 'I want to follow the example of noble men and flee this land. There seems to me nothing to be gained if I wait at home for King Haraldr's thralls and they chase us off our property, or even get killed by them.'

⁸² *ÍF* 4: 3. 'That was at the time when King Haraldr hárfagri came to power in Norway. Because of the strife many noble men fled their ancestral lands in Norway.'

troublemakers and assigns the job of commanding the army to Ketill, who despite initially refusing is compelled to go. He is so successful that he takes over control of the Hebrides, which causes some problems of jurisdiction when he sends his army back to Norway to report the situation to the king:

Ok er þeir kómu á fund Haralds konungs, sögðu þeir, at Ketill flatnefr var hofðingi í Suðreyjum, en eigi sögðusk þeir vita, at hann drægi Haraldi konungi ríki fyrir vestan haf. En er konungr spyr þetta, þá tekr hann undir sik eignir þær, er Ketill átti í Nóregi.⁸³

In this version, there is no grand family meeting held by Ketill – he simply remains in the Hebrides and dies there. His son Björn is outlawed by Haraldr, and indeed in something of an inversion of the pattern found in *Laxdæla saga*, it is Haraldr who calls an assembly: ‘stefndi hann átta fylkja þing, ok á því þingi gerði hann Björn Ketilsson útlaga af Nóregi.’⁸⁴ Rather than being the most determined to go out to Iceland, the Björn Ketilsson of *Eyrbyggja saga* first shelters on the island of Mostr where he is taken in by Þórólfr Mostrarskegg. The meeting of these two characters is extremely important, as they both go on to settle in Iceland and found large families who come to loggerheads by the ninth chapter of the saga. Snorri goði, who becomes a central character in the narrative, is a descendant of Þórólfr, which may well explain why it is important that these two settlers are linked before they even arrive in Iceland – it prefigures the interaction and conflicts between their descendants. Björn is something of a reluctant emigrant here; he goes to the Hebrides to meet his brother Helgi and his sisters, but is disgusted to discover they have embraced Christianity; instead he goes on to Iceland. His rejection of Christianity earns him the epithet ‘inn austrœna’ (‘the

⁸³ *ÍF* 4: 4. ‘And when they came to meet King Haraldr, they said that Ketill flatnefr was the ruler of the Hebrides, but they declared that they did not know if he had extended Haraldr’s rule over the Western Isles. When the king heard this, he took over all of the possessions that Ketill had in Norway.’

⁸⁴ *ÍF* 4: 5. ‘He called an assembly of eight districts and at the assembly had Björn Ketilsson made an outlaw in Norway.’

easterner’). He is thus verbally linked in *Eyrbyggja saga* to the very land he was so eager to spurn in *Laxdæla saga*.

The case of Ketill flatnefr and his sons is important in demonstrating that the fluidity of the representation of the decision to leave Norway goes well beyond the character of Haraldr. In *Laxdæla saga* he is painted as the tyrant, both implicitly by the framing narrative and explicitly by the words attributed to Ketill and Björn at the assembly. But in *Eyrbyggja saga* Haraldr’s behaviour is not so obviously tyrannical and less capricious – his action in seizing Ketill’s land appears more reasonable if it is told that Ketill had exploited the opportunity to fight for the king to set up his own chiefdom. *Eyrbyggja saga* references *Laxdæla saga*, so it is possible that the author of the former would have had knowledge of the latter’s redaction of the settlement myth.⁸⁵ It seems *Laxdæla saga*’s version is dispensed with, and a different tradition is followed: Ketill’s daughter is named Auðr in *Landnámabók* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, but Unnr in *Laxdæla saga*. When these two versions of the story are examined in the light of the relevant section of *Landnámabók*, it may be seen that the three narratives come together as variations on a theme, with some elements given greater prominence in one redaction and less in others. *Landnámabók*’s version is very similar to that of *Eyrbyggja saga*, but with the important proviso that Haraldr had already conquered the Hebrides, and that he sent Ketill in order to win them back not from disgruntled Norwegian *émigrés*, but from a vaguer collection of

⁸⁵ ‘Kemr hann [Snorri goði] ok víða við sögur aðrar en þessa. Hann kemr við Laxdæla sögu, sem mörgum er kunnigt; hann var inn mesti vinr Guðrúnar Ósvífrsdóttur ok sona hennar.’ *ÍF* 4: 180. ‘[Snorri goði] comes into many other sagas than this one. He has a role in *Laxdæla saga*, as many know: he was the greatest friend of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and her sons.’ Although quite plausible, it is impossible to be sure of the extent to which the extant *Laxdæla saga* corresponds with the one mentioned here; the caveat that this reference may be a later addition to *Eyrbyggja saga* must also apply.

‘víkingar ok Skotar ok Írar.’⁸⁶ Furthermore, the *Landnámabók* redaction is quite clear on the reason Ketill fell out of favour with the king: he ‘galt öngva skatta konungi, sem ætlat var.’⁸⁷ The two sagas examined here are discussed further below with regard to their depiction of the settlement itself, but even at this stage it is evident that the myth of settlement was fully manipulable by saga-authors, potentially in order to establish differing relationships between the various characters they go on to treat. Far from being the central protagonist in the settlement myth, Haraldr becomes sidelined, a murky figure on the topographical edge of the saga whose focus is, after all, Iceland. His depiction can be profoundly ambivalent, as in *Víglundar saga*:

Haraldr var allra manna vitrastr ok vel búinn at íþróttum öllum, þeim er konungligri tign byrjaði. Konungr hafði marga hirð um sik ok valdi þar til ágæta menn, þá sem reyndir váru at harðfengi ok mörgum frægðarverkum.⁸⁸

The saga goes on to acknowledge that ‘eigi var hitt þó með minna móti, at þeim þreifst öngum, er í móti gerðu hans vilja.’⁸⁹ Whilst this might seem fairly equivocal, noting both Haraldr’s acumen as a new style of king (possibly modelled on continental precedents) and his decisiveness in consolidating his power, the prologue continues in a far more familiar vein:

[M]argir mikils háttar menn flýðu ór Nóregi ok þoldu eigi álögur konungs, þeir sem váru af stórum ættum, ok vildu heldr fyrirláta óðul sín ok frændr ok vini en liggja undir þrælkan ok ánauðaroki konungs, ok leituðu mjök til ýmissa landa.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ *ÍF* 1: 50. ‘Vikings, Scots and Irish.’ Another version of this story is found within Snorri’s *Heimskringla*, but with no role for Ketill at all – it is Haraldr who subdues all the Scottish islands with his own army after some of the Norwegian chiefs he displaced began attacks on Norway from abroad. See *ÍF* 26: 120–22.

⁸⁷ *ÍF* 1: 50. ‘[He] paid none of the tribute to the king that had been agreed.’

⁸⁸ *ÍF* 14: 63. ‘Haraldr was the wisest of all men and well equipped with all those skills which are appropriate to kingly dignity. The king had a large retinue about him and chose for it excellent men who were proven through valour and great exploits.’

⁸⁹ *ÍF* 14: 63. ‘It was no less [his] manner that those who acted against his will did not thrive.’

⁹⁰ *ÍF* 14: 63. ‘Many people of much importance fled from Norway, and those who came from great families would not suffer the king’s impositions, and they preferred to forsake their ancestral lands, relatives and friends than to be subject to slavery and the king’s yoke of bondage, and so they set out to various lands.’

In a very short space of time, the narrative moves from enthusiastic praise of Haraldr that resembles his descriptions in the *konungasögur*⁹¹ to the stock saga narrative. This ambiguity is a reflection of that which permeates the first section of the saga. Víglundr's father, Þorgrímr, is fostered by Haraldr, but the king does not come to his foster-son's aid in obtaining the hand of Ólof, whom he may have promised to marry,⁹² but instead sides with his friend Ketill, to whom Ólof's father had promised her. The lovers eventually elope to Iceland, and '[k]onungr gerði Þorgrím útlægan fyrir þetta verk af atgangi Ketils.'⁹³

Two different interpretations of Haraldr coexist within this single saga prologue, and *Víglundar saga* seems an appropriate point at which to end this discussion. It must be emphasized that this is far from a complete treatment of the role of Haraldr in the sagas.⁹⁴ Instead, this section has shown merely some of the ways in which a quasi-historical figure is manipulated by medieval Icelandic authors within the intertextual dialogue of the construction of literary identity.⁹⁵ Some

⁹¹ Two indicative examples: 'Svá segja fróðir menn, at Haraldr inn hárfagri hafi verit allra manna fríðastr sýnum ok sterkastr ok mestr,' *ÍF* 26: 148. ('So wise men say, that Haraldr hárfagri had been of all men the most handsome, the strongest and the greatest.') '[M]aðrinn var snemma røskr ok risuligr vexti,' *ÍF* 29: 4. ('The man was brave early in age and of an imposing stature.')

⁹² The saga-author is (probably deliberately) vague on this point: 'segja þat nökkurir menn, at þá hafi þau bundit sitt eiginorð.' *ÍF* 14: 71. 'Some men say that they had promised to marry.'

⁹³ *ÍF* 14: 74. 'The king made Þorgrímr an outlaw for that deed on the urging of Ketill.'

⁹⁴ *Kormáks saga*, generally considered to be an early example of the genre, does not engage with the myth of Haraldr's tyranny: indeed Kormákr's grandfather 'hafði verit með Haraldi konungi í mǫrgum orrostum', and his son Ogmundr, Kormákr's father, leaves Norway after the death of Haraldr because he 'vingaðisk ekki við þau Eirík ok Gunnhildi', Haraldr's successor. *ÍF* 8: 203-04. '[He] had been with King Haraldr in many battles,' '[he] did not have friendly relations with Eiríkr [blóðøx] and Gunnhildr.' See also Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway* 154-209.

⁹⁵ Historical or otherwise, within the sagas Haraldr becomes a polyvalent and often contradictory sign, as Gert Kreutzer has observed: '[...] Harald Schönhaar so etwas wie eine Symbolfigur darstellt, and der sich die Einstellung zum norwegischen Königtum in besonderer Weise demonstriert. Und die sind nun alles andere als einheitlich.' Gert Kreutzer, 'Das Bild Harald Schönhaars in der altisländischen Literatur,' *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. Heiko Uecker (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994) 461.

sagas emphasize his role far more than others, some have positive views of Haraldr's kingship, and many express no view whatsoever. Nevertheless, those sagas that engage at any length with the process of settlement itself (such as *Egils saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*) do participate in the intertextual debate on Haraldr's role in the process of emigration, and as has been shown, in many respects Haraldr's role is to reify the antitheses of certain qualities that are incorporated into a specifically Icelandic identity. The more condensed and distant the narrative of Haraldr becomes from the archetypes found in *Landnámabók*, the more 'othered' Haraldr becomes, as *Harðar saga* bears witness. Sometimes a combination of factors is cited as the reason for emigration, as in the case of Grímr Ingjaldsson in *Vatnsdæla saga*:

[Æ]tla ek nú í sumar til Íslands ok vit báðir bræðr, ok láta sér nú þat margir sóma, þótt gofgir sé; er mér sagt gott frá landakostum, at þar gangi fé sjálfala á vetrum, en fiskr í hverju vatni, skógar miklir, en frjálsir af ágangi konunga ok illræðismanna.⁹⁶

But in even more general terms, the narrative structure of the settlement myth demands a cause for emigration – this is part of the obsession with origins discussed in the first section of this chapter.

Again, the relationships described between Icelanders and Haraldr produce opportunities for transformation. Icelanders cease to be *hersir*, bound within a Norwegian social structure, and thus free themselves from one collective identity in order to permit the creation of another. If contact between new explorer and ageless land was always acknowledged as a transformative process in the

(‘Haraldr hárfagri constitutes something of a symbol, within which the attitude towards Norwegian kingship is manifested in various ways. And these are anything but uniform.’)

⁹⁶ *ÍF* 8: 30-31. ‘I intend to go out to Iceland this summer together with my brother, and many now consider that quite proper, even those of noble ancestry. I have heard good things about the quality of the land: that the livestock feed themselves in the winter, that there are fish in every stream, great forests, and freedom from the aggression of kings and criminals.’ The most florid expression of the idea of Iceland as a land of plenty is found within the story of Flóki's visit to the island before the settlement: ‘Þórólfr kvað drjúpa smjör af hverju strái á landinu,’ *ÍF* 1: 38. (‘Þórólfr said that butter drips from every straw in that land.’)

first section above, here contact between new, centralizing kingship and old, traditional concepts of regional and individual liberty permit the early settlers to be transformed away from Norwegianness and towards Icelandicness.

3. Land-taking and place-naming

Having now established the literary precedents for the Icelandic settlement-narrative, and the recurrent cause of the emigration in the figure of Haraldr hárfagri, the representation of the arrival and settlement of the bulk of the *landnámsmenn* demands some analysis.⁹⁷ The Icelandic term, *landnám*, which is usually translated as ‘settlement’, carries a stronger sense than the English of the central role the acquisition of territory played in this process. This was not a case of simply occupying sufficient land on which to make a living; early settlers are shown to be participating in a scramble for territory and then parcelling it out to later arrivals. In keeping with the theme of this analysis, the following examples are intended to demonstrate the transformative process of land-taking on both the land-taker and his or her followers.

The redaction of the settlement narrative found in *Laxdæla saga* has already been examined for the material in relation to King Haraldr, but it is also a useful source for the representation of land-taking itself. It is notable that Ketill, the patriarch whose speech to a meeting of his kinsmen begins the emigration of their family, does not have much time for the idea of setting out to Iceland: ‘[í] þá veiðistǫð kem ek aldregi á gamals aldri.’⁹⁸ Instead, he decides to go west, to Scotland, a

⁹⁷ This is necessarily a rather brief investigation of the depiction of land-taking itself. For a far more thorough and illuminating analysis of the topic, see Taylor, ‘Land and Landownership.’

⁹⁸ *ÍF* 5: 5. ‘I will never go to that fishing-ground in my old age.’ Iceland, it seems, is no country for old men; in *Egils saga*, Kveld-Úlfr does not survive the voyage to Iceland, and his coffin is cast overboard in the manner

familiar country in which he had raided. The saga further enhances the prestige of the family through their successes in the new lands they inhabit: Ketill receives a ‘góðar viðtøkur’ in Scotland, and his grandson Þorsteinn ‘eignaðisk hálf Skotland ok varð konungr yfir.’⁹⁹ There is some irony in leaving a country because of the tyranny of centralizing kingship only for one’s offspring to do the same in another country. Þorsteinn’s ascendancy does not last, and he is killed at Caithness. Replicating Haraldr’s model in a new country having thus failed, Þorsteinn’s mother, Unnr in djúpúðga Ketilsdóttir,¹⁰⁰ now the head of her household despite her gender, plans to extricate her family from an increasingly precarious situation in Scotland by secretly having a *knørr* constructed. The Icelandic saga-authors’ typical strategy of smuggling subjective judgement into the narrative is deployed to emphasize quite how remarkable she was:

Hon hafði brott með sér allt frændlið sitt, þat er á lífi var, ok þykkjask menn varla dæmi til finna, at einn kvenmaðr hafi komizk í brott ór þvílíkum ófriði með jafnmiklu fé ok fǫruneyti; má af því marka, at hon var mikit afbragð annarra kvenna.¹⁰¹

Unnr first sets out to Orkney, where she arranges the marriage of one of her granddaughters into the leading family of the islands ‘er þaðan komit kyn allra Orkneyinga jarla,’¹⁰² before moving on to the

of an *öndvegissúla* (‘high-seat pillar’), leaving instructions for his son Skalla-Grímr to settle where his coffin is found. *ÍF* 2: 71.

⁹⁹ *ÍF* 5: 6-7. ‘a good reception,’ ‘acquired for himself half of Scotland and became king over it.’

¹⁰⁰ By far the most recounted female settler, her story is also redacted in *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Grettis saga* and *Njáls saga*. See also pp. 47 above and 116 below.

¹⁰¹ *ÍF* 5: 7. ‘She took with her all of her family that was still alive, and *people reckon* that it would be difficult to find another example of a woman to have escaped from such strife with so much wealth and such a retinue; from this it is seen that she was great paragon amongst women’ (my emphasis).

¹⁰² *ÍF* 5: 8. ‘From which family are descended all the jarls of Orkney.’

Faeroes where she repeats the same strategy, marrying another granddaughter into the important Gøtuskeggja family.¹⁰³ Jenny Jochens sees this as a two-pronged strategy:

Aware of the authority that male kinsmen could exercise – especially younger male in-laws – she wisely scattered her granddaughters on islands in the Atlantic and married them to local men whose authority she avoided by proceeding to Iceland with her young grandson.¹⁰⁴

Finally, she moves on to Iceland, but her ship is wrecked upon landing. Her brothers Helgi and Björn had already settled, but Helgi fails to provide appropriate hospitality when she arrives with twenty followers, and he declares he will only put up ten. ‘Hon svarar reiðuliga ok kvazk eigi vitat hafa, at hann væri slíkt líilmenni,’¹⁰⁵ and she goes to find Björn instead, who meets her with due warmth. Björn, despite in *Eyrbyggja saga* being disgruntled by Unnr’s adoption of Christianity in the Hebrides, here plays the role of the hospitable settler, an attribute essential to survival in the early stages of the population of the island.¹⁰⁶ In the short fifth chapter of *Laxdæla saga*, foundation myth is piled upon foundation myth. It is no surprise that it is Björn, who so eloquently argued for emigration, who behaves with the most correct decorum once he is in Iceland. Then, Unnr proceeds to move through the Icelandic landscape, leaving place-names behind her: Døgurðarnes (‘Breakfast Headland’) and Kambsnes (‘Comb Point’). Land-taking becomes more than a quasi-legalistic process of acquiring the right to use certain portions of the landscape; it also involves a transformation of

¹⁰³ Unnr’s activity rather brings to mind the mythological female activity of ‘peaceweaving’, albeit in an inverted sense: she is actively weaving her family into the aristocracy of the north-western islands. Whilst looking back to this legendary role, the saga is also looking forwards, emphasizing both the innate and acquired nobility of this early settler, and weaving Icelandic society into a broader context.

¹⁰⁴ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995) 62.

¹⁰⁵ *ÍF* 5: 9. ‘She answered him angrily and said that she had not expected that he would be such a mean person.’

¹⁰⁶ Such an imperative is visible in sharper relief in the account of the settlement of Greenland. For an example *in extremis*, see Þorsteinn svartr’s assistance towards Guðríðr Þorbjarnardóttir in ensuring the proper burial of her husband in *Grænlandinga saga* (*ÍF* 4: 259).

that landscape (a ‘de-othering’) which renders it knowable and literarily describable – as Kirsten Hastrup puts it, the settlers created their own ‘world as a separate semantic space.’¹⁰⁷ Unnr also participates in the ritual of throwing overboard her high-seat pillars – or at least one must presume so, since she finds them but is not depicted throwing them – and so settles permanently at Hvamm. By this stage she has accumulated a large amount of land, since ‘fór hon um alla Breiðafjarðardali ok nam sér lǫnd svá víða, sem hon vildi.’¹⁰⁸ Having acquired this land, Unnr immediately begins to redistribute it. Her speech to her followers is a thematic continuation of those made at her father Ketill’s ad-hoc *þing* in Norway:

Nú skulu þér taka ǫmbun verka yðvarra; skortir oss nú ok eigi fǫng til at gjalda yðr starf yðvart ok góðvilja. En yðr er þat kunnigt, at ek hefi frelsi gefit þeim manni, er Erpr heitir, syni Melduns jarls; fór þat fjarri um svá stórættaðan mann, at ek vilda, at hann bæri þræls nafn.¹⁰⁹

Unnr has already been identified as part of the landscape in the naming of her territory, and here she acquires what is very much a mythic role as the dispenser of land. There are two important aspects of this speech. Firstly, her followers receive land for their ‘verka,’ ‘starf’ and ‘góðvilja’. The whole – Unnr’s land-take – is being divided up between the virtuous, the inverse of King Haraldr’s purported activity. Iceland thus becomes, from the beginning, the mirror-image of the supposed situation in Norway – down even to the gender of the ‘ruler’ (even if this does apply only to one part of Iceland). Secondly, the process of land-taking offers the possibility of individual transformation,

¹⁰⁷ Kirsten Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland: An Anthropological Analysis of Structure and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 9.

¹⁰⁸ *ÍF* 5: 9. ‘She travelled through all the valleys of Breiðafjörðr and took land for herself as widely as she wished.’

¹⁰⁹ *ÍF* 5: 10. ‘Now you will receive reward for your work; we now have no shortage of wealth with which to repay you for your labour and your goodwill. You are aware that I have given freedom to the man who is called Erpr, the son of Meldun jarl; it is far from my wish that such a high-born man be called a slave.’

even if it is in some respect a return to an ‘old’ sense of that which is right – thus Erpr regains his nobility.¹¹⁰ Patricia Pires Boulhosa has noted this paradoxically conservative aspect of the settlement as the ‘confrontation between a new and an old order’, King Haraldr representing the new.¹¹¹ The settlement myth is a synthesis of old customs relating to individual freedom and a new territory. As was discussed above with regard to prehistory, the very act of migration is intrinsically transformative, even if its cause is overtly conservative. An attempt to transplant the ‘old’ customs of Norway to a new land leads, necessarily, to the creation of something new.¹¹²

Unnr’s land-taking and distribution is not only remarkable because of the fact she is a woman. It has also been seen as a bold challenge to the conventional method of land-taking. The following stipulation found in *Hauksbók* can hardly have applied to her:

En þat var mælt, at kona skyldi eigi víðara nema land en leiða mætti kvígu tvævetra várlangan dag sólsetra (i) millim, hálfstalit naut ok haft vel.¹¹³

This further demonstrates the futility of the search for consistency and any semblance of historical reality in the presentation of the method of land-taking.¹¹⁴ A parallel stipulation of the method of

¹¹⁰ In *Eiríks saga rauða*, another saga which contains the same story of Unnr’s distribution of territory (in her guise as Auðr), a similar story is related to that of Erpr, concerning another of her followers, Vífill. In this instance she makes it clear to him that once she has freed him and given him land he will be just as noble as the next man (*ÍF* 4: 404).

¹¹¹ Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway* 205.

¹¹² Cultural artefacts of any kind exist in permanent interaction with their temporal and spatial loci. Simply moving something from one point to another in either of these dimensions is necessarily transformative. In the same way that the relocation of John Rennie’s 1831 London Bridge to Lake Havasu City, Arizona in 1968 transformed a Victorian utility into a symbol of Englishness with which to decorate a retirement property development, the transplantation of even the most conservative of Norwegian cultural conventions to a new and empty space necessitated their mutation into something new.

¹¹³ *ÍF* 1: 321. ‘It was said that a woman should not claim more land than she might lead a two-year-old young cow around on a spring day between dawn and sunset.’ The meaning of ‘hálfstalit’ is obscure, which makes translation of the final clause problematic, but it probably means ‘well cared-for’.

staking a land claim is also found in *Hauksbók*, even more surprisingly with the involvement of King Haraldr:

Þeim mǫnnum, er síðar kómu út, þóttu hinir numit hafa of víða land, er fyrri kómu, en á þat sætti Haraldr konungr þá hinn hárfagri, at engi skyldi víðara nema en hann mætti eldi yfir fara á degi með skipverjum sínum. Menn skyldu eld gera, þá er sól væri í austri; þar skyldi gera aðra reyki, svá at hvára sæi frá ǫðrum, en þeir eldar, ar gǫrvir váru, þá er sól var í austri, skyldi brenna til nætr; síðan skyldu þeir ganga til þess, er sól væri í vestri, ok gera þar aðra elda.¹¹⁵

This rather convoluted technique certainly recalls the actions of Þieular in Gotland discussed in section 1 above. It combines mythic, Promethean undertones with a prosaic account of a law formulated to better regulate landownership.¹¹⁶ It is also utterly inconceivable that Haraldr would be able to enforce such a regulation, or that it in any way reflects practice. Instead, statements such as the two above stand as creative engagements with an idea of how the past must have been. When in *Vatnsdæla saga* Sæmundr inn suðreyski makes his land claim, he ‘fór með eldi at fornum sið.’¹¹⁷ It is thus straightforward to conclude within the limits of this discussion that these allusions to fire

¹¹⁴ This has not stopped many from attempting to identify historical practice in these stipulations. See, for a reference to this very example, Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* 86. Jenny Jochens sees Unnr as ‘[i]gnoring the restrictions on land claim’ in Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* 62, 200 n. 154.

¹¹⁵ *ÍF* 1: 337–39. ‘For the people who came out [to Iceland] afterwards, it seemed that they [the earlier settlers] had taken too much land, and because of that King Haraldr hárfagri established that no-one could take more land than they could carry fire around in a day with their ship-mates. People had to make a fire when the sun was in the east; from there on they had to make other [fires] so that each might [be seen] from the next, and the fires which were kindled when the sun was in the east had to burn until night. Afterwards they had to go to these when the sun was in the west and make there further fires.’ It may be a step too far to suggest that the involvement of the Norwegian king at this stage might reflect Haukr Erlendsson’s interests in securing a role in the royal court. For a discussion of Haukr’s possible motivations behind his expansive collation of texts, see Rowe, ‘Literary, Codicological, and Political Perspectives on *Hauksbók*,’ and Sverrir Jakobsson, ‘State Formation and Pre-modern Identities in the North: A Synchronic Perspective from the Early 14th Century,’ *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 125 (2010).

¹¹⁶ It could well also speak to the mythologization of gender roles: animal husbandry for the women, manning ships and fire-lighting for the men. See Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* 2 154.

¹¹⁷ *ÍF* 8: 27–28. ‘going with fire in the ancient custom.’

demonstrate an engagement with a social mythology of land-taking. This is very different from concluding that fire was necessary to make a legitimate land-claim, for which there is no evidence.¹¹⁸ Instead these references are better read as efforts to ground the settlement in a longer narrative of origins. The depiction of fire-carrying is something akin to a created tradition, a deliberate archaism which seeks to abstract the prosaic activity of land-taking to a mythic level.

No matter how reluctant the emigrant, the act of acquiring land in Iceland begins the process of community- and identity-creation through the transformative juxtaposition of the settler and the territory. This applies even to those who arrive in the country late and whose tales are told in late sagas: in *Grettis saga*, Qnundr tréfótr Ófeigsson speaks a heartfelt lament on recognizing his lesser station in Iceland:

Réttum gengr, en ranga
rinnr sæfarinn, ævi,
fákr, um fold ok ríki
fleinhvessanda þessum;
hefk lönd ok fjöð frænda
flýt, en hitt es nýjast,
kröpp eru kaup, ef hreppik
Kaldbak, en ek læt akra.¹¹⁹

But despite this the saga inscribes his name into the ‘history’ of Iceland with the observation that ‘hann hefir frœknastr verit ok fimastr einfœttr maðr á Íslandi.’¹²⁰ Such references to so-and-so being the greatest something *á Íslandi* are reasonably common in the sagas. These statements textually enmesh the settler with the new land. Even if Qnundr had little love for his new home, he is still

¹¹⁸ Again, Laura Taylor has provided a far more detailed analysis of carrying fire and other methods of land-taking: see Taylor, ‘Land and Landownership,’ 108-28.

¹¹⁹ *ÍF* 7: 22. ‘This spear-thrower’s life goes in fits and starts away from land and power: the braced ship, a horse, roams the sea-ways. I have fled land and many kinsmen, and it is a poor deal if I get Kaldbak (‘cold mountain’) for leaving my fields.’

¹²⁰ *ÍF* 7: 25-26. ‘He had been the most valiant and nimblest one-legged man in Iceland.’

absorbed into it through statements such as these. They could be regarded as the literary equivalents of burial mounds: stark markers on the textual landscape that stand as lasting reminders of status and location. It is a further abstraction towards the purely literary of the translation of place and space into linguistic signs evinced through Unnr's breakfast and loss of a comb. Qnundr is fully translated into the Icelandic textual landscape.

The absence of any clear consistency in the representation of the process of land-taking itself – even when sometimes the same characters are involved across different sagas – demonstrates how fertile this territory was for the Icelandic literary imagination. As this chapter has demonstrated, *landnám* as a literary signifier refers both to an event and a process. Where some sources interact with the *landnám* in great detail, describing the manner and method of establishing a settlement on virgin territory, others see the *landnám* as a single, completed event, especially those sagas in which the protagonists arrive late in Iceland.¹²¹ Although these conceptions are far from identical, they do all demonstrate that same interest in origins observed above, creating social myths to explain the way in which things came to be – from land divisions to place-names. But why is there such variance? Whilst part of it may well be related to local traditions, it is also important to consider the possibility that the *landnám* was almost as mythic an event as Ragnarøk or the birth of Christ, despite its relative proximity in time; and that it was one that permitted, even encouraged, re-imaginings as long as certain key features were maintained. There is no need for precision with regard to the method in which land was actually claimed. Instead one is invited to ponder what deep

¹²¹ See *Hallfreðar saga*, for example: 'Þeir Óttarr kómu í Blönduós fyrir norðan land, ok váru þá numin lönð ǫll. Óttarr keypti land í Grímsstungum í Vatnsdal at þeim manni, er Einarr hét, ok gaf honum við kaupskipit.' *ÍF* 8: 140. ('Óttarr [and Ávaldi] came into Blönduós in the north of the country, and by then all the land was taken. Óttarr bought land at Grímsstungur in Vatnsdalr from a man called Einarr, and gave him a merchant ship for it.')

literary and mythic significance might be elicited by involving fire, and how much more importance might be lent to Kambsnes if it were related to that legendary settler, Unnr.

Whether a moment exists at which a group of settlers becomes a coherent community, at which a label such as ‘Icelanders’ becomes meaningful, is a fundamental question in assessing the validity of these texts as ‘foundation’ myths. To briefly return to an analogue introduced above, the Gotlanders – or at least the ‘fulk i Gutlandi’¹²² – fast transcend the physical dimensions of the island of Gotland when the text begins a substantial digression to describe the fate of a third of the population who had to leave, because the ‘land elpti þaim ai alla fyra.’¹²³ The significance of this part of the text, which includes the exiled Gotlanders’ nomadic existence until they settle in the Byzantine Empire, lies in the fact that it forms part of this text at all. Despite the fact that all these events take place in an ill-defined mythic past, the text’s concern for the fate of these people demonstrates the conceptual birth of a community: after relating an anecdote in which the Gotlandic exiles trick the Byzantine emperor into granting them permanent permission to reside in his realm, the author observes that ‘hafa þair sumt af varu mali.’¹²⁴ The use of the second-person plural possessive adjective ‘varu’ betrays the author’s implicit expectation of address to a particular community. *Íslendingabók* demonstrates the same phenomenon in its opening line, ‘Íslendingabók gørða ek fyrst byskupum órum, Þorláki ok Katli.’¹²⁵ Chapter 3 below demonstrates how well defined

¹²² *Guta* 2. ‘people in Gotland.’

¹²³ *Guta* 2. ‘[The] land was not able to support them all.’

¹²⁴ *Guta* 4. ‘they retain some of our language.’ The argument for some form of identification here between Gotlanders and Goths has been much rehearsed; for a brief summary see E. V. Gordon, *An Introduction to Old Norse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956) 175. If so this would only reinforce the view taken here that foundation-narratives such as *Guta saga* readily make use of legend and folktale in order to reinforce communal identity.

¹²⁵ *ÍF* 1: 3. ‘I first wrote the Book of the Icelanders for our bishops Þorlákr and Ketill.’

a sense of Icelandicness was once Icelanders started to go abroad, their very sense of abroad newly re-centred.

This chapter has shown how important beginnings and origins are to literary identity. It is a conceit, of course, to examine the elaboration of Icelandic identity in this linear manner, which is brought about by practical necessity. The following two social myths, those of the legal society and Christianity, both interact with each other and are predicated on the settlement itself. Nevertheless, it is hoped that by concentrating first on origins, this common theme of transformation can be examined in a systematic way. Icelandic identity was not created *ex nihilo*. It is formed from a web of correspondences and contrasts, and it is in the literary treatment of the beginnings of this identity that this web is at its widest. There is also another purpose to this analysis. To return to a final example of objections towards the so-called Icelandic school, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has argued that:

The sagas present themselves as factual historical narratives and it by no means immediately follows that instruments developed for the critical dissection of fiction of one kind or another are suitable tools for the analysis of a saga-text.¹²⁶

Whilst Sørensen's appeal for an interdisciplinary approach to the sagas with a wide variety of methodological approaches is an important one, a result of this sustained engagement with Icelandic myths of origins must surely be that there is little evidence of a desire to present themselves as 'factual historical narratives.' To any audience then, and certainly to the modern reader now, a reading of the sagas not as discrete texts but as interventions in a wider intertextual narrative permits

¹²⁶ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Historical Reality and Literary Form,' *Viking Revaluations*, eds. Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1993) 174.

an understanding of certain themes, *landnám* among them, which are repeatedly recreated in great diversity through the creative potential of a *myth* of historicity.

Three Foundation Myths

2.ii. *Lög* – The Legal Society

In 1914, Bogi Th. Melsteð sought to counter the prevailing nineteenth-century opinion that medieval Icelanders saw themselves as still retaining a predominantly Norwegian identity. He identified the adoption of a new law for all Icelanders as the moment at which a new, specifically Icelandic identity came into being.¹ He argued that:

Ísland eignaðist stjórnarfarslegt sjálfstæði, þá er ein lög voru sett handa öllum landsmönnum (um 930). Eptir það voru allir íbúar landsins eitt þjóðfjelað, ein heild fyrir sig að lögum, þótt flestir þeirra hefðu eðlilega litla eða alls enga sjerstaka þjóðartilfinningu.²

This observation is consonant with one made of the inhabitants of Iceland some eight hundred years earlier or more, in a scholium to Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*:

¹ I am indebted to the work of Gunnar Karlsson for directing me to this material; see Gunnar Karlsson, 'Upphaf þjóðar á Íslandi,' *Saga og kirkja: afmælisrit Magnúsar Más Lárussonar*, eds. Gunnar Karlsson, Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson and Jónas Gíslason (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1988).

² Bogi Th. Melsteð, 'Töldu Íslendingar sig á dögum þjóðveldisins vera Norðmenn?,' *Afmælisrit til dr. phil. Kr. Kålunds, bókavarðar við safn Árna Magnússonar, 19. ágúst 1914* (Copenhagen: Hið íslenska fræðafjelað, 1914) 19. 'Iceland acquired political independence when one law was passed for all citizens (in 930). After that all the inhabitants of the country were part of one society, a single totality in law, even though many of them naturally may have had little or no particular sense of nationality.' (*Þjóðartilfinning* is best rendered 'national sentiment,' but with the caveats regarding the term 'nation' above in mind.) Bogi used the word *norðmenn* to describe the Icelanders' previous identity; the word *norðmaðr* is indeed conventionally translated as 'Norwegian', and this is certainly the meaning of *Norðmaður* in Modern Icelandic. But it may have had wider currency in medieval Icelandic. Gunnlaugr ormstunga Illugason is called a 'norðmaðr' in his saga, by a *berserkr* in England who demands money from him (see *ÍF* 3: 71). Sverrir Jakobsson argues with reference to this that it is evidence that 'in [this part] of the world an Icelander feels no need to assert his Icelandic identity,' but it is probably a broader instance of the term's value being highly dependent on its context: it may, for instance, have referred to a linguistic community when applied by people outside the Norse-speaking world. In a similar manner, the First Grammarian's description of the language he was describing as *dönsk tunga* ought not to be read as implying any specifically *Danish* identity. See Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Defining a Nation: Popular and Public Identity in the Middle Ages,' *Scandinavian Journal of History* 24.1 (1999): 98, Hreinn Benediktsson, ed., *The First Grammatical Treatise* (Reykjavík: Institute of Nordic Linguistics, 1972) 212, Stephen Pax Leonard, 'Language, Society and Identity in Early Iceland,' DPhil, University of Oxford, 2009, 45.

‘[a]pud illos non est rex, nisi tantum lex’.³ Both express the concept of a single Icelandic society in terms of a single law. This equation of law with society is encapsulated in the Icelandic phrase *með lögum skal land byggja* (‘with laws shall the land be established’), a proverb whose currency as a summation of the legitimate state continues in modern Scandinavia.⁴ Laws – *lög* – have long been considered within Old Norse-Icelandic sagas as a defining characteristic of Icelandic distinctiveness, both as a point of origin for a society and as a means of sustaining that society.

Hegel, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, argued that:

Profound sentiments generally, such as that of love, as also religious intuition and its conceptions, are in themselves complete, – constantly present and satisfying; but that outward existence of a political constitution which is enshrined in its rational laws and customs, is an *imperfect* Present; and cannot be thoroughly understood without a knowledge of the past.⁵

As retrospective texts, the *Íslendingasögur* arguably juxtapose the timeless profundity of ‘sentiments generally’ against an acute awareness of time and place within an ordered chronology. Temporal nodes such as the settlement and the conversion punctuate the *Íslendingasögur*, providing the chronological depth required to perfect the narrative ‘present’. Compared to the high romance of,

³ Adam of Bremen, *Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte*, ed. Bernhard Schmeidler (Hannover and Leipzig: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1917) 273. ‘Among them there is no king, only the law.’ There are remarkable echoes of this statement seven hundred years later, in a very different declaration of the supremacy of law in a settler state: ‘in America THE LAW IS KING. For as in absolute governments the King is law, so in free countries the law *ought* to be King; and there ought to be no other’ (original emphasis). Thomas Paine, ‘Common Sense,’ 1776, *Collected Writings*, ed. Eric Foner (New York, NY: Library of America, 1995) 34.

⁴ The phrase demonstrates the remarkable continuity of this medieval equation of society and law. It prefaces the thirteenth-century Danish *Jyske Lov* (‘Law of Jutland’), and may be found in the Swedish *Upplandslagen* and *Hälsingelagen* and the Norwegian *Frostatingslov*. It is absent from *Grágás*, but present in the thirteenth-century *Járnsíða*, the first law imposed on Iceland after the submission to Norway. (See *ÍF* 12: lxxviii, 172–73 n. 6; *MSE* 383–87.) In the modern era, it has become the motto of the Icelandic National Police and of the Shetland Islands. The phrase is prominently featured in the frescos of the Oslo Rådhus, opened in 1950, and above the door to the chamber of the Danish Folketing. Literary discussion of the phrase may be found at p. 100 below, in relation to its use by Njáll Þorgeirsson.

⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1861) 64.

for example, the *riddarasögur*, or the often fantastic *fornaldarsögur*, the much-cited ‘realism’ of the *Íslendingasögur* may be attributed to the anchoring of their discrete stories within two broader narratives – of time, and of law.⁶ Hayden White, reading Hegel, offers a compelling explanation of why this centrality of law to written identity might exist:

The reality that lends itself to narrative representation is the conflict between desire and the law. Where there is no rule of law, there can be neither a subject nor the kind of event that lends itself to narrative representation.⁷

This argument might stand at the centre of a theory of the position of the *Íslendingasögur* as literary products. Whether the notion, as Bogi Melsteð would have it, that a distinct Icelandic society was reified through the establishment of the *Alþingi* in 930 is true or not is irrelevant; the very narrative mode of the *Íslendingasögur* presupposes a legal society, one arranged around a legal core, because subjectivity in narrative only becomes possible when actions may be measured against the precepts of what White describes as ‘the social system’. White goes on to argue that:

Interest in the social system, which is nothing other than a system of human relationships governed by law, creates the possibility of conceiving the kinds of tensions, conflicts, struggles, and their various kinds of

⁶ The key differences between these genres of saga are often attributed to place, in both space and time. Torfi Tulinius argues that the ‘*fornaldarsögur* project the aspirations and preoccupations of the thirteenth century onto the heroes of the distant past [...] The *Íslendingasögur* also project a certain ideal into the past, but into the near past,’ Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, trans. Randi C. Eldevik (Odense: Odense University Press, 2002) 294. To extend ‘place’ as a concept to include an abstract, legally defined community would accord this distinction with the argument made below. There are also connections between these generic distinctions and the conception of Iceland as territory, as discussed in the section on *Landnám* above. Iceland is neither the ‘mythic North’ of the *fornaldarsögur* nor the blank canvas of the Romance-landscape, but a territory fixed in nature through a narrative myth of discovery and settlement.

⁷ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1987) 13-14. White is explicating Hegel’s introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*.

resolutions that we are accustomed to find in any representation of reality presenting itself to us as a history.⁸

Indeed it does not matter whether or not the sagas are considered to be presented as history or otherwise. They are indisputably narrative in mode, and the description of the ‘social system’ White provides above is surely at least as fitting to the *Íslendingasögur* as to any other literature, not least because of the recurrent motif of the feud and its reconciliation.

The subject of feud in Icelandic literature has naturally been intimately connected with studies of the role of law. William Ian Miller and Jesse Byock have both sought to demonstrate a narrative substructure present in the *Íslendingasögur* predicated on an essentially mechanistic model of feud as action followed by counter-action.⁹ This approach has been fruitful, particularly in teasing out the complex webs of claims and counter-claims present in the longer sagas, but it does risk advancing a model of the Icelandic saga as rule-bound, and saga characters as acting only in accordance with the obligations of the feud and, more generally, in a self-interested way.¹⁰ *Lög* is a subtler concept than feud, and although feud is frequently a motor to saga narratives, it would be a mistake to give feud itself agency at the expense of characters. In *Njáls saga* alone, Gunnarr at Hlíðarenda and Síðu-Hallr both intervene in legal processes without obligation, out of an apparent

⁸ White, *The Content of the Form* 14.

⁹ See Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Byock argues that ‘[c]onflict, advocacy, and resolution, as small units of action, [...] cluster together in a variety of ways [...] The clusters form chains of feud, which are the backbone of Icelandic prose narrative; one or several chains make up an entire saga’ (57-8), whilst Miller posits that the ‘Icelanders did have a model of feud and of the disputing process. It was a model of balance and reciprocity [...] involv[ing] careful scorekeeping, an alternating rhythm of giving and taking, inflicting and being afflicted’ (182). Theodore Andersson’s work on the structure of the family saga is used by both these critics, and certainly stands near the head of this tradition. See Theodore M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

¹⁰ This is related, of course, to a desire to see the sagas encoding commentary on and the ideals behind contemporary social behaviour in thirteenth-century Iceland.

desire to ensure justice: these examples are discussed in detail in the third section below. The centrality of feud to the debate is hardly surprising; whilst the very simplest feud might be concluded without any recourse to the legal system, this is rare.¹¹ *Grágás* contains the stipulation that a killing made without the correct legally prescribed public announcement was murder, a far more serious offence than a killing in itself, whatever the motivation.¹² Thus even the greatest physical transgression one human can make against another is immediately contextualized within a set of socio-legal obligations. To return to White and Hegel, in the vast majority of cases a killing in Iceland cannot exist only in the present. It may stand as the culmination of a chain of events that lead to a killing, but it *must* provoke a process of legal settlement, successful or otherwise.

These legal proceedings can well be recognized as a generic motif of the *Íslendingasaga*.¹³

There exists a convenient etymological similarity between *lög* and *saga*. Both have come to represent abstract ideas, yet are derived from verbs originally conveying a sense of concrete agency. *Saga* derives from *segja* – literally, that which has been said; *lög* from *leggja* – those which have been laid down, built, or established.¹⁴ English has borrowed the word *saga*, and the English word *law* is derived from the Old Norse *lög*, although the fact that the Old Norse term is a plural noun is not

¹¹ William Ian Miller observes that '[t]he Icelandic feud was inseparable from Icelandic law and to solve its mazes one needed special, almost proto-professional, sophistication.' Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking* 220.

¹² 'Þat er mælt. ef maðr myrþir man oc varðar þat scog gang. en þa er morð ef maðr leynir eða hylr hræ eða gengr eigi i gegn.' *Gr. Ia*: 154. ('It is stipulated that if a man murders someone the penalty is outlawry, and it is murder if a man keeps it secret or conceals the body or does not confess to it.')

¹³ This said, it is important to recognize the differing manners in which saga-authors represented the law and the different narrative functions it has performed, a theme elaborated by Hannah Burrows, 'Cold Cases: Law and Legal Detail in the *Íslendingasögur*,' *Parergon* 26.1 (2009).

¹⁴ It has been observed that this evokes the common-law system of precedent: 'in English-speaking countries people are well aware that the common law consists of legal 'layers', binding precedents from judges in royal courts from the twelfth century onwards.' Gudmund Sandvik and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Laws,' *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) 223.

without significance.¹⁵ There is a danger that the temptation to automatically equate the *lög* of the sagas with a modern concept of ‘law’ can cause misleading conclusions to arise as to the role of *lög* in the social mythology of the sagas.¹⁶ The Icelandic inflexional system and the language’s comparative scarcity of loan-words conveniently lends the derivatives of *leggja* linguistic interrelationships impossible in English: compare, for example, the closeness between *lög* and *orlög*, the latter a term that could be rendered as ‘fate’: literally, it is another aspect of the sense ‘that which is laid down’. This is not to claim some substantive connection between these terms’ signifieds, but merely to observe a linguistic parallel to the social concept of *lög* in Icelandic literature: not a set of institutions and procedures on the edge of normal social discourse, dealing with exceptions, but instead something directly interconnected with practically all aspects of social interaction, and thus susceptible to invocation in a variety of contexts. Law in the sagas is something much wider than simply the set of rules and processes which govern dispute resolution.¹⁷ In formulating a wider definition of the term, the direct identification of *procedure* (the *Alþingi*, the *fimtardómur*, and so on, which *were* the elements of the system designed to deal with exceptions to normal behaviour) with *lög* must be nuanced towards a more abstract concept of the term. Part of this must involve the unravelling of a paradox at the heart of the presentation of *lög* in the literature, that it is both one

¹⁵ The Old English word for law was *ǣ*, although *lagu* entered the language as a loan word in the mid-tenth century; *ǣ* was only entirely displaced in the early thirteenth. See Andreas Fischer, ‘Lexical Change in Late Old English: From *ǣ* to *lagu*,’ *The History and the Dialects of English*, ed. Andreas Fischer (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1989).

¹⁶ In order to obviate confusion stemming from this broader interpretation of the term, henceforth *lög* will be used to refer to this wider concept of law in the Old Norse literature pertaining to medieval Iceland.

¹⁷ Indeed in texts set outside Iceland, particularly the *fornaldarsögur*, compounds of *lög* have denoted codes of behaviour made between groups of warriors, such as the *Jómsvíkingalög*, which provide prescriptions for correct conduct. For an analysis of the potential influence of chivalric ideology on the thirteenth-century imagination of the idea of a *víkingalög*, see Carolyne Larrington, ‘A Viking in Shining Armour? Vikings and Chivalry in the *Fornaldarsögur*,’ *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 4 (2008).

and many: as a unity it is used to embody social cohesion, but in its diverse procedural instruments it is frequently shown to produce quite the opposite result.

This paradox can begin to be resolved by considering the law as a value-neutral social space – something close, in fact, to the use of *lög* in the sense of ‘jurisdiction’, or the area in which particular laws apply.¹⁸ William Pencak has sought to apply theories of legal semiotics to the study of the *Íslendingasögur*. He states that:

Legal semiotics looks at law not as authoritative, or as a set of texts with definitive status, but rather as an amorphous field – we might use the metaphor of the battlefield – where different communities of interpreters – judges, lawyers, scholars, legislators, interested citizens – interact to create “the law” in accordance with their needs and expertise.¹⁹

Law is thus neither an intrinsically positive or negative force within society: its efficacy rests on its manner of invocation. This will be considered in more detail later in this chapter. Pencak’s formulation also applies a spatial idiom to law, which is where the intersections between law, Iceland-as-territory, and Icelandic identity can most clearly be discerned. Following chapter 2.i above, this section will examine *lög* first as a settler, and the manner in which law and legal

¹⁸ This may be compared to the use of the term *Danelaw* to refer to the area of England where Danish law applied; for a survey of the subtleties of the use of the term in both medieval and modern contexts, see Katherine Holman, ‘Defining the Danelaw,’ *Vikings and the Danelaw: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Viking Congress, Nottingham and York, 21-30 August 1997*, eds. James Graham-Campbell, Richard Hall, Judith Jesch and David N. Parsons (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2001), Matthew Innes, ‘Danelaw Identities: Ethnicity, Regionalism, and Political Allegiance,’ *Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, eds. Dawn M. Hadley and Julian D. Richards (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000).

¹⁹ William Pencak, *The Conflict of Law and Justice in the Icelandic Sagas* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995) 4. Pencak’s influence here is Roberta Kevelson’s work on legal semiotics. She makes the distinction, important for resolving the ambiguous role of the law in the *Íslendingasögur*, that ‘[j]ust as there is not one ideal legal system, but rather a legal system as actually a network of competing and conflicting legal subsystems [...] so there is not one type of legal discourse but conflicting modes of legal reasoning which interact in any given period of time and are coeval in any given society.’ Roberta Kevelson, *The Law as a System of Signs* (New York, NY: Plenum Press, 1988) 10. Pencak’s book is hindered by its exclusive use of the sagas in translation and a very limited range of English-language critical material; but despite these shortcomings, his application of a much more nuanced approach to the concept of law in the sagas is a valuable one.

institutions are represented as arising. A second subsection will then observe the spatial dimension to literary depictions of legal interactions, and the resultant delineation of a discrete social space that overlaps with the wider notion of Icelandic identity. It will test these boundaries through an analysis of the legal reflexes of representations of foreignness and the supernatural. The third will interrogate the problematic representations of *lög* which arise through its invocation and interpretation in conflicting and contradictory ways, and seek to reconcile this with the accretive power of *lög* in community-building, including an examination of the saga as the instrument of precedent. Finally, an epilogue will link this section to the following, on Christianity and Icelandic identity, through the iconic event of the peaceful resolution to convert at the *Alþingi* in 999/1000.

1. *Lög* as settler

If migration and settlement are transformative processes which permit the development of new identities in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, the establishment of laws forms the first step in the elaboration and delineation of these identities. After all, the verb *byggja* in the famous proverb cited above is most commonly used in the sagas with the sense ‘to settle’ with respect to a land-claim.

Amongst the sources, Ari’s *Íslendingabók* naturally stands at the head of this social mythology. *Lög* in *Íslendingabók* is not autochthonic – it is figured as a settler itself, brought ‘út hingat’:

En þá es Ísland vas víða byggt orðit, þá hafði maðr auströenn fyrst lög út hingat ýr Norvegi, sá es Ulfljótr hét; svá sagði Teitr oss; ok váru þá Ulfljótslög kǫlluð; – hann vas faðir Gunnars, es Djúpdællir eru komnir frá í Eyjafirði; – en þau váru flest sett at því sem þá váru Golaþingslög eða ráð Þorleifs ens spaka Hǫrða-Kárasonar váru til, hvar við skyldi auka eða af nema eða annan veg setja.²⁰

²⁰ *ÍF* 1: 6-7. ‘And when Iceland had been widely settled, an easterner named Ulfljótr first brought laws out here from Norway, so Teitr told us, and they were called *Ulfljótslög*. He was the father of Gunnarr, from whom are

As Jakob Benediktsson observes in his note to this passage, Ari declares Iceland *albyggt* ('fully settled') in the third chapter, after the formation of the *Alþingi*. The elaboration and growth of the legal framework is interleaved with that of the demographic growth of the society itself. This interleaving is especially evident in this passage, as Ari establishes Ulfljótr as both the progenitor of intangible laws and tangible descendants, as well as positioning him as an intermediary between Norway and Iceland, an easterner but one whose descendants are the *Djúpdælir*. Although the *lög* is brought 'út hingat', it, like the settlers discussed in the previous section, is transformed in the process. This is established explicitly as the work of Þorleifr Hǫrða-Kárason, who adapted the law to its new circumstances. Although the identity of Þorleifr is problematic, the need to adapt the law of a Norwegian *þing* to the new surroundings of Iceland sets in motion the elaboration of a new law for a new society.²¹

It is notable that Ari's presentation of the narrative of the *lög* is arranged such that the introduction of laws and the establishment of the *Alþingi* are described in distinct passages. This is an acknowledgement that the latter grows from the former, and that *lög* itself is a broader, more abstract concept than its purely institutional manifestations. It also marks the Icelandic innovation of the 'general assembly' as a point of departure from the regional assemblies that existed elsewhere in

descended the people of Djúpadalr in Eyjafjörðr. They were mostly established in common with what were then the laws of the *Gulaping* or on what the advice of Þorleifr enn spaki [the wise] Hǫrða-Kárason was as to what should be added, taken away, or put differently.'

²¹ Jakob Benediktsson observes that *Ágrip*, *Heimskringla* and several other *konungasögur* tell of a Þorleifr spaki who advised King Hákon góði [the good] Haraldsson on the establishment of the *Gulapingslög*, but as Siân Grønlie notes, his historicity is problematic. According to *Heimskringla* his career as an advisor spans an unlikely three generations, and Hákon's establishment of the *Gulapingslög* could be construed to postdate Ulfljótr's introduction of laws to Iceland. See *ÍF* 1: 7 n. 5; Grønlie, ed., *Íslendingabók, Kristni saga* 18-19. For a historical analysis of early Scandinavian law, see Stefan Brink, 'Law and Legal Customs in Viking Age Scandinavia,' *The Scandinavians from the Vendel Period to the Tenth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. Judith Jesch (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002) 87-127.

Scandinavia. Ari opens his third chapter with the declaration that ‘Alþingi vas sett at ráði Ulfjóts ok allra landsmanna þar es nú es.’²² In the same way that the provenance of the *Gulapingslög* is conceptually broadened by reference to Ulfjótr’s adoption of it and Þorleifr’s adaptations, here the *Ulfjótslög* is being established on the advice not only of its namesake but also on the advice of *all* the people of the country. Ari observes that there had already been a *þing* at Kjalarnes. Here he laconically relates a foundation myth dense with significance:

[E]n áðr vas þing á Kjalarnesi, þat es Þorsteinn Ingólfssonr landnámamanns, faðir Þorkels mána lögsgumanns, hafði þar ok hofðingjar þeir es at því hurfu. En maðr hafði sekr orðit of þræls morð eða leysings, sá es land átti í Bláskógum, hann es nefndr Þórir kroppinskeggi; en dóttursonr hans es kallaðr Þorvaldr kroppinskeggi, sá es fór síðan í Austfjörðu ok brenndi þar inni Gunnar bróður sinn. Svá sagði Hallr Órækjasonr. En sá hét Kolr, es myrðr vas. Við hann es kennd gjá sú es þar es kolluð síðan Kolsgjá, sem hræin fundusk. Land þat varð síðan allsherjarfé, en þat lögðu landsmenn til alþingis neyzlu. Af því es þar almenning at viðá til alþingis í skógum ok á heiðum hagi til hrossahafnar. Þat sagði Ulfheðinn oss.²³

Ari’s technique of interleaving social history and family history, national and regional, public and private, is again in evidence here. The *Kjalarnesþing* is located with reference not only to region and specific kin groups, but also to narratives of these groups; the story of Þorvaldr’s killing of his brother in the Eastfjords is of no relevance to the narrative of the institution of the *Alþingi*.

²² *ÍF* 1: 8. ‘The *Alþingi* was established where it now is on the advice of Ulfjótr and all the people of the country.’

²³ *ÍF* 1: 8-9. ‘But before that there was a *þing* at Kjalarnes that Þorsteinn, son of Ingólfr the settler, father of Þorkell máni [moon] the law-speaker, held there together with the chieftains who went to it. And a man had been made an outlaw for the murder of a slave or freedman; he owned land in Bláskógar and is called Þórir kroppinskeggi [crooked-beard]. His daughter’s son is called Þorvaldr kroppinskeggi [crooked-beard], who later went to the Eastfjords and there burned in his brother Gunnarr. So said Hallr Órækjason. The man who was murdered was called Kolr. The chasm where his body was found was afterwards called Kolsgjá [Kolr’s gorge] after him. That land afterwards became public property, and the people of the country established it for the use of the *Alþingi*. Because of this there is common land to furnish the *Alþingi* with wood from the forest and heathland suitable for use as horse-pasture. Ulfheðinn told us this.’ For a modern discussion of the symbolic value of Þingvellir, see Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, ‘Þingvellir: An Icelandic “Lieu de Mémoire”,’ *History & Memory* 12.1 (2000).

Moreover, this foundation myth corroborates the argument made above, that killing in Iceland cannot take place in a legal vacuum. That the establishment of the principal symbol (if not the totality) of the Icelandic legal system takes place upon ground appropriated as part of the settlement made for a killing represents the victory of law over lawlessness, but also, from the perspective of intertextual prolepsis, bodes ill for the capacity of legal institutions to *prevent* killings.

The association of a killing – a death – with the site of the *Alþingi* is also an act of memorialization, an act which recognizes the importance of place for collective memory. Jürg Glauser has observed this in relation to *Njáls saga*, when Njáll himself issues careful instructions to ensure his body is locatable after his house is burned. He concludes:

Medieval texts are embedded in a culture of performance, marked by tensions between memorial culture and written culture – which is to say, by innumerable interferences, simultaneities, and contradictions – and in this setting the human body is both the bearer of messages and their integrated medium.²⁴

The situation here is more complex – Kolsgjá is the toponymic memorial to the killing, and is only a single landscape feature at Þingvöllum. But nevertheless, Ari's recital of this foundation myth explicitly ties memorialization to the establishment of the *Alþingi*: Kolsgjá is the physical location where legal history and legal future intersect. It is a curious form of hallowed ground. The stipulation that Þingvöllum should provide a supply of wood and grazing land places the location outside of the normal system of land-ownership. If Þingvöllum is collectively owned, it presupposes a collective. It is not merely land over which no claim has been made; it is *allsherjarfé* ('public property') by active

²⁴ Jürg Glauser, 'The Speaking Bodies of Saga Texts,' *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, eds. Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007) 26. For a comparable approach to Viking-age archaeology, see Neil Price, 'Passing into Poetry: Viking-Age Mortuary Drama and the Origins of Norse Mythology,' *Mediaeval Archaeology* 54 (2010).

decision of the *landsmen* ('inhabitants of the country').²⁵ As stated above, the concept of *lög* is far broader than that of the legal institutions of Iceland, but then again, the *Alþingi* as a single sign represents a complex superimposition of meanings.²⁶ Nevertheless, Ari's foundation myth of the *Alþingi* creates a unique social space in Iceland, one that emblemizes the fundamentally abstract society whose genesis he relates.²⁷

Ari's text is just one literary interaction with the beginnings of *lög*. As with narratives of settlement, the narrative of the origins of Icelandic law has echoes across the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus. In the prologue to the *Snorra Edda*, Snorri Sturluson describes the euhemerized Óðinn establishing the city of Sigtuna in Sweden:

Þar þótti Óðni fagrir lands kostir ok kaus sér þar borgstað er nú heita Sigtúnir. Skipaði hann þar hofðingjum ok í þá líking sem verit hafði í Troja, setti tólf hofuðmenn í staðinum at dæma landslög, ok svá skipaði hann réttum qllum sem fyrr hofðu verit í Troju ok Tyrkir váru vanir.²⁸

²⁵ *Allsherjafé* is only attested in *Íslendingabók* according to *Fritzner* and *ONP*; as a concept in Old Norse-Icelandic literature it is therefore rare and perhaps specific only to Þingvöllum.

²⁶ Kirsten Hastrup has observed that the 'meaning' of the *Alþingi* is 'related to a whole range of semantic domains. In the first place, *alþingi* was more or less synonymous with "our law", that is, the nation, in that it was the most encompassing element in a hierarchy of elements defining the Freestate. It also connoted a particular place within the country [...] It also denoted a particular time of year.' Hastrup, *Culture and History* 122. Her structural analysis of the legal system is invaluable, although some reservations must be expressed with regard to the use of the terms 'nation' and 'Freestate', as discussed in the introduction above.

²⁷ For an archaeological perspective on the Scandinavian assembly site, see Stefan Brink, 'Legal Assembly Sites in Early Scandinavia,' *Assembly Places and Practices in Medieval Europe*, eds. Aliko Pantos and Sarah Semple (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004) 205-16 and Stefan Brink, 'Legal Assemblies and Judicial Structure in Early Scandinavia,' *Political Assemblies in the Earlier Middle Ages*, eds. P. S. Barnwell and Marco Mostert (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003) 61-72.

²⁸ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning* 6. 'The land there seemed excellent to Óðinn, and he chose for himself a site for a town which is now called Sigtúnir. There he established chiefs in the same way as he had at Troy; he appointed twelve rulers in the town to administer the laws of the land, and he so established all the rights as there had been in Troy, and with which the Turks were familiar.' For a wider discussion of the euhemerized *Eddaic* pantheon, see Anthony Faulkes, 'Descent from the Gods,' *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 11 (1978-79): 92-125.

Snorri's conflation of Trojan legend and Germanic divine genealogy is very likely an act of literary creativity rather than a reflection of any widely held belief.²⁹ But it is compelling evidence for the centrality of law to the process of identity construction that Óðinn's first act, after locating a suitable site for a settlement, is the institution of a legal system. As with Iceland, settlement is followed by the introduction of laws, and once again these are laws imported from the settlers' home.

Furthermore, the governmental system he implements has parallels in the Icelandic example.

Although Óðinn himself is autocratic in his establishment of new societies across Northern Europe, the government of Sigtuna is not to be founded on his edicts, but decided by a council of elders, prefiguring the *lögretta* ('law-council') of the Icelandic *Þjóðveldi*.³⁰ Even the wording of *Grágás* is similar in its summation of the composition of the law council:

þat ero xii. menn or fiordunge hueriom er lögretto seto eigo. oc logsögo
maðr vm fram sva at þar scolo ráða logom oc lófom.³¹

Here twelve *goðar* represent each of the four quarters of Iceland. Furthermore it is not too tenuous to note the motif of equals coming together in council even in the *Poetic Edda*:

Hvat er með ásom?
Hvat er með álfom?
Gnýr allr iqtunheimr.
Æsir ro á þingi.³²

²⁹ And, indeed, typical of early medieval historiography – Geoffrey of Monmouth established a connection between Britain and Troy through the figure of Brutus, a descendant of Aeneas born in Italy following the flight of the Trojans. See Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) 54 ff.

³⁰ The *lögretta* could make new laws and interpret the existing law in cases of dispute. It also had the power to grant permission for certain activities that required it, such as the mitigation of penalties and some settlements. See *Gr. Ia*: 211-17.

³¹ *Gr. Ia*: 211. 'That is twelve men from each quarter who have seats on the law council, besides the law-speaker, who there shall rule on law and license.'

³² Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda II*: 20. 'What troubles the Æsir? What troubles the Elves? All giant-land roars. The Æsir are in council.' Compare also the reaction of Iqrmunrekkr's soldiers to the approach of Hamðir and

This occurs as *Ragnarøk* begins; the first action after the rebirth of the world following the apocalypse also appears to be the convening of a meeting:

Finnaz æsir
 á Iðavelli
 ok um moldþinur
 mátkan dæma
 [ok minnaz þar
 á megindóma]
 ok á Fimbultýs
 fornar rúnar.³³

The Æsir meet (*hitta*) at Iðavöllr earlier in the poem, where they build temples and altars and produce tools and wealth.³⁴ This collocation of cyclical meeting, remembering, discussing and cultural production at Iðavöllr demonstrates a plausible parallel with the routine of the *Alþingi*, which of course took place at another *völlr*, Þingvöllr. As well as these references in the *Poetic Edda*, the Æsir's resort to council after the death of Baldr as described in the *Prose Edda* contains similar resonances.³⁵

Naturally the theme of the *þing* is not exclusively Icelandic; but nevertheless the idiom of the council and collective decision-making and responsibility permeates the mythological texts as much as the *Íslendingasögur*. Whether this demonstrates an ancient innate predilection for assembly and consensus reaching back to prehistory, or one merely in the mind of medieval Icelandic authors, is not distinguishable from the literature. Nevertheless, hierarchical decision-making is a hallmark

Sqrli in *Hamðismál*: 'Rœðið ér um ráð- / ríkir ero komnir!' Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda* I: 165. ('You – take council – the powerful ones are coming!')

³³ Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda* II: 23. 'The Æsir assemble on Iðavöllr and converse about the mighty world serpent, and there remember great matters and the ancient secrets of Fimbultýr.'

³⁴ 'Hittoz æsir / á Iðavelli ...,' Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda* II: 8. ('The Æsir meet at Iðavöllr').

³⁵ 'ok sá hværr til annars' (and they looked to one another); and the following discussion of choosing a messenger to Hel; see Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning* 46ff.

both of kingship and of the institutional Christian church, neither of which are represented as being present in Iceland until several hundred years after the settlement. The concept of the assembly is both abstract and physical, and the status of the *þing* as the physical manifestation of *lög* provides a starting-point for an analysis of *lög* post-settlement – the emergence of a single social space.

2. *Lög* as social space

The notion of the Iceland of the sagas as a ‘social space’ is a long-standing one that sees the Iceland delineated in the literature as an artistic realization of a society, rather than merely a group of individuals.³⁶ Adjusting Pencak’s model of the law as a battlefield,³⁷ it is quite possible to see this social space as coterminous with a legal space. It is this that prompts Þorgeirr to plead for unity in the dispute over the conversion, as related in *Íslendingabók*:

En þá hóf hann tölur sína upp, es menn kvómu þar, ok sagði, at hónum þótti þá komit hag manna í ónýtt efni, ef menn skyldi eigi haga allir lög ein á landi hér.³⁸

A direct equivalence is suggested here between *land* and *lög*, and the concept of the two *not* having the same borders is a source of considerable alarm. Kirsten Hastrup notes that ‘the logic of social life in medieval Iceland was to a large extent defined by the concept of *vár lög*, “our law,”’³⁹ and this spatial dimension to the law is emblemized by its focal point, Þingvöllr, the site of the *Alþingi*.

³⁶ Such an argument is implicit in both this thesis and other works that seek to treat the *Íslendingasögur* and related texts as demonstrating some kind of unity arising out of an intertextual dialogue over the idea of Iceland; a representative example is Jürg Glauser, ‘Sagas of the Icelanders (*Íslendinga sögur*) and *þættir* as the literary representation of a new social space,’ trans. John Clifton-Everest, *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

³⁷ See p. 68 above.

³⁸ *ÍF* 1: 17. ‘He then began to speak, when people arrived there, and said that it seemed to him that the situation would become impossible to handle, if people should not manage [themselves under] one law here in this land.’

³⁹ Hastrup, *Culture and History* 205.

Having examined the depiction of the genesis of laws above, this section will use an examination of the social conventions seen at the *Alþingi* and beyond as markers of social roles and thus common subscription to an abstract set of principles. It is these principles that constitute *lög*.

The *Alþingi* performs many more functions in the literature than as the site of the quarter-courts. In this respect it mirrors the polysemous term *lög* itself. *Njáls saga*, described by Guðbrandur Vigfússon as ‘the Saga of Law *par excellence*,’⁴⁰ invokes the symbol of the *Alþingi* from its very inception as the locus for the formation of a marriage-contract, when Hǫskuldr Dala-Kollsson arranges the marriage of his half-brother Hrútr Herjólfsson:

Síðan ganga þeir til lǫgréttu. Mǫrðr gígja mælti lǫgskil at vanða sínum ok gekk heim til búðar sinnar. Hǫskuldr stóð upp ok Hrútr ok gengu til búðar Marðar ok inn í búðina; Mǫrðr sat í innanverðri búðinni; þeir kvøddu hann. Hann stóð upp í móti þeim ok tók í hönd Hǫskuldi, ok settisk hann niðr hjá honum, en Hrútr sat it næsta Hǫskuldi.⁴¹

One of the most fascinating aspects of this extract is all that is left unsaid. Apart from Mǫrðr’s business at the *lǫgrétta*, the relationship between the three agents here is expressed by the saga author purely in terms of gesture. The adjective *innanverðri* sets up a spatial distance between Mǫrðr and the half-brothers which is bridged when Mǫrðr ‘tók í hönd Hǫskuldi.’ The physical and social space between them is reduced through the action of taking a hand and offering a seat. This ritualized social conduct is as much part of *lög* in the abstract sense as is the *lǫgskil* (‘legal business’) which Mǫrðr is conducting at the *lǫgrétta*, especially with regard to the gestures of hands. Hands play a large role in the language of Icelandic legal affairs as well, of course, as being the physical

⁴⁰ Gudbrand Vigfusson, ed., *Sturlunga saga*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1878) I: xlii.

⁴¹ *ÍF* 12: 8. ‘Next they go to the law-council. Mǫrðr gígja [Fiddle] was conducting legal argument as he was accustomed to, and then went back to his booth. Hǫskuldr and Hrútr stood up and went to Mǫrðr’s booth and stepped inside; Mǫrðr was sitting in the innermost part of the booth. They greeted him. He stood up to meet them and took Hǫskuldr’s hand, and sat him down beside himself, and Hrútr sat next to Hǫskuldr.’

agents of many illegitimate acts. This is best exemplified by the noun *handsal*, which not only has the sense of the literal shaking of hands, but which carries an expressly legal sense of a transaction sealed through the shaking of hands. In many sagas, legal cases themselves are transferred from one person's responsibility to another's through the action of handshaking.⁴² The protocol of seating is also loaded with social significance: it is Hallgerðr's refusal to move to allow Bergþóra to seat her guest Þórhalla at one of Njáll's feasts which begins a poisonous enmity between the two women which rapidly draws in their families and ultimately contributes to the deaths of both Gunnarr and Njáll.⁴³ The carefully choreographed meeting between Hǫskuldr, Hrútr and Mǫrðr is partly due to the gravity of the request and the fact that they are, as far as the reader may tell, not well acquainted. The scene could be compared to a later one in the lead-up to the prosecution of the burners before the *Alþingi*:

Flosi gekk einn hvern dag til búðar Bjarna Brodd-Helgasonar. Bjarni tók við honum báðum höndum, ok settisk Flosi niðr hjá Bjarna.⁴⁴

⁴² See, for example, Mǫrðr Valgarðsson's summons of Flosi Þórðarson over the case of the burning of Njáll: 'lýsi ek loðlýsing; lýsi ek handseldri sök Þorgeirs Þórissonar.' *ÍF* 12: 357. ('I give notice of this pleading; I give notice of the action made over to me by Þorgeirr Þórisson.')

⁴³ '„Hvergi mun ek þoka, því at engi hornkerling vil ek vera.“' *ÍF* 12: 91. ("There's no way I'll move, because I'm not going to be the old woman in the corner.") Presumably Hallgerðr is being asked to move from the *pallr* [dais] where she is initially described as sitting. Again, the spatial implications of this are significant; Bergþóra is quite literally elevating one of her guests at the expense of another. Allen suggests that the scene quoted above concerning Mǫrðr, Hrútr and Hǫskuldr is, among other things, a lesson in manners: see Richard F. Allen, *Fire and Iron: Critical Approaches to Njáls saga* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971) 65. Sitting in another's seat is frequently presented as a far graver matter than one of poor manners. For another example see Guðmundr inn ríki's squabble with Ófeigr Qnundarson in *Ljósvetninga saga* (*ÍF* 10: 58-59). For commentary on this incident, see Theodore M. Andersson and William Ian Miller, *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: Ljósvetninga saga and Valla-Ljóts saga* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989) 59-60. If one were to take another's seat at the *loðgrétta*, and be witnessed to refuse to give it up, *Grágás* provides for a sentence of lesser outlawry: *Gr.* Ia: 212.

⁴⁴ *ÍF* 12: 364. 'One day Flosi went to Bjarni Brodd-Helgason's booth. Bjarni received him with both hands, and Flosi sat down next to Bjarni.'

Although much compressed, the essential gestures remain – the act of taking hands and that of sitting close to the host.

The sequence of events involved in entering the booth forms the prelude to the formal negotiation between Mǫrðr and Hǫskuldr, the latter acting effectively as Hrútr’s advocate on the terms of the proposed marriage between Hrútr and Unnr Marðardóttir. It is Hrútr who eventually seals the bargain, intervening apparently because he is worried his half-brother is not being entirely frank in his representation of his kinsman’s wealth:

[„Þ]á vik ek, at þér gerið kostinn.“ Mǫrðr svaraði: „Hugsat hefi ek kostinn. Hon skal hafa sex tigi hundraða, ok skal aukask þriðjungu í þínum garði, en ef þit eigið erfingja, þá skal vera helmingarfélag með ykkur.“ Hrútr mælti: „Þenna kost vil ek, ok hǫfum nú váttu við.“ Síðan stóðu þeir upp ok tókusk í hendr, ok fastnaði Mǫrðr Hrúti dóttur sína, Unni, ok skyldi boð vera hálfum mánaði eptir mitt sumar at Marðar.⁴⁵

The use of the gesture of the handshake to conclude negotiations thus recalls the hand taken by Mǫrðr bringing the brothers into the booth. Again, recalling the first entry into the booth, the confirmation of the arrangement is expressed by gestures rather than words, through standing up and shaking hands.⁴⁶ The two concrete actions, ‘stóðu þeir upp ok tókusk í hendr’ are followed immediately, and naturally, by the abstract action indicated by *fastna* (‘to pledge, (here) betroth’).

⁴⁵ *ÍF* 12: 9. “‘I’d like you to decide terms,” [said Hrútr]. Mǫrðr answered, “I have considered the terms. She shall have sixty hundreds [from me] to be increased by a third from your estate, and if you have heirs, the property will be treated as owned equally between you.” Hrútr said, “I’ll accept that deal, and now let’s call witnesses.” Then they stood up and shook hands, and Mǫrðr betrothed his daughter Unnr to Hrútr, and the wedding was to take place two weeks after midsummer at Mǫrðr’s [home].’

⁴⁶ The significance of the gesture in sealing the agreement is further illustrated in the following threat from *Laxdæla saga*, made by Þorsteinn Þorkelsson kugga against Halldórr Ólafsson: ‘er sá kostur annarr, at þú ger þetta mál með vild ok haf þar í mót vinfengi vart; en sá er annarr, at sýnu er verri, at þú rétt nauðigr fram hǫndina ok handsala mér Hjarðarholts land.’ *ÍF* 5: 220. (‘The first option is that you agree to this deal willingly and have in return our friendship; but the alternative, that looks to be worse, is that you reach out your hands and make over with a handshake the Hjarðarholt land to me.’)

The ritualized solemnity of the action of entering another's booth at the *Alþingi* within saga literature is testament to the pervasiveness of *lög* beyond the courts and councils themselves. It is here that *lög* interfaces with identity. To be 'within' the community is to follow these rituals, to defer to convention. *Hrafnkels saga*, an inexhaustibly curious saga in many respects, presents a version of the entry into the booth which is jarringly different from that which one might expect. The farmer Sámur Bjarnason agrees to take up the prosecution of the *goði* Hrafnkell Hallfreðarson for the killing of Einarr, a shepherd who incurred Hrafnkell's wrath by riding on a horse he had part-dedicated to Freyr, on behalf of Einarr's father Þorbjörn.⁴⁷ After initially having no success at the *Alþingi* in finding any *goðar* who would support his case, he meets Þorkell Þjóstarsson, an *einhleypingr* ('unattached man') who had passed his *goðorð* to his brother in order to go abroad. He promises Sámur his brother's support in the case, but gives him some quite extraordinary instructions on how to initiate legal relations with him:

Fari þit nú fyrir til búðarinnar ok gangið inn í búðina. Er mannfólk í svefni. Þit munuð sjá, hvar standa innar um þvera búðina tvau húðföt, ok reis ek upp ór ǫðru, en í ǫðru hvílir Þorgeirr, bróðir minn. Hann hefir haft kveisu mikla í fœtinum, síðan hann kom á þingit, ok því hefir hann lítit sofit um

⁴⁷ Hrafnkell's killing of Einarr is often characterized as an action stemming from an excessive desire to fulfil the oath he took when he dedicated the horse to Freyr: 'Þar munda ek hafa gefit þér upp eina sök, ef ek hefða eigi svá mikit um mælt, en þó hefir þú vel við gengit.' *ÍF* 11: 105. ('I would have overlooked this one offence if I had not made such a grave oath, even though you have readily admitted it.') This oath has been considered an abuse of Hrafnkell's own power by deliberately constraining his freedom of action unnecessarily: see Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's Saga* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1971) 41. But according to *Grágás*, riding another's horse without permission was a specific offence: *Konungsbók* has a section entitled 'vm hross reiðir' ('on horse-riding'). The law distinguishes *meiri* and *minni* ('major' and 'minor') rides, with *skóggangr* ('full outlawry') the punishment for the former and fines for the latter, the difference principally being distance travelled. It is noted by the saga-author that 'Einarr reið Freyfaxa allt frá eldingu ok til miðs aptans,' *ÍF* 11: 103. ('Einarr rode Freyfaxi right from dawn until the middle of the evening.') The further detailing of him calling in at a shieling called Reykjasel seems to indicate that Einarr rode far enough to have committed the greater offence, although he was a member of Hrafnkell's household. This serves to illustrate how a combination of public law and private oath could coalesce to precipitate such an immoderate action. See *Gr. Ib*: 61.

nætr. En nú sprakk fótrinn í nótt, ok er ór kveisunaglinn. En nú hefir hann sofnat síðan ok hefir réttan fótinn út undan fōtunum fram á fótafjōlina sakar ofrhita, er á er fōtinum. Gangi sá inn gamli maðr fyrir ok svá innar eptir búðinni. Mer sýnisk hann mjōk hrymðr bæði at sýn ok elli. Þá er þú, maðr, [...] kemr at húðfatinu, skaltu rasa mjōk ok fall á fótafjōlina ok tak í tána þá, er um er bundit, ok hnykk at þér ok vit, hversu hann verðr við.⁴⁸

This long and almost absurd advice is, first of all, comic, although it also serves to create a clear and unequal power dynamic between Þorkell and Sámr, the former probing, perhaps, how outrageous a task he can persuade the simple *bóndi* to perform for him in return for the support of a *goði*.⁴⁹ The humour arises partly from the fact that the reader might well infer Þorkell intends some revenge on his brother for the sleepless nights the boil has caused him, but also from the way this scene parodies the solemnity of such scenes of discussion in the booth at the *Alþingi* as observed above in *Njáls saga*. Within *Hrafnkels saga* itself, the phrasing of the direction ‘tak í tána’ (‘grasp the toe’) recalls the moment when Sámr took over the case for the killing of Einarr: ‘[þ]á rétti Sámr fram hōndina ok tók við málinu af Þorbirni.’⁵⁰ Two key verbs, *taka* (‘to take’), and *rétta* (‘to stretch out’), are common to

⁴⁸ *ÍF* 11: 112-13. ‘Now go to the booth and walk inside. The people are asleep. You’ll see how inside there are two hammocks across the booth, and I got up from one of them, but in the other Þorgeirr, my brother, is lying. He has had a big boil in his foot since he came to the *þing*, and so he’s hardly slept at night. But his foot [i.e. the boil] burst in the night, and the core of the boil came out. He’s been sleeping since then and has stretched out his foot from under the bedclothes to the foot-board because of the heat which is in his foot. The old man [Þorbjōrn] should go first right inside the booth. He looks to me rather infirm both in sight and age. Then when you, my man, come to the hammock, you should stumble badly and fall on the foot-board, and grasp the toe that is bound up, jerk it towards yourself, and see what he does in response.’

⁴⁹ Þorkell’s own excuse for his advice to his brother is that it will enable Þorgeirr to feel sympathy for the pain Þorbjōrn is experiencing for the unatoned death of his son: ‘Nú má ok þat vera, at gōmlum manni sé eigi ósárari sonardauði sinn.’ *ÍF* 11: 113-14. (‘It may be that the old man is no less pained by the death of his son.’) Hermann Pálsson takes Þorkell’s reasoning as an appeal to pity, but it can equally be seen as a mostly rhetorical ruse to conceal the other motives described here; Hermann is unduly generous towards Þorkell, seeing him as ‘a man of high moral principles.’ See Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel’s Saga* 67, 55. Conversely, Johansen notes that he ‘does not deal respectfully and candidly with his brother’ in this episode, and that sending Þorbjōrn crashing into the booth was irresponsible in the extreme, as Þorgeirr could well have killed him as an intruder. Jan Geir Johansen, ‘The Hero of *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*,’ *Scandinavian Studies* 67.3 (1995): 280.

⁵⁰ *ÍF* 11: 108. ‘Then Sámr stretched out his hands and took the case from Þorbjōrn.’

these two episodes. Both demonstrate how *log* spans a conceptual gap between physical action and legal action: the physical action takes place in the moment, but, fulfilling the Hegelian schema elaborated above, it is the *legal* ramifications of the physical gesture which imbue the actions with narrative significance.

As the saga progresses, Sámur is successful in the medium term, managing to outlaw Hrafnkell and seize much of his property, before allowing him to leave the district and set up a new farm elsewhere. In a scene unusual in the *Íslendingasögur*, Hrafnkell is tortured.⁵¹ It is the Þjóstarssynir who initiate this. Þorkell's bright clothes, his adventures abroad, his status as an *einhleypingr*,⁵² and the brother's origins far away in the Westfjords, set them apart from the local dispute in which they have engaged themselves. They exist in a space on the border of the legal community of the Eastfjords, involving themselves in the lives of the locals in the knowledge that they have no real stake in the outcome of the cases themselves. The ridiculous advice given to Sámur on how to engage the services of Þorgeirr is a parody of legal counsel, and one of the central reasons for Sámur's eventual demise and Hrafnkell's recovery of his status – despite being an *ójafnaðarmaðr* ('unjust man') – is that Sámur, for all his pretensions, is a poor lawyer. He is a poor lawyer in the wider, Icelandic sense, for he does not properly understand how to interact with *log* to his or his kinsmen's benefit. There is another key scene where this failure of legal *comprehension* is evident, and it is one of the few occasions where the Þjóstarssynir give good advice. Having given Hrafnkell

⁵¹ For an analysis of this scene and a discussion of the portrayal of torture elsewhere in the *Íslendingasögur* and *Sturlunga saga*, see pp. 209-13 below.

⁵² An *einhleypingr* was not attached to a *goði* and thus neither to a district *þing*; 'as a consequence they have no stake in maintaining the orderliness of society or in preserving the laws and traditions according to which social relations were carried out.' Johansen, 'The Hero of *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*,' 276-77. See also *KLNM* XI: 152-53.

the choice between death or leaving the district and handing over his *goðorð* to Sámur, Hrafnkell chooses the latter. Þorgeirr comments:

Eigi veit ek, hví þú gerir þetta. Muntu þessa mest iðrask sjálfur, er þú gefur honum líf.⁵³

The *Alþingi* had no executive branch. Hrafnkell was, according to the saga, a full outlaw (*alsekr*), and thus enjoyed no legal protection, nor essentially a right to life. It is quite possible to see Sámur not only as a ditherer, not possessed of the decisiveness required of a *goði*, but also as negligent in not fulfilling the legal end of a process he himself wished to initiate. If he were to take Hrafnkell's life at this stage, filling the absent role of the executive, he would retain Hrafnkell's former *goðorð* and avoid the reversal of fortune of the second part of the saga. *Lög* demanded that every individual played their expected part within a tacit code of conduct. Peter Foote elaborates:

When the Icelandic constitution was evolved in the tenth century provisions for the execution of judgements made in the courts were willingly left inadequate: punishment and redress were in the end the business of the individual [...] The paramount duty remained the duty of vengeance, when justice was done and, equally important from the point of view of a man's good name, seen to be done.⁵⁴

Despite the onus on the individual to take vengeance, this provision existed not to protect individual rights, but to attempt to safeguard the community from wider disorder.⁵⁵ The principle of *lög* must

⁵³ *ÍF* 11: 121. 'I don't know why you are doing this. You shall yourself regret it most, if you let him live.'

⁵⁴ Peter Foote, 'An essay on the saga of Gísli and its Icelandic background,' *Kreddur: Select Studies in Early Icelandic Law and Literature* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2004) 11-12.

⁵⁵ *Grágás* is not entirely clear on the point, but it seems that the prosecutor who achieved a sentence of outlawry was compelled to kill that outlaw if the opportunity arose: 'Eigi er manne scyllt at drepa scogar man þott hann hitte hann at mále ef hann tecr hann eigi oc ræðr honom eigi biarg ráð nema hann hafe sectan.' *Gr. Ia*: 189. ('A man is not obliged to kill an outlaw even if he meets him to talk to if he does not capture him and does not give him protective advice, unless he had had him convicted.') As the prosecutor of Hrafnkell, Sámur may very well be acting in contravention of this rule – he certainly contravenes the *Staðarhólsbók* redaction of *Grágás*, which stipulates outlawry as the punishment for a prosecutor who lets an outlaw escape his control. See *Gr. II*: 398, and for the obligation incumbent on all not to give assistance to outlaws, p. 225 below.

be seen in a socio-economic context in which cooperation was generally essential for survival. A symbiotic relationship exists, therefore, between the duty of personal vengeance and the maintenance of social stability. This lies at the heart of the concept of law in Icelandic literature, and is why law and identity are subtly, but inextricably, intertwined. Law is such an obsession of the sagas because law and society become one and the same.

If *lög* may thus be conceived as a social space, it follows that this space must have boundaries. As discussed above in the chapter on the *Landnám*, Iceland's status as a relatively small island allowed it a degree of conceptual integrity stronger than that of Greenland or Norway, where boundaries with other peoples and other places were more fluid and potentially threatening.⁵⁶ But *lög* is, of course quite different to territory: the social space *lög* creates is far more flexible. For example, the penalty of outlawry immediately establishes an individual outside (or at least on the boundary) of the Icelandic social space, even if they are still physically present in the island.⁵⁷ Identities are sharpened and strengthened when placed in juxtaposition with an 'other', and when the borders between groups must be adjudged. This is most evident with reference to *lög* when it must confront the foreign and the supernatural.

Thus far, *lög* has been interrogated as unifying force, something that is quite different from the modern conception of 'the law' as a mechanism that deals with exceptional and transgressive behaviour. But the necessity of invoking the authority of legal conventions during times of social strife is repeatedly addressed by the *Íslendingasögur*. An overlap exists between law as codified procedure, as social practice, and as quasi-'religious' practice. The latter relates to an important

⁵⁶ See p. 29 above.

⁵⁷ This said, Iceland's relatively unique environment (in Europe) of habitable coastline and inhospitable interior desert allows for something approaching a matching physical binary opposition.

element of *lög*: the significance of the ritualistic aspect of the legal system, including its use in circumstances where it cannot have a direct material effect, only a socially symbolic one. It is on these occasions that the relationship between *lög* and communal identity is clearer than in more straightforward cases, for it is in these instances, where law functions only as speech-act, with little or no physical, financial or political dimension, that the underlying binary of ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ the law becomes apparent. Episodes of discord and strife which involve liminal agents and interactions with an ‘other’ force *lög* to adjudicate membership of a community. Furthermore, the almost mystic potency *lög* acquires in these situations arguably situates it as something approaching a secular religion, something more than a mechanism for resolving disputes.

The most straightforward liminal agents present in the literature from the perspective of Icelandic *lög* are foreigners. *Njáls saga* contains a typical example of the explicit differentiation saga-authors make between Icelanders and non-Icelanders in a legal context. Fairly early in the saga, Geirr goði Ásgeirsson begins the prosecution of Gunnarr að Hlíðarenda for the killings of Otkell Skarfsson, Hallbjörn Skarfsson, Skammkell and Auðólfr, all killed in the fight following Otkell’s wounding of Gunnarr whilst he sowed his fields. However, the panel of neighbours appointed to decide on the legality of the case set aside one of Geirr’s claims:

Þá gengu búar at dóminum, þeir er kvaddir höfðu verit, ok nefndu sér vátta ok létu þat standa fyrir kviðburði um mál Auðólfs, at aðili var í Nóregi ok þeir áttu eigi um at skila um málit.⁵⁸

Auðólfr is far from a central character in the saga: he is introduced only shortly before his demise at the point of Gunnarr’s spear. Despite his brief role, his foreign extraction is repeatedly emphasized

⁵⁸ *ÍF* 12: 143. ‘Then the neighbours who had been called up to act as jurors went to the court, named witnesses for themselves, and declared an impediment to a verdict in the case of Auðólfr, because the legal prosecutor was in Norway and [thus] they could not consider the case.’

by the epithet ‘austmaðr’.⁵⁹ *Grágás* indeed has special provisions for the prosecution of the killers of foreigners:

Ef utlendir menn verða vegnir her a lande danscir. eða senscir eða norønir. þa eigo frændr hans söc ef þeir ero her alandē vm þav iii. konvnga vellde er or tunga er. En vígsacar vm vig utlendra manna af öllom londom öðrom en af þeim tungom. er ec talða nu. þa á her engi maðr at söcia þa söc af frændsemis söcom nema faðir eða sonr. eða broþir. oc þo þviat eins þeir. ef þeir hafa her við kanatz aðr.⁶⁰

Here a differentiation is being made between two subsets of *utlendir menn* – those from Denmark, Sweden or Norway (i.e. *austmenn*) and those who are not. More importantly, identity here is established on the basis of common language, rather than purely on physical location. The importance of the role of the *ðönsk tunga* in Icelandic law has long been noted, often as part of an argument for a more generalized ‘Nordic’ identity at the expense of any further specificity.⁶¹ But an important consequence of this is that an individual’s legal identity is not predicated on one single factor, but on a nexus of separate categories: language, birthplace, and location of relatives. A hierarchy is evident: the death of an Icelander may be prosecuted by any relative; an *austmaðr* by any of his kinsmen who are in Iceland; and finally a foreigner by only the dead’s immediate

⁵⁹ Literally ‘easterner’, the term is frequently translated into English as ‘Norwegian’, although *Cl-Vg* observes it could refer to any native of mainland Scandinavia. See *ÍF* 12: 133 and 138 for examples of its application to Auðólfir.

⁶⁰ *Gr.* Ia: 172. ‘If foreign people are killed here in the country, Danish or Swedish or Norwegian, then for these three kingdoms which have our language their kinsmen have the suit if they are here in this country. But the suit for the killing of foreigners from all other lands than those of the languages which I enumerated here can be prosecuted out of kinship by nobody except father, son or brother, and only if they have already been recognized here [as such].’ See also Stephen Pax Leonard, ‘Language, Society and Identity in Early Iceland,’ 229.

⁶¹ See *KLNM* II: 662–64 for an overview. The stipulations concerning assembly procedure in *Grágás* famously state that ‘Þan man scal eigi i dom nefna. er eigi hefir mal nvmit. i barn æskv. a danska tvngv. aþr hann hefir verit .iij. vetr a íslandi. eþa lengr.’ *Gr.* Ia: 38. (‘A person shall not be named in court who has not learnt in childhood the *ðönsk tungu* until he has been in Iceland for three years or longer.’) This is strong evidence of an equivalence of ethnicity with language, but nevertheless the example above demonstrates that status as an Icelander was still superior in law to other Scandinavian identities.

relatives. Although it might appear that equal status is being accorded to fellow Scandinavians, the example above from *Njáls saga* demonstrates how the panel summoned by Geirr interpret the law as restricting their jurisdiction to the prosecution of the deaths of Icelanders. Auðólfr's kinsmen may well have a right to prosecute, but it is essentially negated by the fact that none of them are in Iceland. Only with a physical presence within the community can legal rights be enforced. A corollary of this may be seen in the renewal of the feud between the Njálssynir and Sigfússynir, caused by Þráinn Sigfússon's shielding of Víga-Hrapp from Hákon jarl in Norway, and the jarl's subsequent pursuit and capture of the Njálssynir, whom he mistakenly believes are complicit.⁶² Although these events all take place in Norway, and that in some respects Hákon jarl is the principal protagonist, the Njálssynir are unequivocal about whom they have a claim against once back in Iceland:

Einu hverju sinni, er Ketill ór Mørk var at Bergþórshváli, þá segja Njálssynir frá hrakningum sínum ok kváðusk mikit eiga at Þráni Sigfússyni, nær sem þeir talaði til.⁶³

Thus although in some respects *lög* is coterminous with the physical boundaries of Iceland, as discussed above, and likewise despite the fact that Norwegians had a certain degree of legal parity, it is a distinctly Icelandic attribute that is common to the Njálssynir and Sigfússynir. The existence of an abstract community of Icelanders is confirmed through the encounter between *lög* and territorial boundaries. In chapter 3, a more detailed discussion of the depiction of Icelanders abroad will serve further to elucidate this point.

⁶² *ÍF* 12: 220-25.

⁶³ *ÍF* 12: 225. 'On one occasion, when Ketill í Mørk [Sigfússon] was at Bergþórshváll, the Njálssynir tell of their wretched ordeal and said that they had something big against Þráinn Sigfússon, when they came to claim it.'

A more extreme form of liminality is the supernatural: the incursion of the implausible on the prosaic. If encounters with foreignness provide an opportunity to see the boundaries of *lög*, the supernatural may perform a complementary function: it can isolate the function of *lög* as an element of identity from its more overt function as a regulator of social behaviour. No better example of this is found than in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Here, in a family saga with more than its fair share of supernatural happenings, law and religion (or even religions) are invoked in unison to banish troublesome ghosts. The bodies of Þóroddr and some of his men, drowned at sea, reappear soaking wet at their own funeral feast and continue to reappear every night to the chagrin of the hosts Kjartan and Þuríðr, the dead man's son and widow respectively. The ghosts are joined by those of Þórir viðleggr and some of his men who had previously been killed by a ghostly shepherd. On one occasion these two groups of ghosts scuffle when the latter party throws the earth they were buried in at the former. This event is important: the ghosts of Iceland were not the ethereal apparitions of the modern imagination, but reanimated corpses.⁶⁴ For the purposes of this discussion, this is highly significant – they were a concrete problem, impacting directly on the social order and occupying social space, and not visions which could be safely dismissed as the imaginings of a single observer. Kjartan seeks the advice of his uncle Snorri goði, the saga's protagonist, who is described in the following terms:

[H]ann var vitr maðr ok forspár um marga hluti, langrækr ok heiptúðigr, heilráðr vinum sínum, en óvinir hans þóttusk heldr kulða af kenna ráðum hans.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ For a survey of Icelandic revenants, see Vésteinn Ólason, 'The Un/Grateful Dead - from Baldr to Bægifótr,' *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2003). Vésteinn concludes in a later paper that 'although people believed such fantastic phenomena as revenants to be real in a concrete and physical sense, they feared them or marvelled at them, thinking that they did not properly belong in their world.' Vésteinn Ólason, 'The Fantastic Element in Fourteenth Century *Íslendingasögur*: A Survey,' *Gripla* 18 (2007): 8.

⁶⁵ *ÍF* 4: 26. 'He was a wise man and foresaw many things, unforgiving and vengeful; wise in counsel to his friends, but his enemies all the more thought to resent his advice.'

As a *vitr* man and *heilráðr*, Snorri is presented in the terms of a *lögmaðr* endowed with considerable social power through his knowledge of the law, to the extent that he can use it to the betterment of his allies and the detriment of his enemies. He demonstrates this knowledge in his advice to Kjartan:

[H]ann gaf þau ráð til, at brenna skyldi ársal Þórgunnu, en sækja þá menn all í duradómi, er aptr gengu; það prest veita þar tíðir, vígja vatn ok skripta mǫnnum.⁶⁶

This short piece of advice demonstrates the potential unity of religion, social practice and law. His first instruction, to burn Þórgunna's bed-covers, is not only a demand to fulfil her dying wish which Þóroddr failed to execute, but also a classic example of what Frazer would have termed 'contagious' sympathetic magic,⁶⁷ a form of superstition that transcends a concept of organized religion. The summons issued to the ghosts will be examined in more detail later: it is, however, clearly an invocation of *lög* against disruptive elements. Finally, the three tasks assigned to the priest confer Christian legitimacy on this act. This should not be seen only as an example of hedging one's bets; it is, more importantly, an affirmation of the accretive nature of social convention, confirmation of the theory that *lög*, religion and social convention are not discrete sets of behavioural norms but reflections of a larger underlying social mythology. If the narrative specificities are removed, a failure to comply with social convention (that is, *lög*) through Þóroddr failing to carry out Þórgunna's dying wishes leads to social discord in the form of deaths and hauntings, resolved by the invocation of a number of essentially ritualistic stabilizing mechanisms: superstition, law and religion. This is a

⁶⁶ *ÍF* 4: 151. 'He advised them that they must burn Þórgunna's bed-hangings, and then summon all the ghosts to a door-court; [then] ask a priest to perform Mass, consecrate water and confess people.'

⁶⁷ For his discussion of this, see James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1890, Oxford World's Classics, ed. Robert Fraser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 26 ff.

somewhat simplified account: in the context of the saga as a whole, other readings are possible.

William Pencak argues, on the basis of the ghosts' parting words, that:

They are warning that they are not the real cause of the problem, and that things will not improve once they have departed.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, the very fact that a *duradómr* is said to have taken place is indicative of an antiquarian reverence for the law in the mind of the author. This type of court is not documented in *Grágás*; one can only assume it fell out of use early in the history of *Þjóðveldi*, if indeed it ever existed. It is interesting, and possibly telling, that a saga which opens with an unusually long account of likely reconstructed pagan religious practices also reaches back into history for long-obsolete legal practices:⁶⁹ the term *duradómr* is stripped of any real meaning within a coherent legal system, and instead becomes an act of ritual performance. It is a summoning of the power of *lög* to counter the ghosts on an equal footing with the religious procedures designed to encourage divine intervention. This seems especially likely given the saga's earlier use of *duradómr*, in the context of Þorbjörn digri's search of Þórarinn svartí's house for some missing horses. Konrad Maurer suggests that the *duradómr* procedure was generally invoked in cases of suspected theft, and goes on to argue that the procedure's use against the ghosts evinces other jurisdictions of the *duradómr*:

[D]abei ist aber klar, daß das Verfahren gegen Gespenster dem gegen lebende Menschen üblichen nachgebildet sein mußte, und wenn somit in unserem Falle die Klage wegen unerlaubten Umgehens auf einem fremden Hofe und widerrechtlicher Beschädigung von Menschen erhoben wurde, darf hieraus immerhin geschlossen werden, daß sich die Kompetenz der

⁶⁸ Pencak, *The Conflict of Law and Justice* 121.

⁶⁹ The saga contains a detailed description of the temple erected by the settler Þórólfr Mostrarskegg Qrnólfsson at Hofstaðir on Snæfellsnes: see *ÍF* 4: 8-9.

Türengerichte [...] noch auf ganz andere Verbrechen als auf den Diebstahl erstreckte.⁷⁰

Maurer's attempt here to reconstruct the 'original' function of the *duradómr* mistakes literature for social history. This extension of jurisdiction, which must ultimately be conjecture in relation to different classes of crime, is nonetheless a valuable concept in terms of the idea of the extension of jurisdiction to different classes of legal agent: in this case from the living to the un-dead. This is essentially an example of the *solely* ritualistic use of the procedure, the act representing the ineffable influence of *lög* over society. The *duradómr* does not, in the saga, fit within a larger framework or structure of legal institutions: it is not part of the mechanism of law at all. Instead, the signified is subsumed by the signifier. The fact that it evokes the spirit (to pardon the pun) of the law is all that matters. The ghosts have made an incursion into the community, into *lög* as social space, and it is the very *idea* of *lög* that must be invoked to remove them. The only function the *duradómr* performs is to reaffirm who is 'inside' and 'outside' the social space.⁷¹

In contrast, another telling juxtaposition of law and the supernatural may be found in *Vatnsdæla saga*. Glœðir, the nephew of a man named Þorgils, had insulted Þorkell, the adopted son of Þórir, and Þorkell promptly killed him. Þorgils went to the *Alþingi* with the begrudging support of a powerful chief, Guðmundr. As the author says, '[þ]eir Vatnsdælir buðu sættir, en þeir Guðmundr

⁷⁰ Konrad Maurer, *Vorlesungen über Altnordische Rechtsgeschichte*, 5 vols. (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1910) V: 376. 'It is thereby clear that the proceedings against ghosts had been copied from those in common use against living people, and if thus, as in our case, action was taken due to trespass on someone else's homestead or unlawful injury of people, it may at least be concluded that [...] the jurisdiction of the *duradómr* was extended further to many different sorts of crimes than merely that of theft.'

⁷¹ John Martin observes that '[l]iving and dead alike are bound by the proper, felicitous execution of speech acts and by their common volitional acceptance of speech acts as binding ethical constraints.' John D. Martin, 'Law and the (Un)Dead: Medieval Models for Understanding the Hauntings in *Eyrbyggja Saga*,' *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 29 (2005): 81.

vildu ekki útan sekðir.⁷² It is the supernatural powers of a staff owned by Þórdís which eventually lead to a settlement; she instructs Þorkell to surreptitiously strike Guðmundr three times on the cheek with it, the effect being to cause him to lose his memory and thus fail to proceed with the case in a timely manner. This leads to the case's procedural collapse, but aids its resolution:

Ok er hann skilði, [í] hvert efni komit var málinu ok eigi mátti sækja til laga, þá tók hann sjálfðæmi af Þórormi at gera fé slíkt sem hann vildi, at undan skilðum útanferðum ok heraðssekðum; var þá handsalat niðrfall at sǫkum.⁷³

Here may be observed a quite different relationship between law and the supernatural to that seen in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Roles are reversed: for legal interaction to succeed (i.e. a peaceful arbitration between Þorkell and Guðmundr), the saga-author invokes supernatural agency. It is not the law that carries a talismanic power to settle a dispute, but Þórdís's staff; legal advantage is sought not through manipulation of procedure within *lög*, but through the use of magic. In this case, as in many others where a potential sentence of outlawry is averted through a monetary settlement, there is blame on both sides. Glæðir compared Þorkell to a *hundertík* ('bitch'), a word whose emasculatory connotations mean it may well constitute *níð*, as well as repeatedly goading Þorkell over his illegitimacy.⁷⁴ However, although this seems to be a frustration of procedure by the incursion of the supernatural, the result is a settlement, something that Guðmundr – in typically belligerent style – initially refused to countenance. A certain degree of cunning is used to frustrate the desires of a powerful and

⁷² *ÍF* 8: 120. 'The people of Vatnsdal offered a settlement, but Guðmundr's party wanted nothing less than outlawry.'

⁷³ *ÍF* 8: 121. 'And when he saw how the matter stood in law and could not be prosecuted, he then accepted self-judgement from Þórormr: that he could demand such a payment as he wished, except exile and outlawry in the district; then with a handshake the case was dropped.' For a discussion of Þórdís's actions in the context of female uses of magic across the sagas, see Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Women's Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the *Íslendingasögur*,' *Scandinavian Studies* 81.4 (2009): 426.

⁷⁴ *ÍF* 8: 117.

overweening chieftain. To some extent, Þórdís's magic is here subsumed by a redefinition of *lög* as the search for consensus, and it is an examination of this dynamic, interpretative aspect of *lög* that is necessary to reconcile its mixed depiction in the literature with its status as a myth of foundation.

3. Competing interpretations: the struggle for consensus

The role of *lög* in *Njáls saga* appears almost irredeemably complex. It is undeniable that the saga charts a tragic series of deaths and confrontations which legal processes at the very least do not prevent, and arguably help to engender. Back in 1878, Guðbrandur Vigfússon argued that:

[T]he lesson it teaches is of a Divine retribution, and that evil brings its own reward in spite of all that human wisdom and courage, even innocence, can do to oppose it.⁷⁵

This reading of *Njáls saga* as a portrait of essentially powerless characters lashed by the waves of fate and chaos has been persistent. Lars Lönnroth echoed Guðbrandur a hundred years later: '[h]uman laws and human wisdom are of little use on a lonely farm threatened by the entire universe,'⁷⁶ and Einar Ól. Sveinsson is in accord: '[m]an, regardless of how wise, powerful, and benevolent he may be, is impotent against fate, against that which must come to pass.'⁷⁷ Richard Allen sees the saga as an attempt to demonstrate how such a tragic outcome might be inevitable:

Njáls saga might be seen as an attempt to explain, to make comprehensible, the horror and ineluctability of this central disaster, as an attempt to cope with these facts, the Burning of Njáll, the death of Gunnarr, which – as tradition states and other evidence supports – did actually happen.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Gudbrand Vigfusson, ed., *Sturlunga saga* xlii.

⁷⁶ Lars Lönnroth, *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976) 48.

⁷⁷ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Njáls saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1971) 196.

⁷⁸ Allen, *Fire and Iron* 124.

As noted in the opening to this chapter, more recent criticism has taken a strongly structuralist approach, embodied in William Ian Miller's suggestion of the 'balance-sheet model' of feud standing at the centre of *Njáls saga*.⁷⁹ More recently, other critics have deviated from a kinship-derived model of feud to look at more dynamic social structures.⁸⁰ But in some respects all these approaches have much in common with earlier views that the saga was about the intractability of fate. Where once Providence was the immobile force against which Njáll and Gunnarr battled, for later critics it has become the Structure.⁸¹ These approaches have been valuable, but they leave the status of *lög* in the saga as one of profound ambiguity. How, for example, is Njáll's character to be interpreted? Are the failures to contain violence within the saga attributable to the decisions characters make, or the flaws inherent in the legal system itself? These questions matter to an investigation of the place of *lög* in Icelandic literary identity for several reasons. Thus far, this section has demonstrated how *lög* is an active participant in the narrative of community foundation, and how in the *Íslendingasögur* *lög* and the Icelandic community are frequently portrayed as coterminous. *Lög* is developed, between these texts, as an expression of identity. It would therefore be remiss not to address the fact that many of

⁷⁹ 'The bloodfeud is the structure through which what we would recognize as purely political behavior, the competition for power, is mediated. The two explanations are not offered as alternatives; they are inextricably bound together.' William Ian Miller, 'Justifying Skarpheðinn: Of Pretext and Politics in the Icelandic Bloodfeud,' *Scandinavian Studies* 55.4 (1983): 316-17.

⁸⁰ See Richard Gaskins, 'Network Dynamics in Saga and Society,' *Scandinavian Studies* 77.2 (2005). William Ian Miller's analysis, above, does place the bloodfeud itself within the context of regional politics.

⁸¹ This critical predisposition may be traced all the way back to Vladimir Propp's famous 1928 analysis of the folk tale: see Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* 47-50, Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1968). In response to this, Roland Barthes's poststructuralist criticism still stands: these interpretations seek to 'see all the world's stories [...] within a single structure: we shall, they thought, extract from each tale its model, then out of these models we shall make a great narrative structure, which we shall reapply (for verification) to any one narrative: a task as exhausting [...] as it is ultimately undesirable, for the text thereby loses its difference.' Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975). For a short and balanced history of structuralist criticism of the *Íslendingasögur*, see Lars Lönnroth, 'Structuralist Approaches to Saga Literature,' *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World*, eds. Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007).

the sagas, but perhaps most of all *Njáls saga*, have been interpreted as directly critical of *lög*, and may appear to demonstrate the potential for legal transactions to frustrate and fragment the very community posited above. Part of the answer to this is the role of *lög* as a set of social conventions subscribed to by a certain group beyond the institutional and public manifestations of these conventions – *lög*, as stated above, concerns more than dealing with aberrant behaviour. But *Njáls saga* provides the opportunity to go further, and to suggest that perhaps a more fundamental element of Icelandic literary identity is the individual and subjective nature of *lög* itself. This may seem counter-intuitive, given the arguments above as to how *lög* comes to represent a collectivity. But if examined further, it is possible to argue that a freedom to interpret *lög* according to one's inner convictions is intrinsic to an understanding of the events of *Njáls saga*, and potentially to the narrative of Icelandic *lög* itself. Part of the freedom the settlers are represented as having sought was to avoid definition by another – by a king – and to define oneself actively through the search for fame.⁸² Icelandic identity is something that acquires meaning self-reflexively, not through deference to an outside authority. *Njáls saga* is not an indictment of *lög*; it is a demonstration of the tragedy that arises from discrete characters, acting to their own conceptions of justice, failing to recognize these differences of interpretation until too late. *Lög* is nothing more than the sum of the members of the community: in its literary form, the set of principles, actions and beliefs attributed to various actors. It is not something above or behind the text, but created through it.

⁸² See, for example, the likely compiler of *Sturlunga saga*'s description of the reasons for emigration in *Geirmundar þáttur heljarskinns*: 'Ok þat vilja sumir menn segja, at Geirmundr færi fyrir ofríki Haralds konungs til Íslands. En ek hefi þat heyrt, at í þann tíma, er þeir bræðr kómu ór vestrvíking, væri sem mest orð á, at engi þætti vera frægðarför meiri en fara til Íslands.' *Stur.* I: 7. ('And some men will say that Geirmundr fled from the tyranny of King Haraldr to Iceland. But I have heard that in that time when the brothers came back from raiding in the west it was held by most that there was no more glorious journey than the trip to Iceland.')

The tragedy of Gunnarr is at least as poignant as the tragedy of Njáll, and this is doubtless the reason why debate continues as to at what point the *Brennu-Njáls saga* read today became a literary unity. The disjuncture between Gunnarr's repeated avowals of his distaste for violence and his desire for peace, relatively unusual amongst saga-heroes, and the many bloody battles in which he finds himself generate considerable pathos. This pathos is all the more compelling given Gunnarr's own recognition of his conflicted self:

„Hvat ek veit,“ segir Gunnarr, „hvárt ek mun því óvaskari maðr en aðrir menn sem mér þykkir meira fyrir en qðrum mǫnnum at vega menn.“⁸³

This insecurity Gunnarr expresses just after killing Otkell Skarfsson arises both from a fear that his lack of relish in killing is somehow unmanly, and that this lack of relish is caused by a recognition of the gravity of the act – both pragmatically, in the knowledge that it may perpetuate the feud – but more generally as an offence to natural justice. Gunnarr demonstrates most clearly a personal inclination towards a judicial ideal when he intervenes on behalf of Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson in an inheritance case against Úlfr Uggason:

Ásgrími tóksk svá til, sem sjaldan var vant, at vǫrn var í máli hans; en sú var vǫrnin í, at hann hafði nefnt fimm búa, þar sem hann átti níu; nú hafa þeir þetta til varna. Gunnarr mælti: „Ek mun skora þér á hólmi, Úlfr Uggason, ef menn skulu eigi ná af þér réttu máli; ok myndi þat Njáll ætla ok Helgi, vinr minn, at ek mynda hafa nokkura vǫrn í máli með þér, Ásgrímr, ef þeir væri eigi við.“ „Ekki á ek þetta við þik,“ segir Úlfr. „Fyrir hitt mun nú þó ganga,“ segir Gunnarr.⁸⁴

⁸³ *ÍF* 12: 138-39. “I should like to know,” says Gunnarr, “whether I’m less manly than others, for to me killing men seems so much graver than [it seems] to them.”

⁸⁴ *ÍF* 12: 152. ‘It turned out that there was a flaw in his case, which was rare for Ásgrímr; and the defence case was that he had named five neighbours when he was required to have nine. Now they [the defendants] have this as a defence. Gunnarr said, “I shall challenge you to a duel, Úlfr Uggason, if people are not going to get their rightful dues from you; and I’m sure that Njáll and my friend Helgi intend me to have some part in your case, Ásgrímr, if they are absent.” “I don’t have any quarrel with you over this,” says Úlfr. “It’ll now turn out to be quite the opposite,” says Gunnarr.’

Gunnarr is not entirely unconnected to the participants in this dispute. Although this is the first appearance of Úlfr in the saga, Gunnarr is well acquainted with Ásgrímr. Þórhalla Ásgrímsdóttir is married to Helgi Njálsson, and Njáll fosters one of Ásgrímr's sons and teaches him the law.⁸⁵ But Gunnarr is by no means automatically obliged to help Ásgrímr because of his connections to the family of his friend Njáll. When Gunnarr was prosecuted by Geirr goði for the killing of Otkell Skarfsson, Ásgrímr was one of the *goðar* who took the side of Gizurr hvíti Teitsson, a kinsman of Otkell, who also initiates the legal action with Geirr and will later lead the attack on Hliðarendi.⁸⁶ It is not especially surprising that Ásgrímr takes this side, since Gizurr is his uncle.⁸⁷ Úlfr's surprise at Gunnarr's desire to involve himself in the dispute is quite probably in part due to the fact that not only does Gunnarr have no particular reason to get involved, but he even takes the side of a chieftain who had in the past stood against him in a legal dispute. The reason he gives for doing so is particularly interesting: 'ok myndi þat Njáll ætla ok Helgi, vinr minn, at ek mynda hafa nokkura vörn í máli.' It is an entirely conjectural explanation: he does this out of his own internal conviction that this is what his friends would want him to do.⁸⁸ Thus Gunnarr's internal image of what a friend ought to do – to stick up for the father-in-law of Njáll's son – is expressed in terms of justice. He vows to fight Úlfr 'ef menn skulu eigi ná af þér réttu máli,' but Gunnarr's sense of what is just is entirely malleable according to his internal sense of what is right. It is not that he is seeking to uphold correct procedure by preventing Úlfr from using procedural tactics to frustrate a case: he

⁸⁵ *ÍF* 12: 74.

⁸⁶ 'Í sambandi með Gizuri hvíta váru þessir hofðingjar: Skapti ok Þóroddr, Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson, Oddr frá Kiðjobergi, Halldórr Qrnólfsson.' *ÍF* 12: 141-42. ('In league with Gizurr hvíti [the white] were these chieftains: Skapti and Þóroddr, Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson, Oddr of Kiðjabergr, [and] Halldórr Qrnólfsson.')

⁸⁷ Ásgrímr's mother is Jórunn Teitsdóttir, Gizurr's sister. See *ÍF* 12: 72, 485.

⁸⁸ Note that Helgi is a *vinr*, quite distinct from a *frændi*. In many respects this scene can be seen as a vindication of the power of bonds of friendship being at least equal in potency to those of kinship, at least according to the personal values of Gunnarr.

willingly used similarly deceptive tactics to recover Unnr's dowry from Hrútr.⁸⁹ This fundamentally emotional response to justice correlates with Gunnarr's behaviour later in the saga, when he decides not to leave Iceland for the term of his lesser outlawry for the killing of Þorgeirr Otkelsson.⁹⁰ This is despite the stern advice issued by Njáll that if he breaks the settlement made for the second killing within one family, his downfall is assured.⁹¹ The friendship between Njáll and Gunnarr endures despite the repeated conflicts between their households, but they do not share comparable attitudes towards justice, and this failure of Gunnarr to understand the ramifications of Njáll's advice is due to his inability – or refusal – to see himself as beholden to a structural, 'balance-sheet' model of law. Even Mǫrðr Valgarðsson, the 'villain' of the piece, recognizes the sagacity of Njáll's advice – he interprets it, correctly, as prophecy.⁹² These differing outlooks on law are crystallized early in the saga, in a conversation between the two friends:

Njáll sagði hann vera inn mesta afreksmann – „ok ert þú mjök reyndr, en þó munt þú meir síðar, því at margr mun þik ofunda.“ „Við alla vilda ek gott eiga,“ segir Gunnarr. „Mart mun til verða,“ segir Njáll, „ok munt þú jafnan eiga hendr þínar at verja.“ „Undir því væri þá,“ segir Gunnarr, „at ek

⁸⁹ Arguably, tricking Hrútr into reciting a summons was even more against the spirit of the law than exploiting a legal loophole. For the episode in which Njáll instructs Gunnarr on how to force Hrútr to recite the summons, see *ÍF* 12: 59–63; for an analysis of this episode according to speech act theory, see Thomas Bredsdorff, 'Speech Act Theory and Saga Studies,' *Representations* 100 (2007).

⁹⁰ 'Fogr er hlíðin, svá at mér hefir hon aldri jafnfogr sýnzkr, bleikir akrar ok slegin tún, ok mun ek ríða heim aprt ok fara hvergi,' *ÍF* 12: 182. ('How beautiful are the mountain slopes, more beautiful than they have ever seemed to me before, the fair cornfields and mown home-meadow. I shall ride back home, not travel away.')

⁹¹ Gunnarr has already killed Otkell Skarðsson after being wounded by Otkell's spurs whilst sowing his field (*ÍF* 12: 138), after which Njáll issued his warning (*ÍF* 12: 139). The killing of Þorgeirr Otkelsson thus constitutes the second killing within one family, and the settlement made for it the one he must not break if he wishes to live to be old.

⁹² Advising Þorgeirr Starkaðarson to hold back in the attack on Gunnarr to ensure that Gunnarr kills Þorgeirr Otkelsson, if anybody, Mǫrðr concludes: 'Hefir hann þá vegit tysvar í inn sama knérunn, en þú skalt flýja af fundinum. En ef honum vill þetta til dauða draga, þá mun hann rjúfa sættina. En þar til at sitja.' *ÍF* 12: 168 ('He has then killed twice in the same family, and you shall flee from the battle. And if this is to drag him to his death, then he shall break the settlement. And then it's a matter of waiting.')

hefða málaefni góð.“ „Svá mun ok vera,“ segir Njáll, „ef þú geldr eigi annarra at.“⁹³

Gunnarr and Njáll speak in two very different ways. Gunnarr expresses wishes of an absolute kind. He desires good relations with everybody, and if he must defend himself, he would do so only with justice on his side – with a ‘málaefni góð’. Conversely, Njáll prophesizes: ‘*mun þú*’, ‘*mart mun til verða*’, and so on. Njáll is apparently blessed with a supernatural knowledge of the future: ‘*vitr var hann ok forspár, [...] langsýnn ok langmínnigr*’.⁹⁴ The juxtaposition of *langsýnn* and *langmínnigr* establish Njáll as a temporal fulcrum, seeing both far ahead and far behind in time.⁹⁵ Njáll, so to speak, sees a legal framework: in common with Hayden White and Hegel, and indeed with William Ian Miller, he sees *lög* as a kind of deep structure that has the capability to engender an agency of its own. Gunnarr does not see this; he, to all intents and purposes, lives in the moment, something reified in the different uses of tenses in the passage above. He cannot see the hidden chain of cause and effect that Njáll is aware of. He is an utterly different interpreter of *lög*: for Gunnarr it is not a structure, but simply an ideal, something that he expects will authorize his internal sense of justice.⁹⁶

Gunnarr’s tortured sense of his own failings is a direct consequence of his inability, even with Njáll’s help, to see the public dimension of *lög* match his own interpretation of justice. For Njáll, the

⁹³ *ÍF* 12: 84. ‘Njáll said that he was the most valiant man – “and you’re well proven, though yet to be more so, since many will envy you.” “I want to have good relations with everybody,” says Gunnarr. “Many things are to happen,” says Njáll, “and you will always have to act in self-defence.” “It would then depend,” says Gunnarr, “on me having a just cause.” “So you shall,” says Njáll, “if you do not suffer on account of others.”’

⁹⁴ *ÍF* 12: 57. ‘He was wise and prescient, [...] far-sighted and had a long memory.’

⁹⁵ In this respect Njáll could even be said to have some of the characteristics of the *vǫlva*, who, for example, in *Vǫluspá* is able to recall both unimaginably ancient events whilst also prophesying the end of the world. Ursula Dronke discusses this and the separation of these two abilities through the alternating use of *ek* and *hón*. See Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda* II: 28.

⁹⁶ In many respects Gunnarr prefigures the failure of the Saxon missionary Þangbrandr to successfully convert Iceland, due to a similar mismatch between an internal conception of what conversion ought to be – something effected on an individual scale – and the collective ideal of Icelandic *lög*. This is discussed in detail in chapter 2.iii.

structure is a complex tool that can be put to a variety of purposes, but one that is, at the centre, empty. At the centre of *lög* Gunnarr sees a reflection of his own ideal: Njáll sees a void, without principle, to be filled with meaning merely out of pragmatism and according to specific circumstance.

Shortly after the challenge to Úlfr discussed above, Gunnarr again becomes involved in legal disputes which are not directly of his concern. But this time it is not because of his sense of natural justice, but because Njáll sees the assignment of some of his own claims to Gunnarr as a means to counter the charges that will be made against him after his skirmish with the Þríhyrningi:

Nú hefi ek nökkut at hugat, ok lízk mér sem þetta muni nökkut með harðfengi ok kappi verða at gera. Þorgeirr hefir barnat Þorfinnu, frændkonu mína, ok mun er selja þér legorðssökina. Aðra skóggangssök sel ek þér á hendr Starkaði, er hann hefir höggvit í skógi mínum á Þríhyrningshálsnum, ok skalt þú sækja þær sakir báðar.⁹⁷

Njáll, of course, transfers the cases to Gunnarr in accordance with legal ritual – note the use of the term *selja*, discussed above in relation to the physical aspects of legal assignment. Njáll also goes on to give Gunnarr detailed instructions on how he must dig up the bodies of the men killed in the skirmish and outlaw them for conspiring to attack him and his men.⁹⁸ Gunnarr acts entirely according to Njáll's wishes, and it seems quite clear that despite his strong sense of just behaviour, he has no *legal* insight whatsoever. The contrast between these two assignments could not be starker;

⁹⁷ *ÍF* 12: 160. 'I've now given it some thought, and it seems to me that this can be achieved with some courage and boldness. Þorgeirr has made Þorfinna, my kinswoman, pregnant, and I shall assign to you the seduction claim. I'll also assign to you an outlawry action against Starkaðr, since he has cut wood in my forest at Þríhyrningshálsar, and you shall take up the prosecution of both these actions.' Gunnarr has just arrived at Bergþórshváll to ask Njáll's advice after killing a number of men in an encounter that stems from the violence that broke out at the horse-fight instigated by Starkaðr Barkarson (see *ÍF* 12: 147-51).

⁹⁸ 'Þú skalt [...] grafa upp ina dauðu ok nefna vátta at benjum ok óhelga þá alla ina dauðu fyrir þat, er þeir fóru með þann hug til fundar at veita þér ákvámur ok bráðan bana ok bræðrum þínum.' *ÍF* 12: 161. ('You shall [...] dig up the dead and name witnesses to the mortal wounds and declare outlawed all of the dead who came with the intention of delivering wounds and sudden death to you and your brothers.')

in the first instance, Gunnarr involves himself in a case without invoking legal language but directly through a challenge to a duel, all for the sake of natural justice. In the second instance, Gunnarr is involved by Njáll in two further legal cases, through the medium of correct legal language and procedure, in the course of self-preservation. That Gunnarr's sense of *lög* tends towards natural justice and not self-preservation is, ultimately, his tragedy.⁹⁹

As has already been shown in his interactions with Gunnarr, Njáll interprets *lög* very differently. Njáll is indisputably a strong advocate for the mutual dependency of *lög* and society. In his analysis of *Njáls saga*, Thomas Bredsdorff refutes Njáll's declaration that:

„Eigi er þat sættarrof,“ segir Njáll, „at hverr hafi lög við annan, því at með lögum skal land vart byggja, en með ólögum eyða.“¹⁰⁰

Instead, he considers the saga an indictment of the intrinsic inefficacy of the legal institutions of the

Þjóðveldi:

The law is no longer the means by which the land will be built up, but rather an institution that keeps wounds open and delays their healing. [...]

⁹⁹ The author of *Bandamanna saga* offers a harsh satire of the lawyer class, embodied in the wily old Ófeigr Skíðason, whose son, Oddr, faces defeat in a lawsuit over a similar technical infraction to that made by Ásgrímr. Ófeigr seeks a just outcome by pecuniary corruption of the court, through the comic juxtaposition of a verbal appeal to high legal ideals and a visual display of a money-bag: ‘„hvat er sannara en dæma inn versta mann sekjan ok dræpan ok firrðan allri björg, þann er sannreyndr er at stulð ok at því, at hann drap saklausan mann, Vála?“ [...] Ófeigr lætr stundum síga sjóðinn niðr undan kápunni, en stundum kippir hann upp.’ *ÍF* 7: 323. (‘What is more just than to sentence the worst of men to outlawry, to death, and to deprive him of any assistance, when he has been duly proved of theft and of killing the innocent man Váli? [...] Ófeigr let the money-bag fall from time to time out from under his cloak, before snatching it back up.’)

¹⁰⁰ *ÍF* 12: 172. “‘It is no breach of agreement,” says Njáll, “for one to have legal dealings with another, for with law shall this land be built, and with lawlessness destroyed.” Njáll’s famous use of this proverb is tinged with irony, since, as noted above, this maxim is absent from *Grágás* and only extant in an Icelandic law-code in *Járnsíða*, imposed by Norway between 1271–73 and superseded by *Jónsbók* in 1281. In *Járnsíða* the phrase follows the rules on the constitution of the *lögrettta*, substantially altered from those in force during the *Þjóðveldi*. See *KLNM* VII: 566, R. Keyser and P. A. Munch, eds., *Norges gamle love indtil 1387*, 5 vols. (Oslo: Chr. Gröndahl, 1846–1895) I: 260. For an interpretation of Njáll’s behaviour in establishing the fifth court in the light of the legal reforms of the later thirteenth century, see Lönnroth, *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction* 188–94. For a general discussion of the proverb, see p. 63 above.

What we witness in *Njal's Saga* is [...] a demonstration of the paradox that the growth of legal institutions equals the decay of the rule of law.¹⁰¹

Bredsdorff's argument is a little subtler than some of those advanced above, but it still equates the central tragedy of the saga with the failure of the 'rule of law', something that remains ill-defined. Nevertheless, the argument that *lög* is the villain of the saga requires consideration, especially since Njáll himself is presented as directly responsible for a particularly famous example of 'the growth of legal institutions.' This is the establishment of the *fimtardómr*, a fifth court for the *Alþingi*, without the geographic remit of the quarter-courts, that would act as a kind of supreme court or court of appeal for settling the most contentious cases and those which crossed jurisdictional boundaries. The concept indeed leads one to consider again the unifying idea of the *Alþingi* as a representation of a single social space; the *fimtardómr* might be seen as a reaffirmation of the singularity of the Icelandic community. But the circumstances surrounding its creation are telling regarding the very different interpretation of *lög* to which Njáll subscribes:

Þetta sumar váru þingdeildir miklar; gerði þá margr sem vant var at fara til fundar við Njál, en hann lagði þat til mála manna, sem ekki þótti líkligt, at eyddusk sóknir ok svá varnir, ok varð af því þræta mikil, er málin máttu eigi lúkask, ok riðu menn heim af þingi ósáttir.¹⁰²

In context, Njáll's actions can plausibly be read as nepotistic: eager to find a *goðorð* for Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði, he uses the common people's dependence on his knowledge of the law to confound cases and thus materialize evidence for the necessity of a court of final instance which would happily

¹⁰¹ Thomas Bredsdorff, *Chaos and Love: The Philosophy of the Family Sagas*, trans. John Tucker (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2001) 83.

¹⁰² *ÍF* 12: 241–42. 'That summer there was a great deal of litigation at the assembly; many people then went as usual to talk with Njáll, but he gave them advice that seemed improbable, which rendered actions and defences void, and so there arose great wrangling when legal matters were not resolved, and people rode away from the assembly unreconciled.'

require the creation of additional chieftains. The saga-author is careful, however, to ensure that one can never be certain of the veracity of this reading. The phrase ‘sem ekki þótti líkligt’ could equally be read to imply that against all expectations even Njáll’s acumen could not resolve the intractable quarrels which arose at that year’s assembly, thus prefiguring the crescendo of institutional collapse which occurs at the assembly following Njáll’s death. There is, one might argue, no correct reading of this: *lög* is value-neutral, and it is the very human character of Njáll whose values one needs to infer. Nevertheless, Njáll’s intervention is a moment of considerable importance in the developing relationship between *lög* and identity, because it sees a character essentially redefining constitutional arrangements according to his own will. What makes Njáll a great lawyer is his ability, in sharp contrast to Gunnarr, to effect a match between the public, institutional manifestations of law and his own conception of what it is *lög* ought to do. At no other place in the saga is it clearer that *lög* is a corporate concept, ever malleable and ever evolving.

This is dissimilar to previous critical interpretations of *lög*’s role. Thomas Bredsdorff broadly interprets the saga’s underlying ideology to be a confirmation of the internal weaknesses of the commonwealth’s socio-legal system, redeemable only by outside agency, be it new religion or new government: ‘the old world is the world of the law, the new one is that of Christianity.’¹⁰³ There are a number of objections to this. Bredsdorff’s vision of the law seems to be one of a monolithic judicial system, defined largely by its procedures and somehow equivalent to Christianity, when in fact they could not be more different. *Njáls saga* takes place before the inscription of the law at the house of Haflíði Másson; until that moment, *lög* existed only in multiple instances of interpretation

¹⁰³ Bredsdorff, *Chaos and Love* 84.

by discrete individuals.¹⁰⁴ Christianity, the religion of the book, is thus something of a different order. The conversion narrative (sometimes labelled *Kristni þáttur*) stands at the centre of the saga, and is discussed in more detail in chapter 2.iii below. It occurs just after the institution of the *fimmtardómur*, and acts as the fulcrum of the saga narrative. After seeing two very different, and ultimately equally fated interpretations of and interventions into the social space of *lög*, the conversion provides the reader with the opportunity to witness an example of the synthesis of precepts new and old in two figures: Ámundi Høskuldsson and Síðu-Hallr. If, as it is argued here, *lög* to Njáll and Gunnarr was no more than that which they constituted it to be, in these post-conversion examples characters are guided by a new certainty about the values *lög* ought to embody.

Immediately after the end of the conversion narrative, Ámundi, a blind man and a grandson of Njáll, confronts Lýtingr á Sámstöðum, the killer of his father. Lýtingr had paid compensation to Njáll just before the conversion narrative, and indeed the case of Lýtingr is divided into two parts by *Kristni þáttur*. Although it has been regarded as an interpolation, the splitting of the case provides an important example of the consequences of the conversion. Before Christianity, Njáll had settled the case; but a change has now been effected. Having been told by Lýtingr that he will pay no compensation, Ámundi replies:

„Eigi skil ek,“ segir Ámundi, „at þat muni rétt fyrir guði, svá nær hjarta sem þú hefir mér hōggvit; enda kann ek at segja þér, ef ek væra heileygr báðum augum, at hafa skylda ek annathvart fyrir fōður minn fébætr eða mannhefndir, enda skipti guð með okkr!“¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ This transcription of the laws is recorded in *Íslendingabók*: see *ÍF* 1: 23.

¹⁰⁵ *ÍF* 12: 273. “I do not understand,” says Ámundi, “how that can be just before God, when you have struck me so close to the heart; and yet I can say this to you, that if both my eyes could see, I should have either compensation for my father or blood vengeance. And may God choose between us!”

Here Ámundi involves God in a legal matter. He appeals to a transcendent definition of justice and rectitude, although it is, of course, also a reflection of his own sense of what is right. Although a minor character, here he demonstrates how Christianity gives him a strength of conviction that Gunnarr lacked: Gunnarr did not know whether he was less of a man for being reluctant to take revenge, but Ámundi *knows* that in the sight (and there is an irony here too) of God he is entirely on the side of justice. It is not that *lög* has now been given the deep structure that previous critics have seen through its incorporation of Christianity; it is simply that an *appeal* to a deep structure is now possible. Just as Ámundi leaves the booth, his eyesight is restored, momentarily, and he kills Lýtingr. Then:

Ámundi gengr út í búðardyrin, ok er hann kom í þau spor in sǫmu, sem
upp höfðu lokizk augu hans, þá lukusk aptr, ok var hann alla ævi blindr
síðan.¹⁰⁶

Even miracles seem to conform to the patterns of social space discussed above. Within the booth, that microcosm of *lög*-as-social-space, God permits Ámundi to exact revenge, but only to settle his claim and allows him no more sight than is necessary. It still falls to Njáll and Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði to settle with Lýtingr's kinsmen. Two points can thus be drawn from this example. Firstly, the conversion – and the accompanying rhetoric of Christianity – allows for the *idea* of an absolute truth to lie behind *lög*.¹⁰⁷ But conversely, the way in which both the conversion narrative itself, and the miracle of Ámundi's sight, are bounded by legal manoeuvres, language and procedure,

¹⁰⁶ *ÍF* 12: 273. 'Ámundi goes back to the door of the booth, and when he came to the same spot where his eyes opened, they shut again, and he was blind again for the rest of his life.'

¹⁰⁷ It is far from the case that the conversion necessitates any material change in ethics. For example, Flosi's grim avowal that burning Njáll is a sin but unavoidable: 'er þat þó stór ábyrgð fyrir guði, er vér erum kristnir sjálfir' ('it is, however, a heavy responsibility before God, and we ourselves are Christians') contrasts poorly with the pre-conversion refusal of Gizurr hvíti to countenance Mǫrðr's suggestion of burning-in Gunnarr. See *ÍF* 12: 327–28, 188.

demonstrate a degree of synthesis. *Log* is able to accommodate Christianity, but it is able to do so only through consensus – in Ámundi’s case, through the synchronous action of miraculous vengeance and legal settlement. Ámundi’s personal desire to achieve his own sense of justice is again sublimated into a movement towards a consensual settlement.

The conversion is, ultimately, a moment of consensus broken and then repaired. The Christian element of the process of the conversion of Iceland is discussed in chapter 2.iii below, and it is purely the ramifications for the concept of *log* which are discussed here, as a bridge between these two central planks of Icelandic literary identity. One of the few contemporary external narratives of Iceland’s conversion, that of Adam of Bremen, written around the middle of the eleventh century, contains the following remark:

De quibus noster metropolitanus inmensas Deo gratias retulit, quod suo tempore convertebantur, licet ante susceptam fidem naturali quadam lege non adeo discordabant a nostra religione.¹⁰⁸

Whilst Adam’s sources are obscure, this curious remark is nonetheless telling about the probable social impact of conversion. It was a process of ‘receiving the faith’ (a process elaborated on in a number of sagas through the portrayal of the baptism of key characters), which *began* at the *Alþingi* but did not end there. Furthermore, the ‘natural law’ which Adam of Bremen describes is quite possibly just that concept of *log* discussed above in the sagas. It is certainly not just the procedures of the *Alþingi* or the rules governing the summoning of witnesses which Adam is referring to; instead it is conformity to a set of modes of social behaviour and interaction which seemed not so distant from

¹⁰⁸ Adam of Bremen, *Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte* 273. ‘For them our metropolitan returned vast thanks to God that they had been converted in his time, even though before receiving the faith they were in what may be called their natural law, which was not much out of accord with our religion.’ Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. Francis J. Tschan (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1959) 218.

those of the Christian world. The communitarian principle which saw the adoption of Christianity might be seen by an outsider as proof that there existed no intrinsic incompatibility between Christianity and Icelandic *lög*.

To return briefly to *Íslendingabók*, there are two moments during the process of conversion when consideration of the future of the law becomes a primary concern. First, when Iceland appears to be on the brink of religious war:

En þat gøðisk af því, at þar nefndi annarr maðr at qðrum vátta, ok sqgðusk hvárir ýr lögum við aðra, enir kristnu menn ok enir heiðnu, ok gingu síðan frá lögbergi.¹⁰⁹

Second, when communal unity is affirmed as an absolute necessity by the law-speaker:

En þá hóf hann tǫlu sína upp, es menn kvómu þar, ok sagði, at hónum þótti þá komit hag manna í ónýtt efni, ef menn skyldi eigi hafa allir lög ein á landi hér.¹¹⁰

The second quotation demonstrates the inability of the Icelanders to countenance the existence of more than one law, and this is precisely because to a considerable extent ‘Iceland’ as any kind of meaningful entity beyond the geographic was defined by *lög*. William Ian Miller notes the necessity of the identifying role of the law given the nature of the Icelandic state itself:

[H]ow in the world could one build a polity with two laws? The ready answer is that one would need a strong state. But given the non-existent state apparatus (there was no state beyond the Law-speaker, the two-week long Allthing, plus local things that met in the spring) [...] what you had was a recipe for exactly what Thorgeir supposed: ‘that it was a reasonable

¹⁰⁹ *ÍF* 1: 16. ‘And it so happened because of this that one named another as a witness, and each side declared themselves out of law with the other – the Christians and the heathens – and then went from the law-rock.’

¹¹⁰ *ÍF* 1: 17. ‘He then began to speak, when people arrived there, and said, that it seemed to him that the situation would become impossible to manage, if people should not manage [themselves under] one law here in this land.’

expectation that armed conflict would arise among men such that the land would be wasted.’¹¹¹

When the conversion narrative is examined it must be remembered that the compromise the two parties seek to attain is not merely in order to secure peace but to preserve the existence of the polity itself. Whilst there were certainly some social conventions that differed between the Christian and non-Christian communities (such as those regarding the eating of horse flesh and the exposure of infants) that were dealt with by statute, the process which is occurring in this depiction of the *Alþingi* is not the replacement of one ‘law’ with another, but the vindication of the Icelandic *lög* in its potential to defuse conflict and unite a people: to achieve consensus. It is a rather neat paradox that it is the *lög*, here referring not to procedures, but to the unity Þorgeirr deems essential to maintain, which resolves the problem of the two communities declaring themselves ‘ýr lögum’ (out of law). *Lög* is thus far more than the institutions and procedural rules which are so liable to abuse; it is a shared cultural value. In his etymological dictionary of Icelandic, Alexander Jóhannesson glosses the dual meanings of *lög* as ‘Gesetz’ (law) and ‘staatliche Gemeinschaft’¹¹² (national community), and this is a duality observable throughout the discussion above. It is the latter that is vindicated at the *Alþingi* during the conversion. The two parties are reconciled because they recognize the law-speaker’s appeal to *lög*, and his correct inference that two standards of social interaction, and thus two communities purporting to *staatlichkeit*, cannot co-exist. In the process of demonstrating the binding power of the legal foundation-myth, a new one is born: that of the peaceful and ‘democratic’

¹¹¹ William Ian Miller, ‘Of Outlaws, Christians, Horsemeat, and Writing: Uniform Laws and Saga Iceland,’ *Michigan Law Review* 89.8 (1991): 2090.

¹¹² Alexander Jóhannesson, *Isländisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1956) 750.

conversion to Christianity.¹¹³ This sense is sealed by Þorgeirr's explicit exaltation of the will of the people, by arguing that if *lög* is equated with a monarch and their jurisdiction, war is inevitable:

Hann sagði frá því, at konungar ýr Norvegi ok ýr Danmörku höfðu haft ófrið ok orrostur á miðli sín langa tíð, til þess unz landsmenn görðu frið á miðli þeira, þótt þeir vildi eigi.¹¹⁴

The resolution the Danes and the Norwegians effect is one of popular consensus; and it is this that is at the heart of *lög*.

To return to *Njáls saga*, Síðu-Hallr, after the great battle at the *Alþingi*, embodies this spirit of consensus. Realizing that the settlement to be made for the killings at the *Alþingi* could be impossibly complex, and acknowledging the failure of the settlement put before Flosi which did not prevent the burning, Hallr makes a considerable sacrifice:

En ek vil vinna þat til sætta at leggja son minn ógildan ok ganga þó til at veita þeim bæði tryggðir ok grið, er mínir mótstöðumenn eru.¹¹⁵

With these words Síðu-Hallr achieves an interpretation of *lög* that eluded both Gunnarr and Njáll – that one's personal convictions of justice must sometimes be sublimated towards a greater good, and that *lög* is nothing more than the sum of its participants' actions. The wider implications of the malleability and interpretability of *lög* according to consensus are clear once *lög* becomes a textual entity.

¹¹³ Haki Antonsson observes that the myth of the conversion at the *Alþingi* 'provided the Icelandic conversion tradition with a gravitational centre to which other narratives, such as the celebrated conversion episode in *Njáls saga*, were drawn.' Haki Antonsson, 'Traditions of Conversion in Medieval Scandinavia: A Synthesis,' *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 34 (2010): 38.

¹¹⁴ *ÍF* 1: 17. 'He told about how the kings of Norway and Denmark had long had strife and warfare between them, until the people brought peace about between them, even though they [the kings] did not want it.'

¹¹⁵ *ÍF* 12: 412. 'But in order to find a settlement I will leave my son uncompensated for and nevertheless pledge a sworn truce and peace to those who were my enemies.'

Just as *lög* is present in the interpretation of multiple individuals within texts, it is present across multiple texts.¹¹⁶ An example of the interaction between narrative and *lög* may be found near the end of *Grettis saga*. Þorvaldr Ásgeirsson leads the counter-claim against Þorbjörn ǫngull Þórðarson's claim for the reward for the killing of the outlaw Grettir Ásmundarson with the charge that Þorbjörn used magic to kill Grettir, and killed him whilst he was already dying of a previous wound:

Varð nú ǫðruvís en hann hugði, því at Þorvaldi ok Ísleifi, mági hans, þótti þat ólífisverk, at gera manni gǫrningar til bana. En með tillögum skynsamra manna varð sú lykð á málum þessum, at Þorbjörn skyldi sigla samsumars ok koma aldri síðan til Íslands, meðan þeir lifðu eptir, er mál áttu eptir Illuga ok Gretti. Var þá í lög tekit, at alla forneskjumenn gerðu þeir útlæga.¹¹⁷

This is a useful account of the process of the creation of a law – essentially an example of the establishment of precedent – and the potential resultant statute can be found in *Grágás* itself:

Ef maþr ferr með fordæs skap. þat varþar scoggang. þat ero fordæs skapir. ef maþr gérir i orðvm sinvm. eþa fiolkyngi sott eþa bana. fe eþa mavnnvm. þat scal sekia við .xij. qvið.¹¹⁸

This is an important demonstration of the bidirectional flow of legal information between law and literature: *Grettis saga* stands as an ostensible point of origin for a law, providing evidence of the circumstances which caused its promulgation; *Grágás* stands as a distillation of this knowledge into

¹¹⁶ The potential problem of legal change in the written period – the existence of copies at variance with one another – is provided for in *Grágás*; law codices owned by bishops trump those owned by others, and the law code kept by the Bishop of Skálholt trumps that of Hólar. See *Gr. Ia*: 213.

¹¹⁷ *ÍF* 7: 268–69. ‘Now things went otherwise than he [Þorbjörn] had expected, as Þorvaldr and his son-in-law Ísleifr felt it to be a capital offence to bring about a man’s death through sorcery. And on the advice of wise men this case was concluded such that Þorbjörn should sail away that summer and never afterwards return to Iceland whilst those who had a case against him over the matter of Illugi and Grettir lived. It was then incorporated into law that all practitioners of sorcery be outlawed.’

¹¹⁸ *Gr. Ia*: 23. ‘If someone practises witchcraft, the punishment is outlawry. It is witchcraft if one causes the sickness or death of livestock or people by words or black magic. That shall be tried by a panel of twelve.’

something approaching a codification. Not only does *lög* inform the sagas in their treatment of settlement-era Iceland; the sagas too form part of *lög* itself, acting as something akin to a gloss on the pared-down prohibitions and regulations of the written law.

This section has demonstrated how *lög* exists as a plurality of concepts in the literature pertaining to the Icelandic *Þjóðveldi*. *Lög* can be seen as an attribute or aspect of the characters of the sagas themselves, transformed by the process of migration; altering to new social circumstances; and accommodating the ‘new law’ of Christianity. One aspect of *lög* that must be emphasized is its status as a mediating space rather than a structure. The idea that *lög* fails in the sagas because of the ‘lack’ of an executive misses the point. *Lög* permits an expression of individual identity through its interpretation, and an expression of collective identity through the interaction and dialogue between these interpretations. The role of consensus in reconciling the autonomous individual with the society that embodies that individual’s identity has long been a matter of debate in political philosophy.¹¹⁹ *Lög*, as an instance of that struggle for consensus, rightly stands at the centre of the conceptual world of the sagas. It takes Christianity, however, to fully establish a distinctly Icelandic literary identity, both through the redemption of consensus at the *Alþingi*, but also more generally as the expression of a bounded and identifiable world – Christendom – within which Icelandicness may find a place.

¹¹⁹ A long-standing distinction has been made between the Enlightenment model of the rational individual (or ‘sovereign artificer’) acting according to his or her personal desires and wishes, communities evolving through collaboration when such interests are shared, and the communitarian model of ‘an agent constituted and constrained in important respects by communal attachments and cultural formations.’ See Robert E. Goodin, ‘Review Article: Communities of Enlightenment,’ *British Journal of Political Science* 28.3 (1998): 533. A detailed application of these ideas to medieval Icelandic literature is beyond the scope of this work.

Three Foundation Myths

2.iii. *Kristni* – A Christian People

If the first two social myths examined thus far, of settlement and of law, demonstrate the tendency for Icelandic literary identity to be presented as a product of the transformations of extant peoples and ideas in new physical and conceptual spaces, much the same argument can be made for Christianity in Iceland. The social mythology of Christianity in Iceland has at its heart the crucial event of the conversion. But, as this chapter will explore, the importance of Christianity to a developing literary identity goes well beyond this particular event. That the conversion narrative so frequently concentrates on the events at Þingvǫllr in 999/1000 is, of course, no accident. Just as this physical space is the conceptual centre of the legal system, and the only piece of ‘common’ territory,¹ it is also the space within which Christianity is affirmed as a new aspect of Icelandicness. This chapter will go on to examine the function of Christianity as an aspect of Icelandic identity in a variety of situations, and witness how the literature approaches the incorporation of this new religion mid-way through the narrative of the Icelandic people. But first, it is necessary to sketch the outlines of the conversion as a common narrative, present across multiple texts.

In a great many respects, the social myth of Christianity permeates the corpus to the same degree as those of *landnám* and *lǫg* discussed above. As myths themselves, they have much in common. But whereas the *landnám* was fundamentally an interaction between people and the landscape, the adoption of Christianity is a more abstract event. It is an interaction between individuals, and subsequently a society on the one hand, and a system of beliefs on the other. Whilst

¹ See pp. 72-73 above.

the Old Norse terms for settlement and law are established and particular (*landnám* and *lög*), the process referred to here as the ‘conversion’ of Iceland lacks a stable signifier in the Old Icelandic corpus. *Kristnitaka* has the literal sense of ‘taking the faith,’ a useful idiom especially in the context of the integration of Christianity into the *lög*, but it appears to be a modern Icelandic compound.² Conversely, *siðaskipti* is frequently attested. Whilst usually used in the sense of conversion to Christianity, its literal sense is closer to a ‘change of customs’ or ‘habits’.³ Finally, the term *réttsnúning* is also found, which has a double sense of ‘turning to (God’s) law’ and ‘turning to what is right and just.’⁴

Such diversity reflects the multifaceted nature of the conversion as a literary event. This has long been recognized: Dag Strömbäck observed that there is ‘a formal, legal aspect, a political aspect, and finally a religious aspect’ to the conversion.⁵ Joaquín Martínez Pizarro has observed more generally the problematic polysemy of the term:

In the first place it covers both the public act of changing religious allegiance (e.g. a ceremony that makes conversion official) and the wholly private experience that constitutes conversion itself. Secondly, we speak of a conversion from the perspective of the agent who brings it about (e.g. a missionary’s conversion of a tribe) and from that of the protagonist (e.g. Newman’s conversion to Catholicism). [...] [T]hey all focus on the same

² Although probably the most common term for the conversion in modern Icelandic, it is not attested in Old Norse in *Fritzner*, *Cl-Vg* or *ONP*. It is glossed as ‘introduction of the Christian religion; Christianization’ in Arngrímur Sigurðsson, ed., *Íslensk-Ensk Orðabók* (Reykjavík: Prensmiðjan Leiftur, 1970) s.v. *kristnitaka*.

³ E.g. *ÍF* 12: 255 ‘siðaskipti varð í Nóregi’ (‘there had been a change of faith in Norway’). It ought to be noted that *siðaskipti* in modern Icelandic usually refers to the Reformation, which is presumably why *kristnitaka*, a more specific term, has come to be the standard referent for the conversion in the modern language.

⁴ With reference to *ONP*, there appears to be a generic basis for lexical choice. *Réttsnúning* is frequently used in hagiographic texts, such as *Ágústínuss saga*, *Péturs saga postula*, and *Maríu saga*, whilst *siðaskipti* is found more commonly in the texts directly related to Iceland and Scandinavia, including *Laxdæla saga*, *Njáls saga*, *Færeyinga saga* and *Jómsvíkinga saga*. Both terms, however, are attested in the versions of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*.

⁵ Dag Strömbäck, *The Conversion of Iceland: A Survey*, trans. Peter Foote (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1974) 26.

basic reality, a change of religious belief, and only differ in point of view [...] Together they make up a comprehensive and plausible range of variations in narrative technique.⁶

These variations are numerous: many different texts, over a period of time, have made diverse interventions on the subject of how Iceland came to be Christianized.⁷ This process of Christianization may be considered distinct to ‘the conversion’, insofar as it encompasses the totality of the incorporation of Christianity into Icelandic social mythology. This is something that is indeed composed of multiple conversions, both of individuals and of societies. The conversion of the Faeroe Islands, for example, may not relate to the narrative of Icelandic conversion, but it is in substantial dialogue with the narrative of Icelandic Christianization, as shall be discussed in subsection 3 below. As with the *landnám*, Ari’s *Íslendingabók* exists as the earliest example of a literary treatment of the event, but it was a subject that attracted much attention throughout the medieval period. Siân Grønlie has demonstrated a chronological progression in these treatments, from Ari’s politically inclined texts to the didactic and hagiographic sagas of King Óláfr Tryggvason produced by Oddr Snorrason and Gunnlaugr Leifsson, and then to the historical and literary syntheses in *Kristni saga* and the *Íslendingasögur* respectively.⁸

⁶ Joaquín Martínez Pizarro, ‘Conversion Narratives: Form and Utility,’ *Sixth International Saga Conference Workshop Papers*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: Det arnamagnæanske Institut, 1985), II: 814.

⁷ Compare, for example, the treatment of Haraldr hárfagri across texts dealing with the migration to Iceland: see chapter 2.i.2 above.

⁸ For a detailed examination of this process, see Siân Duke (Grønlie), ‘Recreating History: Literary Depictions of Iceland’s Conversion to Christianity, 1100-1300,’ DPhil, University of Oxford, 2000.

Kristni saga is a useful text insofar as it constitutes a clear attempt at combining the multiple narratives of Christianization that existed in both oral and written forms.⁹ Grønlie argues that the author of *Kristni saga*:

[C]learly aimed to give the best documented picture he could of early Christianity in Iceland, and the wide range of sources he used and combined reflect a concern for reliability as well as for fullness of depiction.¹⁰

The author of *Kristni saga* is clear in his intentions: '[n]ú hefr þat hversu kristni kom á Ísland.'¹¹ The text begins by relating the narratives of a number of missionaries to Iceland, and their mostly unsuccessful encounters with the Icelanders. At the structural centre of the saga is not the conversion narrative of Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði, but Hjalti Skeggjason's blasphemous verse about Freyja and his subsequent trip to Norway, followed by his return with Gizurr inn hvíti Teitsson. The familiar narrative of the conversion debate at the *Alþingi* follows, but neither does this provide the climax to the saga. It ends with the deaths of Gizurr Ísleifsson, the second Icelandic bishop of Skálholt, and Jón Ögmundarson, first bishop of Hólar.

To adopt the model of textual relationships used in the section on the *landnám*, *Kristni saga* represents one, particularly thorough, redaction of the intertextual narrative of Icelandic conversion, where the conversion has occupied a central place in the narrative itself – some comparison with

⁹ 'Í öðrum ritum, þar sem flest af þessum frásögnum er einnig að finna, eru þær hvergi saman komnar allar í einum stað eða settar fram með sama hætti sem í [*Kristni sögu*].' *ÍF* 15.I: lxii. ('Most of these stories are also to be found in other texts, but nevertheless they are nowhere all together or set out in the same way as in *Kristni saga*.) For analyses of the hypothetical sources of *Kristni saga*, see *ÍF* 15.I: lxiv-lxxi and Siân Duke (Grønlie), 'Kristni saga and its sources: some revaluations,' *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 24.4 (2001).

¹⁰ Duke (Grønlie), 'Recreating History,' 120.

¹¹ *ÍF* 15.II: 3. 'Now begins [the story] of how Christianity came to Iceland.'

Landnámabók in this limited sense would not be inappropriate.¹² In the same way that different sagas interacted with the narrative of settlement in different ways, emphasizing diverse aspects of the myth of settlement, so too do the family sagas approach the event of the arrival of Christianity with markedly varying emphases. As with the settlement, *Íslendingabók* forms a point of *written* origin for the social myth of Icelandic conversion; the *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur* and *biskupasögur* elaborate various aspects of the conversion, whilst *Kristni saga* may be read as an attempt to gather together these diverse narratives within a structural unity.¹³

In the same way that the myth of the *landnám* is constructed upon the foundations of a tradition of legendary migration narratives,¹⁴ Christianity in Iceland has a clear prehistory that forms a prologue to the conversion. Ari famously mentions in the first chapter of *Íslendingabók* that:

Þar váru hér menn kristnir, þeir es Norðmenn kalla papa, en þeir fóru síðan á braut, af því at þeir vildu eigi vesa hér við heiðna menn, ok létu eptir bœkr írskar ok bjöllur ok bagla; af því mátti skilja, at þeir váru menn írskir.¹⁵

This mention of the *papar* can be seen to establish Iceland as, if not a fully Christian space, at least not a land intrinsically hostile to the faith.¹⁶ It is instead the settlers who see off the *papar*, settlers

¹² There is certainly some truth in the claim that both *Landnámabók* and *Kristni saga* have received less critical attention than *Íslendingabók*. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson observes that *Kristni saga* ‘hefur ávalt staðið í skugga [*Íslendingabókar*] sem yngri heimild.’ *ÍF* 15.I: lv. (‘has always stood in the shadow of *Íslendingabók* as a later source.’)

¹³ Of course, even though *Íslendingabók* is the earliest source, it is still a text potentially influenced by the literary milieu in which it was produced. For example, it has been argued that Ari could have been influenced by earlier Irish penitential books: see Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, ‘Um kristnitökufrásögn Ara prests Þorgilssonar,’ *Skírnir* 153 (1979).

¹⁴ See chapter 2.i.1 above.

¹⁵ *ÍF* 1: 5. ‘There were Christian people here whom the Northmen call *papar*, but they later went away, because they didn’t want to be here with heathen people, and they left behind Irish books and bells and croziers; from this it can be seen that they were Irish.’

¹⁶ ‘For purposes of reckoning the beginnings of the settlement of Iceland, then, things began with the first boatloads of Scandinavians and not with the *papar*, important as we shall see they probably were held to have

who are still *Norðmenn* rather than *Íslendingar*. It must also be remembered that *Landnámabók* and several *Íslendingasögur* record settlers who were already Christian when they arrived, although how long this situation lasted is an issue for speculation by the redactors of the *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók* versions of *Landnámabók*:

Svá segja vitrir menn, at nokkurir landnámsmenn hafi skírðir verit, þeir er byggt hafa Ísland, flestir þeir, er kómu vestan um haf. Er til þess nefndr Helgi magri ok Örlygr enn gamli, Helgi bjóla, Jörundr kristni, Auðr djúpauðga, Ketill enn fíflski ok enn fleiri menn, er kómu vestan um haf, ok heldu þeir sumir vel kristni til dauðadags. En þat gekk óvída í ættir, því at synir þeira sumra reistu hof ok blótuðu, en land var alheiðit nær hundraði vetra.¹⁷

This ambiguity is manifested across the corpus. To return to a familiar character introduced above, when Auðr en djúpauðga appears in *Laxdæla saga* with the name Unnr in djúpúðga, there is no hint of her being a Christian; when she dies, ‘hon var lögð í skip í hauginum, ok mikit fé var í haug lagt með henni’.¹⁸ In contrast, in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* one finds that

Auðr var grafin isand þar er flæðr gekk yfir sem hún hafði aðr sialf fyrir sagt. Þvíat hon villdi eigi liggja í viggðri molldo er hun var skirð. En eptir andlat hennar. viltuz frændr hennar af rettri tru. Var síþan gert hof æ Kross holum þa er blot toko til.¹⁹

been in Christianizing the new territory.’ Margaret Clunies Ross, ‘Textual Territory: The Regional and Geographical Dynamic of Medieval Icelandic Literary Production,’ *New Medieval Literatures* 1 (1997): 12.

¹⁷ *ÍF* 1: 396. ‘Knowledgeable people say that some of the land-takers were baptized who settled Iceland; mostly those who came from the west over the sea [the British Isles]. These are named: Helgi magri [the lean] and Örlygr enn gamli [the old], Helgi bjóla, Jörundr kristni [the Christian], Auðr djúpauðga [the deep-minded], Ketill enn fíflask [the foolish] and many people who came from the west over the sea, and some of them kept their Christianity until their death. But it did not spread widely in families, because the sons of some of them raised temples and sacrificed, and the country was entirely heathen for around a hundred and twenty years.’

¹⁸ *ÍF* 5: 13. ‘[S]he was laid in a ship inside a cairn, and much wealth lay in the cairn with her.’ For further analysis of Auðr/Unnr as a settler, see pp. 47 and 52-53 above.

¹⁹ Ólafur Halldórsson, ed., *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ Series A, 1-3, 3 vols. (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1958-2000) I: 273. ‘Auðr was buried in the sand where the tide washed over as she herself had stipulated before, because she did not want to lie in unconsecrated earth when she was baptized. But after her death her kinsmen deviated from the true faith, and afterwards a temple was built at Krosshólar [a place where she erected crosses and prayed] where sacrifices took place.’ Elizabeth Ashman Rowe

This account of Auðr's death is also present in the *Sturlubók* redaction of *Landnámabók*.²⁰

Nevertheless, it is symptomatic of a desire to understand a complete narrative of Christianity in Iceland that in *Hauksbók* Haukr Erlendsson copies *Kristni saga* immediately after the paragraph from *Landnámabók* quoted above.²¹ Here, this period of apparent total heathenism between the deaths of the immigrant Christians and the arrival of the missionaries is reified as a blank space. The *Íslendingasögur*, on the other hand, interact frequently with this period, although their status as products of a Christian literary tradition cannot be overstated.

It is thus no surprise that elements of Christianity are projected back on the settlement period, for the very reason that Christianity was, by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, an intrinsic

suggests that the author of *Laxdæla saga* may have decided to cast Unnr as a pagan in order 'to reserve the prestige of introducing Christianity for the later character Kjartan.' Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, 'The Adaptation of *Laxdæla Saga* in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*,' *Leeds Studies in English* 36 (2005): 171. For a discussion of Kjartan's conversion in Norway, see chapter 2.iii.3.

²⁰ *ÍF* 1: 146-47. The reference to the temple being built on Krosshólar is at 139. The problem of Auðr/Unnr's faith has long been an issue in the relationship between texts. Björn Ólsen argues that '[h]eraf synes at fremgå, at alt, hvad Stb.-Hb. fortæller om Ketill flatnefs og hans slægts kristne tro, er en senere interpolation i Landnáma, rimeligvis hentet fra den i Gunnlaugs Ólafs saga indflettede Kristniþáttur,' Björn Magnússon Ólsen, 'Landnáma og Laxdæla Saga,' *Aarbøger for Nordisk oldkyndighed og historie* 23 (1908): 189-90. ('It appears to be the case that all that *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók* tell of Ketill flatnefr and his family's Christian faith is a later interpolation in *Landnámabók*, probably taken from the interwoven *Kristni þáttur* of Gunnlaugr's *Óláfs saga*.) Ólsen sees Gunnlaugr as the source of all material relating to a Christian Auðr. Jakob Benediktsson disagrees, observing that Sturla Þórðarson refers to a lost *Þórðar saga gellis* that may be his source for this material (*ÍF* 1: 146 n. 5). Jón Jóhannesson notes that whilst previous critics, including the editor of the *Íslensk fornrit* edition of *Laxdæla saga*, Einar Ól. Sveinsson, have considered that the author of *Laxdæla saga* was familiar with Gunnlaugr's *Óláfs saga*, it seems improbable that a Christian author would exclude information on Auðr's piety and substitute what is ostensibly a heathen burial. See Jón Jóhannesson, *Gerðir Landnámabókar* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1941) 130.

²¹ This section of the medieval *Hauksbók* (AM 371 4to) is lost; Jón Erlendsson's seventeenth-century transcription leaves a space on the page below this ending of *Landnámabók* before opening *Kristni saga* ('Her hefur Kristni sög') with space for a historiated initial, but they share the same visual space (AM 105 fol. f. 83'). Finnur Jónsson argues that 'der er al grund til at antage, at den i originalen har fulgt umiddelbart på Landnáma.' Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Hauksbók* (Copenhagen: Thieles Bogtrykkeri, 1892-96) lxx. ('There is every reason to suppose that in the original it immediately followed *Landnámabók*.) The texts follow this same order in *Sturlubók*; see Jón Jóhannesson, *Gerðir Landnámabókar* 70.

element of Icelandic identity. Else Mundal has sought to reconcile the interplay between Christian present and pagan past with reference to *Íslendingabók*:

I dei tidlege kapitula får ein framstilt den islandske historia i heiden tid, men bak anar ein den kristne historia som går parallelt med den heidne og som renn saman i år 1000. Omtalen av dei irske munkane som let etter seg heilage gjenstander, kan gje inntrykk av at islendingane kjem til eit land som alt er vigsla til kristendomen.²²

She comes to the same conclusions as Margaret Clunies Ross regarding the presence of the *papar* as precursors of Icelandic Christianity, but her characterization of two parallel narrative strands is an extremely valuable one. One method of reconciling the gap between Christian and pre-Christian Iceland is to apply a typological interpretation of history, as shall be seen below.²³ Within the intertextual conversion narrative itself, three distinct episodes can be discerned. The first phase of the conversion proper was a period of missionary activity, mostly but not exclusively sponsored by King Óláfr Tryggvason. The mission of Þangbrandr is the most frequently recounted in the *Íslendingasögur*, probably because his negative report on the suitability of the Icelanders for conversion to Óláfr Tryggvason spurred the pivotal confrontation at the *Alþingi*. But other sources including *Kristni saga* contain earlier examples, such as Þorvaldr Koðránsson and the bishop Friðrekr, and the Icelander Stefnir Þorgilsson, whose missions preceded that of Þangbrandr.²⁴

²² Else Mundal, 'Íslendingabók vurdert som bispestolskrønike,' *alvissmál* 3 (1994): 71. 'In the early chapters there is a depiction of Icelandic history in the heathen period, but behind it is a Christian history which runs parallel with the heathen and the two flow together in the year 1000. Mention of the Irish monks who left behind their holy objects can give the impression that the Icelanders came to a land already consecrated to Christianity.'

²³ See pp. 145–46 below.

²⁴ For reasons of space the mission of Stefnir Þorgilsson will not be examined in detail here. His mission is the least well attested, found only in *Kristni saga*, Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* as *Stefnis þátr Þorgilssonar*. An Icelander, his mission is unsuccessful and he does not even succeed in converting his own family. He is outlawed for blasphemy by his own kinsmen, and returns to King Óláfr. In

Secondly, there is the essentially political crisis that ensues when Þangbrandr returns to his patron, Óláfr Tryggvason, and admits his failure, precipitating a hostage situation and, depending on the source, the near-execution of the Icelanders then in Norway. The third phase is surely the most celebrated, that of the decision of the Icelanders at the *Alþingi* to convert to Christianity through the appointment of Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði as a mediator between the heathen and Christian parties. These phases are not all described by all the sources, and different texts focus on different phases to considerably varying extents. They also often overlap: heathen Icelanders are depicted interacting with the Christian King Óláfr before and during Þangbrandr's mission, and this too can have a bearing on the saga-author's interpretation of the event. The great variation texts exhibit in their depiction of the process of conversion demonstrates the various literary uses to which this myth was deployed.

The conversion to Christianity of the Icelandic people *en masse* exists as the crowning achievement of the *Þjóðveldi*'s legal system, a concept discussed in the previous chapter.²⁵ But, as was explained there, the moment of conversion at the *Alþingi* is presented principally as a moment of legal, rather than religious unity. It is unsurprising that the powerful myth of the potency of the nascent Icelandic polity's constitutional institutions, first expounded in *Íslendingabók*, has later come to be seen as the most significant event in the story of Christianity in Iceland. But this prominence is not reflected in the medieval literature.²⁶ The true role of Christianity in Icelandic literary identity is

the latter source, he is another example of the reluctant missionary, observing that Þorvaldr and Friðrekr's mission had not met with success.

²⁵ See p. 107 above.

²⁶ Haki Antonsson observes that by the time *Kristni saga* was composed, the constitutional system (including the prominence in secular affairs of the bishops of Skálholt and Hólar) had weakened considerably, hence the effort to present the conversion as an affair that transcended regional boundaries, as opposed to the southern

to be found elsewhere. This chapter will begin by examining other aspects of the role of the arrival of Christianity in the narrative of Icelandic identity. The first part of this chapter will stay in Iceland itself, discussing the events that ostensibly preceded the conversion at the *Alþingi*: the activities of the missionaries who sought to evangelize Iceland. The second part will look at Icelanders taking the faith abroad, not only those who later provided the main impetus for the confrontation at the *Alþingi* (Gizurr Teitsson and Hjalti Skeggjason), but also the Christian dimension to interactions between Icelanders and foreigners outside of the island itself. Finally, Icelandic accounts of the conversion and Christian practice in other settled territories will be examined, to assess the degree to which Icelandic literature portrays Icelandic Christianity as a ‘special case’, something new and more than the sum of its parts. It will be seen that Christianity and Icelandicness are both presented as undergoing processes of transformation and accommodation, permitting a new, but also age-old identity to be reaffirmed.

1. Evangelizing the North: Þorvaldr, Friðrekr and Þangbrandr

Across the corpus as a whole, a number of missionaries are depicted as having visited Iceland before the conversion was ratified at the *Alþingi*. *Íslendingabók* records Þangbrandr as the first missionary, dispatched by King Óláfr Tryggvason, with the Icelanders Gizurr Teitsson and Hjalti Skeggjason and the priest Þormóðr forming a second wave of missionary activity once Þangbrandr had returned to the king without success.²⁷ Unsurprisingly, Þangbrandr also appears in several *Íslendingasögur*, most

bias evident in *Íslendingabók*. One might argue, therefore, that the power of the *Alþingi* to stand as a symbol of a unitary Iceland had diminished between the composition of *Íslendingabók* and *Kristni saga*. See Haki Antonsson, ‘Traditions of Conversion,’ 38.

²⁷ *ÍF* 1: 14–15. The same narrative is found in the Norwegian Latin history *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium* by Theodoricus Monachus, where Þormóðr’s name is rendered ‘Thermo.’ See Gustav Storm,

extensively in *Njáls saga*. But Ari makes oblique mention of a bishop, Friðrekr, who ‘kom í heiðni hér’ as part of his list of foreign bishops at the end of *Íslendingabók*.²⁸ The mission of Friðrekr, a Saxon bishop, and his Icelandic companion Þorvaldr is recounted in only one *Íslendingasaga*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, although passing mention is made in some other sagas, and the narrative is extensively handled in the *konungasögur* dealing with Óláfr Tryggvason.²⁹

The compiler of *Kristni saga* puts the story of one of them at the very head of the text itself: ‘Nú hefr þat hversu kristni kom á Ísland, at maðr hét Þorvaldr Koðránsson.’³⁰ This statement is a strange one. As observed above, *Kristni saga* continues directly in its manuscript context from an ending of *Landnámabók* which establishes Iceland as a place in which Christianity had existed, but has died out. It has already been established, therefore, that Christianity has come to Iceland: and furthermore, the man named is an Icelander. The author appears to be squaring the circle; to realize the conversion of Icelandic society to Christianity as something that came from within, despite the fact that it is shortly revealed that Þorvaldr is a missionary, accompanying the Saxon bishop Friðrekr.

Þorvaldr Koðránsson is introduced with the usual genealogical information that would befit an Icelander.³¹ He travels widely abroad (thus earning his nickname *víðfyrli*), and meets the Saxon

ed., *Monumenta Historica Norvegiæ* (Oslo: A. W. Brøgger, 1880) 21. Of the early Norwegian sources, *Ágrip* also contains references to Þangbrandr and Þormóðr, though here they accompany Óláfr to Norway and a connection with Iceland is not explicit. See *ÍF* 29: 22.

²⁸ *ÍF* 1: 18. ‘came here in the heathen period.’

²⁹ For an analysis of the sources for Friðrekr, see G. A. Piebenga, ‘Fridrek, den første utenlandske misjonæren på Island,’ *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 99 (1984).

³⁰ *ÍF* 15.II: 3. ‘Now the story of Christianity’s arrival in Iceland begins with a man called Þorvaldr Koðránsson.’

³¹ ‘[M]aðr hét Þorvaldr Koðránsson, bróðursonr Atla ins ramma; þeir vǫru synir Eilífs arnar, Bárðarsonar ór Ál, Ketilssonar refs, Skíðasonar ins gamla.’ *ÍF* 15.II: 3. (‘A man was called Þorvaldr Koðránsson, son of the brother of Atli enn rammi [the strong]. They were the sons of Eilífr ǫrn [eagle], son of Bárðr of Ál, son of Ketill refr [fox], son of Skíði enn gamli [the old].’)

bishop Friðrekr and ‘bað byskup fara til Íslands með sér at skíra fǫður sinn ok móður ok aðra frændr sína, þá er hans ráði vildu fylgja.’³² The significance of Þorvaldr’s mission, which antedates Þangbrandr’s according to *Kristni saga*’s chronology, is that Þorvaldr is not sent to Iceland at the behest of a king, but simply wishes to bring his own kinship group within Christendom – and even then, only those who wish to follow the new faith. There is no hint of a desire for coercion. They have only modest success, and Koðrán, Þorvaldr’s father, refuses to convert until the bishop performs a miracle at a stone which contained the family’s *ármaðr* (‘guardian spirit’). When they finally get the chance to present their case at the *Alþingi*, things take a turn for the worse, and Þorvaldr ends up killing two people who libelled the missionaries with the verse ‘Hefir bǫrn borit / byskup núu / þeira er allra / Þorvaldr faðir.’³³ The verse is clearly an attack on Þorvaldr and Friðrekr’s masculinity, and Þorvaldr’s killing of the libellers is a breach of process, but not of the spirit of the law.³⁴ Nevertheless this does not square with Friðrekr’s Christian sensibilities:

Deir lugu á okkr, en þú færðir óorð þeira afleiðis því at ek máttu vel bera
bǫrn þín eptir mér.³⁵

This is not the last straw, but when Þorvaldr has Heðinn, one of his adversaries at the *Alþingi*, killed in Norway, Friðrekr ends their partnership, ‘er hann var heiptrækr.’³⁶ Þorvaldr is not an agent of Norway; his Icelandicness is not in doubt, and it is not his ethnicity which poses a problem for his

³² *ÍF* 15.II: 4. ‘asked the bishop to go to Iceland with him to baptize his father and mother and his other kinsmen who wished to follow his advice.’

³³ *ÍF* 15.II: 12. ‘The bishop has borne nine children: Þorvaldr is father of all of them.’

³⁴ The composition of defamatory or praise poetry in Iceland is prohibited in *Grágás*, on penalty of full outlawry. See *Gr. Ib*: 183–85, and p. 161 below.

³⁵ *ÍF* 15.II: 12. ‘They lied about us, but you have taken their insult the wrong way, because I could well have borne your children on my back.’

³⁶ *ÍF* 15.II: 13. ‘for he was vindictive.’ This seems a straightforward contrast between Christian and pre-Christian ethics; see Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. Joan Turville-Petre (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983) 54–55.

mission, as might be said to be the case for Þangbrandr, explored below. But Þorvaldr is unable in *Kristni saga* to bridge the gap between Christian faith and Icelandic society, as the manner in which he deals with the insults made against him demonstrates. In *Kristni saga*, the missions of Þorvaldr and Stefnir exist, fundamentally, as prologues to the successful conversion that takes place under the influence of Gizurr and Hjalti. They demonstrate that Christianity is in no way incompatible with individual Icelanders, but that for Christianity to be acceptable to Icelandic society as a whole, a careful construction of consensus is required.

In *Vatnsdæla saga* the narrative concerning Þorvaldr and Friðrekr does not contradict anything found in *Kristni saga*. But the use of this narrative of missionaries in an *Íslendingasaga* whose focus is very much on one dynasty and one geographic area has quite different results to those found in *Kristni saga*. *Vatnsdæla saga* is even more overtly concerned with matters of origin and identity than the majority of Old-Norse Icelandic texts.³⁷ The saga's long prologue in Norway, which sees Ingimundr Þorsteinsson fail to resist his fate to settle in Iceland, betrays a sustained interest in the process of emigration and the noble descent of the settlers. Andrew Wawn has observed the centrality of Christianization to the myth of regional origins the saga comprises.³⁸ A subtler strand within the saga is its sustained interest in correct modes of behaviour and social conduct, and this interest is frequently interrelated with issues of both secular and religious affinity.

³⁷ 'Það er auðgert, að ákveða *uppistöðu* Vatnsdæla sögu: hún er hrein ættarsaga, saga hinna fornu Hofverja í Vatnsdal, og nær yfir marga mannsaldra, eða frá því Ingimundur gamli kom út til Íslands að nema land (um 900) og fram á 11. öld,' *ÍF* 8: xv. ('It is easy to determine the *central subject* of *Vatnsdæla saga*: it is a pure genealogical saga, a saga of the ancient people of Hof in Vatnsdalr, and covers many generations, from when Ingimundr gamli [the old] came out to Iceland to settle (in 900) to the eleventh century,' his emphasis.)

³⁸ Andrew Wawn, 'Vatnsdæla Saga: Visions and Versions,' *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World*, eds. Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007) 403.

During the saga's opening prologue in Norway, Þorsteinn Ketilsson, father of Ingimundr the settler, receives the favour of Ingimundr jarl, ruler of Gautland. He marries the jarl's daughter, Þórdís, and when he is called by his kinsmen to return to his ancestral lands upon the death of his father, the jarl promises Þorsteinn a lavish send-off. The jarl requests that Þorsteinn name his son after him. His reply is telling:

Þorsteinn kvað svá vera skyldu, en því kvazk hann eigi eptir jarls tign leita,
at frændr hans váru ótignir.³⁹

Þorsteinn's relative disdain for the trappings of power and hierarchy establishes a precedent of independent-mindedness that his descendants go on to follow. His son, Ingimundr Þorsteinsson undergoes a conversion of identity that foreshadows the religious conversion later in the saga. After the battle of Hafrsfjörðr, Ingimundr reproaches his friend Sæmundr for not participating on the side of the future king of Norway, Haraldr hárfagri:

[H]efði betr verit, at þú hefðir mér fylgt í Hafrsfirði ok þurfa nú eigi at fara í eyðisker þetta.⁴⁰

The term he uses for Iceland, *eyðisker*, is a doubly negative compound (something akin to a 'barren skerry'), and when Grímr, Ingimundr's *fóstbróðir*, decides to go to Iceland, Ingimundr announces '[e]igi mun ek þangat, ok mun þat skilja með okkr.'⁴¹ Nevertheless, fate intervenes in the form of the supernatural transportation of his *hlutr* ('amulet') to Iceland and its equally supernatural discovery

³⁹ *ÍF* 8: 17. 'Þorsteinn said that he would do so, but announced that he would not seek the status of jarl, for his kinsmen were untitled.' Einar Ól. Sveinsson observes a parallel in Erlingr Skjálǫgsson's refusal to take the rank of jarl from Óláfr Trygvasson in Snorri's *Heimskringla*, because his kinsmen have always been *hersir* and he will take no higher title than theirs. See *ÍF* 26: 307.

⁴⁰ *ÍF* 8: 27. 'It would have been better if you had followed me at Hafrsfjörðr, and you wouldn't now need to go off to that empty rock.'

⁴¹ *ÍF* 8: 31. 'I shall not go there, and here we will part company.' Such words are formulaic and sometimes ominous; Ingimundr also uses them when parting company with Sæmundr, but this form of words can also be used to dissolve marriages, for example that between Geirmundr and Þuríðr in *ÍF* 5: 82.

there by the *Finnar* ('Finns' or 'Lapps') he engages to search for it. Ingimundr's reluctance to go to Iceland is emphasized at every opportunity; 'hefi ek nú alls í leitit,' he tells the king, and finally he announces to his household:

[H]ygg ek mik fara munu til Íslands, meir af forlögum ok atkvæði rammra hluta en fýsi.⁴²

It would be too lengthy an affair to trace the subtle changes in Ingimundr's behaviour in the proceeding chapters, but it is important to notice that before he leaves Norway he is keen to ensure that he follows correct procedure. He speaks to the king before sending the *Finnar* there to see if they can bring back the *hlutr* without having to go himself:

Konungr kvað hann þat mega gera, – „en þat hygg ek, at þangat munir þú koma, ok er þat uggligt, hvárt þú ferr í lofi mínu eða lynisk þú, sem nú tekr mjök at tíðkask.“ „Þat mun mér aldri verða,“ segir Ingimundr, „at ek fara í banni þínu.“⁴³

Ingimundr's pledge of loyalty to the king, that he will only go to Iceland with his permission, runs against the grain of the majority of the *landnámsmenn* examined in chapter 2.i, and is perhaps surprising given his father's clear wish not to be over-dependent on his patron, Ingimundr jarl. But only a few chapters later, Ingimundr's new-found identity as an Icelander is explicitly demonstrated through an encounter with a Norwegian sailor, Hrafn. Hrafn and some other *norraenir menn* ('Norsemen') arrive, and Ingimundr meets them at the shore: he 'var vanr fyrsta manna til skips at

⁴² *ÍF* 8: 36. 'I've now tried everything,' 'I think I shall go to Iceland, more because of fate and the decision of powerful things than any eagerness.' *Rammra hluta* could perhaps contain a pun – it refers to 'powerful forces' in the abstract, something akin to fate or providence, but *hlutr* in the singular is also the term for the amulet given by King Haraldr and discovered by the *Finnar* in Iceland, which has a more direct influence on his decision to go out to Iceland.

⁴³ *ÍF* 8: 33–34. 'The king said that he could do that, "but I think that you will end up over there, and it worries me whether you go with my permission or steal yourself away, which is now very much the fashion." "It would never happen," says Ingimundr, "that I would go in the face of your prohibition."'

koma,⁴⁴ and was also accustomed to exchange his hospitality in return for some item of value from his visitors. In this case, Ingimundr has his eyes on Hrafn's sword, but Hrafn fails to take the hint when Ingimundr asks to see the weapon and refuses even to sell it to him, let alone gift it.

Ingimundr takes great offence. The next scene deserves close analysis:

Ok einn tíma, er hann gekk til hofs síns, stillti hann svá til, at Austmaðrinn fór með honum. Ingimundr talar þá til hans hugarlátliga þat er hann fann, er honum var bezt at skapi; hann vildi jafnan ræða um víking sína ok herferðir. Ingimundr gekk inn í hófit fyrir, ok eigi finnr hann fyrr en Hrafn hleypr inn í hófit með sverðit. Ingimundr snerisk við honum ok mælti: „Eigi er þat siðr at bera vápn í hófit, ok muntu verða fyrir goða reiði, ok er slíkt ófært, nema bætr komi fram.“ Hrafn svarar: „Hér hefir þú lengi um setit ok ráð til sett, ok ef ek hefi misgørt í lögum yðrum, þá ætla ek þat ráð, at þú gerir um, því at þú ert kallaðr sannsýnn maðr.“⁴⁵

Ingimundr uses Hrafn's ignorance of religious customs to gain recompense for his flouting of social customs. Although Hrafn is explicitly rendered a difficult individual, the passage above is saturated with references to differentiation between the two characters on grounds of societal affiliation and identity: Hrafn is an *austmaðr*, and the fact that he is categorized according to his direction of travel necessitates an acceptance that Ingimundr, so reluctant to make that journey west, is now at home – Iceland is the geographic centre of the text, not Norway. Furthermore, Ingimundr has to explain to Hrafn the conventions involved in entering a temple. Whilst to some extent this is a ruse to obtain the sword, this ruse functions only because Hrafn is prepared to accept that he is abroad and that

⁴⁴ *ÍF* 8: 47. 'Was accustomed to be the first to meet arriving ships.'

⁴⁵ *ÍF* 8: 48. 'On one occasion, when he went to his temple, he arranged it such that the man from Norway went with him. Ingimundr talks to him amiably about that which he found most pleased him; he always wanted to relate his viking raids and military exploits. Ingimundr went ahead into the temple, and no sooner than that does he find Hrafn running into the temple with the sword. Ingimundr turned to him and said: "It is not customary to carry weapons into the temple, and you shall become the object of the gods' wrath. Such a thing can't be let past unless compensation is forthcoming." Hrafn replies, "You've waited a long time here to plan against me, and if I have transgressed your laws then I'd think it right that you deal with it, because you're said to be a just man.'"

rules may be different there. When he asks ‘ef ek hefi misgort í lögum yðrum,’ the qualification of *lög* with the second-person possessive adjective reifies their social separation.

From the very outset, then, *Vatnsdæla saga* is concerned not simply with issues of identity and origins but with the dynamic processes of *shifts* in identity, and how these are manifested through demonstrations of affinity not only with kings or peoples, but also with faiths. Hrafn’s lack of familiarity with the particular religious customs of Ingimundr marks him as an other, and this prefigures the subsequent importance of Christianity to the delineation of individual identity.⁴⁶ The role of the conversion to Christianity in identity formation can therefore be integrated with ease into the saga narrative. As can be discerned from the passage examined above, Ingimundr’s religion is one concerned more with decorous behaviour than bloody sacrifice or sorcery.⁴⁷ This contrasts with the religion of somebody such as Þórólfr heljarskinn, of whom the saga notes, ‘[g]runaðr var hann um þat, at hann mundi blóta mǫnnum.’⁴⁸ A later migrant to Iceland, Þórólfr settles at Forœludalr, and is presented as universally unpopular. Ingimundr’s good character thus rests partly on his ‘civic’ religion: a religion that involves building temples and observing social rules, not one that seeks advantage over others through occult practice.⁴⁹ This has often been viewed as proto-Christianity; Siân Grønlie observes that conversion ‘is depicted as the fulfilment of the beliefs and actions which characterise Þorkell and his ancestors, the family of Ingimundr, from the very beginning.’⁵⁰

Furthermore, Elizabeth Ashman Rowe argues that:

⁴⁶ ‘The important factor is unfamiliarity, not nationality.’ Sverrir Jakobsson, ‘Strangers in Icelandic Society 1100-1400,’ *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 3 (2007): 154.

⁴⁷ See Lars Lönnroth, ‘The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas,’ *Scandinavian Studies* 41.1 (1969): 1-29.

⁴⁸ *ÍF* 8: 46. ‘It was suspected that he carried out human sacrifices.’

⁴⁹ Compare, for example, the disruption caused to legal procedure by magic in this saga: see pp. 91-93 above.

⁵⁰ Duke (Grønlie), ‘Recreating History,’ 259.

Just as salvation history is divided into two ages by the Incarnation of Christ, so was Scandinavian history divided into a pagan age and a Christian age by the conversion around the year 1000. And just as events and people from the time of the old law could be understood as prefiguring the events and people of the time of the new law, so too could pagan Scandinavians be understood in a variety of ways as “pre-Christians.”⁵¹

This typological interpretation of Ingimundr is consonant with that advanced by Gerd Wolfgang Weber in respect to *Laxdæla saga*, as discussed below.

Towards the end of the saga, in the story of the missionaries Þorvaldr and Friðrekr themselves, one may see the process of conversion carefully contextualized by the author:

Nærri þessum tíma kom út Friðrekr byskup ok Þorvaldr Koðráns­son, er kallaðr var inn viðförl­i. Þessu næst kom út annat skip, ok váru þar á berserkir tveir, ok hét Haukr hvár­rtveggi.⁵²

The Icelandic perspective cultivated in *Vatnsdæla saga*, which is as much as anything else a generic marker of the *Íslendingasögur* in general, has a transformative effect on the narrative of Þorvaldr and Friðrekr. Here two directly opposed forces arrive in Iceland at the same time: proselytizing Christianity and one of the most disruptive and excessive instances of heathenism, the *berserkr* warrior. Both are unpopular: the *berserkir* because ‘þeir buðu mönnum nauðung til kvenna eða fjár,’⁵³ and the missionaries because the faith they preach is a *nýgöfving*, something of an unwelcome novelty. This may be compared with the other extant redactions of the mission of Þorvaldr and

⁵¹ Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, ‘Cultural Paternity in the Flateyjarbók *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*,’ *alvissmál* 8 (1998): 10. Gerd Wolfgang Weber has also engaged with this, arguing that it is in part for this reason that Ari dates the settlement of Iceland according to the death of the English saint Edmund in *Íslendingabók*: this represents ‘the synchronization of national histories with world history,’ the latter a history predicated on a typological understanding of the course of human events. See Gerd Wolfgang Weber, ‘Intellegere historiam. Typological Perspectives of Nordic Prehistory,’ *Tradition og historieskrivning*, eds. Kirsten Hastrup and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (Århus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1987) 103.

⁵² *ÍF* 8: 124. ‘Around this time Bishop Friðrekr and Þorvaldr Koðráns­son, who was called the *viðförl­i* (widely-travelled) came out to Iceland. Just afterwards another ship arrived, and there were two *berserkir* on board, both called Haukr.’

⁵³ *ÍF* 8: 124. ‘They ordered people to give up their women or property.’

Friðrekr. Óláfr á Haukagili hosts the feast at which the *berserkir* appear, and in *Vatnsdæla saga* one finds:

Um haustit at vetrnóttum bauð Óláfr til sín vinum sínum, einkum Þorkatli mági sínum. Þeir byskup ok Þorvaldr váru þar. Vel at eins tók Þorkell þeim ok lét þá vera eina saman í húsi, því at þeir höfðu annan sið.⁵⁴

The difference in perspective in *Kristni saga* is obvious:

Þeir byskup ok Þorvaldr váru at haustboði í Vatsdal at Giljá með Óláfi. Þar var þá kominn Þorkell krafla ok mart annarra manna.⁵⁵

There is no mention of Þorkell's generous accommodation of the Christians, and the very ordering of the narrative is inverted, so that Þorkell appears to be more of a guest than the Christians, rather than the other way around. Furthermore, in *Vatnsdæla saga* the separation of the Christians from the others present ('lét þá vera eina saman í húsi') is presented as a boon granted by Þorkell: a respectful gesture, befitting a saga concerned throughout with correct social behaviour. However, in *Þorvalds þáttur víðfjara*, the version of this story found in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, the situation is described quite differently:

En því at hvárigir vildu öðrum samneyta, kristnir menn ok heiðnir, þá var þat ráð tekit at tjaldat var um þveran skálann í milli þeira þar sem lœkrinn fell. Skyldi byskup vera fram í skálann með kristna menn, en heiðingjar fyrir innan tjaldit.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *ÍF* 8: 124-25. 'In the autumn during the winter-nights Óláfr invited his friends, especially his kinsman Þorkell. The bishop and Þorvaldr were there. Þorkell alone gave them a hearty welcome, and let them be alone together in the house, because they believed in a different faith.'

⁵⁵ *ÍF* 15.II: 8-9. 'The bishop and Þorvaldr were at the autumn feast with Óláfr at Giljá in Vatsdalr. Þorkell krafla [scratcher] and many other people had arrived.'

⁵⁶ *ÍF* 15.II: 69-70. 'Because neither wanted to converse with the other, the Christian people and the heathens, it was decided to hang cloth across the hall between them along the line of the brook. The bishop was to be in the front of the hall with the Christians, and the heathens back behind the cloth.'

Furthermore, the *berserkir* are ‘með öðrum heiðnum mönnum tveir bræðr.’⁵⁷ Grønlie deduces from this that:

The role of the berserks in *Þorvalds þáttr* is [...] rather unconventional: far from being outsiders who intrude upon the feast, they are ‘með auðrum heiðnum mönnum’ [with the other heathens], and so must have been invited. The antithesis is not between society and its outcasts, but between heathens and Christians, and this is given symbolic expression by the physical boundary Gunnlaugr sets up between the two parties.⁵⁸

The *berserkir* as symbols are polyvalent: in *Vatnsdæla saga* they stand for the ultimate in social disruption: ‘[þ]eir grenjuðu sem hundar ok bitu í skjaldarrendr,’⁵⁹ whilst in *Þorvalds þáttr* they stand for the ultimate in recalcitrant heathenism: ‘þeir [...] kostgæfðu at eyða kristiligu siðlæti.’⁶⁰ The polyvalence of the *berserkir* mirrors that of the missionary activity and the conversion itself, and reflects the multiple narratives of identity within which Christianity participates.

The most famed missionary, Þangbrandr, introduces the additional complexity of Norwegian interference.⁶¹ Whilst the narrative of conversion both promotes the necessity of communal unity – of ‘ein lög ok einn sið’⁶² – and vindicates the Icelanders’ potential to decide on their future collectively, Christianity appears as an external introduction which arrived in Iceland at the behest of a Norwegian king. Within the Icelandic foundation-myth, kingship plays a profoundly ambivalent role. As discussed in chapter 2.i.2, *Landnámabók* presents descent from the petty kings of Norway as a marker of *stór ætt* (‘noble extraction’), but Haraldr hárfagri’s *ofríki* (‘tyranny’) is often cited as the

⁵⁷ *ÍF* 15.II: 70. ‘two brothers amongst the other heathens.’

⁵⁸ Duke (Grønlie), ‘Recreating History,’ 174.

⁵⁹ *ÍF* 8: 124. ‘They howled like dogs and bit the shield-rims.’

⁶⁰ *ÍF* 15.II: 70. ‘They took pains to destroy good Christian morality.’

⁶¹ Stefnir Þorgilsson precedes him in *Kristni saga* and the sagas of Óláfr, but he is never integrated into an extant *Íslendingasaga*.

⁶² *ÍF* 1: 17. ‘One law and one faith.’

reason for the beginning of migration to the new land.⁶³ King Óláfr Tryggvason's determination to see Christianity adopted in Iceland comes close to placing the Icelanders back under the influence of a Norwegian king, through the agency of Þangbrandr. The manner in which saga-authors realized Þangbrandr as a literary character varies substantially. This variation extends both to the scope of his role in bringing about the conversion – from an abortive foray to the vital establishment of a Christian bedrock – and the implicit value-judgement the saga-author makes as to his virtue. *Íslendingabók* does not contain any great detail about Þangbrandr's character, only the basic sequence of events: that he was sent to Iceland to spread the faith by King Óláfr Tryggvason, that he converted some Icelanders but nothing approaching a majority, and that he had to leave because he had quickly got himself involved in violent feuds. There is disagreement between the sources over precisely how many men he killed whilst in Iceland, and Ari cautiously notes that it was 'tvá menn eða þrjá'.⁶⁴ He returns to the king, and 'lét ørvant, at hér mundi kristni enn takask'.⁶⁵ It falls to Gizurr enn hvíti Teitsson and Hjalti Skeggjason, two Icelandic converts, to persuade the enraged king not to take revenge on the Icelanders present in Norway and instead to allow them to attempt to convert the island, something they succeed in through arbitration at the *Alþingi*.

Whereas Þangbrandr's origins are not related in *Íslendingabók*, in *Njáls saga* he is emphatically not an Icelander. The saga describes him as 'son Vilbaldús greifa ór Saxlandi',⁶⁶ which

⁶³ See p. 33 above.

⁶⁴ *ÍF* 1: 14. ('Two or three men.') *Laxdæla saga* mentions two killings (*ÍF* 5: 125), whilst in Snorri's *Heimskringla* there are three (*ÍF* 26: 320). In *Njáls saga* Þangbrandr is implicated in at least four deaths, of a Þorkell, Vetrliði skáld Sumarliðason, Þorvaldr inn veili and the *berserkr* Ótryggr (*ÍF* 12: 258-68).

⁶⁵ *ÍF* 1: 15. 'said that it was beyond hope that Christianity might yet be accepted here.'

⁶⁶ *ÍF* 12: 256. 'the son of Count Vilbaldús of Saxony.' *Kristni saga* describes his father as 'greifa af Brimum' (Bremen). See *ÍF* 15.II: 14. For a historical analysis of the implications of Þangbrandr's origins, see Ekkehard Eickhoff, 'Bischof Friedrich und Thangbrand: Sächsische Glaubensboten im Hohen Norden,' *Historisches Jahrbuch* 119 (1999).

sets him apart from the Icelandic society he enters in two ways: through his origins in Saxony, and furthermore his social status as the son of a *greifi*, an aristocratic title not of Scandinavian origin. Apart from his father, Þangbrandr's only other relationship mentioned by the author is one with the king: the straightforward statement that he 'var sendr út hingat Óláfi konungi Tryggvasyni at boða trú'.⁶⁷ It is important to notice here the use of *hingat*, 'hither', rather than 'á Íslandi': an Icelandic perspective on events is established on a basic semantic level. But not all of his company are foreigners to Iceland:

Með honum var íslenzkr maðr, er Guðleifr hét; hann var son Ara Mássonar, Atlasonar, Úlfs sonar ins skjálga, Høgna sonar ins hvíta, Ótryggsonar, Óblauðssonar, Hjørleifs sonar ins kvensama Hjørðalandskonungs. Guðleifr var vígamaðr mikill ok manna røskvastr ok harðgørr í øllu.⁶⁸

This thorough introduction of the character of Guðleifr is important. In stark contrast to Þangbrandr, Guðleifr is an Icelandic paragon, somewhat akin to Þorvaldr. He is the great-great-grandson of an aristocratic settler descended from one of the ancient petty kings of Norway.⁶⁹ This brief genealogy thus roots him in a very specific imagined past: the Icelandic foundation-myth of men of 'stórrar ættar ok mikillar lundar'⁷⁰ leaving their rightful lands in Norway to maintain their freedoms in Iceland.⁷¹ Upon closer examination, of course, this genealogy appears somewhat suspect, despite its

⁶⁷ *ÍF* 12: 256. 'was sent here by King Óláfr Tryggvason to preach the faith.'

⁶⁸ *ÍF* 12: 256. 'With him was an Icelander who was called Guðleifr; he was the son of Ari Másson, son of Atli, son of Úlfr inn skjálgi [the squinting], son of Høgni inn hvíti [the white], son of Ótryggr, son of Óblauðr, son of Hjørleifr inn kvensami [the ladies' man], king of Hjørðaland. Guðleifr was a great fighter and a brave man, hardy in every respect.'

⁶⁹ For Úlfr inn skjálgi's settlement and details on his great-great-grandfather King Hjørleifr and his other descendants who took land in Iceland, see respectively *ÍF* 1: 161, 50.

⁷⁰ *ÍF* 13: 3. 'noble families and proud minds.'

⁷¹ *Landnámabók* contains further information on the reason why Guðleifr is already a Christian. His father Ari was driven off course and landed in the mysterious *Hvítamannaland*: 'Þaðan náði Ari eigi á brutt at fara ok var þar skírðr' ('Ari couldn't get away from there and was baptized there'). 'White men's land' is described as being somewhere between Iceland and Vínland; this westward location might suggest an encounter with Irish

presence in the saga and *Landnámabók*: it seems odd that one of Guðleifr's ancestors would share a name (Ótryggr, 'untrustworthy') that would later match that of the *berserkr* he goes on to fight. The *form* of a noble genealogy here trumps the importance of the content. Guðleifr's description as a *vígamaðr* places him more within the tradition of the 'good viking' than the missionary: it is a term used negatively in relation to Þangbrandr elsewhere.⁷² The combination of this sustained interest in Guðleifr, who is after all only one of a ship full of men, and the lack of any further background material on Þangbrandr or his mission allows the proceeding narrative to mitigate the foreignness of this encounter with the new faith. But the shock of the arrival of Þangbrandr is mitigated yet further. Not only does the Christian missionary arrive with an Icelander who is already a Christian, but the saga-author has Njáll himself defuse the incipient tension in a clash between the two belief systems by declaring, before Þangbrandr has even been mentioned in the saga, that '[s]vá lízk mér sem inn nýi átrúnaðr muni vera miklu betri'.⁷³ Thus in *Njáls saga*, Guðleifr and Njáll combine to make the Christianization of Iceland an inevitability, and Þangbrandr is explicitly rendered as foreign.

Despite having Guðleifr with him, Þangbrandr enjoys very mixed success in Iceland. He converts a number of households, including that of Njáll. But again, in the model of the narrative regarding Þorvaldr and Friðrekr, both he and Guðleifr commit a number of killings of heathens who had refused to convert. Guðleifr kills Galdra-Heðinn ('sorcerer-Heðinn'), who had attempted to kill Þangbrandr by having the ground open below him. Þangbrandr manages to jump off his horse just in time, but his steed is lost. Before Þangbrandr leaves Iceland, he finds consolation in the words of

Christianity. Again, Christianity's foreign origins cannot be denied, but here it is again an Icelander who mediates between the new religion and Icelandic society, albeit in this early case, only his immediate family (*ÍF* 1: 162).

⁷² See pp. 136–37 below.

⁷³ *ÍF* 12: 255. 'It seems to me that the new faith is sure to be much better.'

Gestr Oddleifsson. Gestr has just converted after seeing Þangbrandr defeat the *berserkr* Ótryggr (whose name could also be translated as ‘unfaithful’) by consecrating a fire which the *berserkr* could not cross: very much a variation on the same theme found in the narrative of Þorvaldr and Friðrekr.⁷⁴ After asking whether he should next attempt to evangelize in the Westfjords, Gestr demurs:

[E]n hann latti þess ok kvað þar vera menn harða ok illa viðreignar, – „en ef þat er ætlat fyrir, at trúa þess skuli við gangask, þá mun á alþingi við gangask, ok munu þar þá vera allir höfðingjar ór hverju heraði.“⁷⁵

The subtext to this statement is easy enough to read. Gestr is telling Þangbrandr that only the Icelandic institution of the *Alþingi* can effect conversion. Þangbrandr protests that he has already tried this tactic, with no success, but Gestr replies:

„Þú hefir þó mest at gørt,“ segir Gestr, „þó at qðrum verði auðit í lög at leiða. En þat er sem mælt er, at eigi fellr tré við it fyrsta högg.“⁷⁶

The reason for Þangbrandr’s failure here is evident. Although Gestr has witnessed the miracle of Þangbrandr’s consecrated fire that the *berserkr* could not cross, and has taken the new faith, they do not have the same conception of what conversion is. Þangbrandr is attempting to convert as many individuals and families as possible; his conception of success on his mission is the adoption of Christianity by all he encounters. In this respect, he does not exhibit a recognition of the existence of any social superstructure beyond the familial groups he encounters. Gestr, on the other hand, is

⁷⁴ ‘Þar kómu berserkir tveir er Haukr hét hvárrtveggi. Þeir buðu mǫnnum kúgan ok gengu grenjandi ok óðu elda.’ *ÍF* 15.II: 9. (‘Then came along two *berserkir*, both named Haukr. They threatened violence and went around howling and wading through fire.’) Once Friðrekr blesses the fire, of course, the *berserkir* perish in it.

⁷⁵ *ÍF* 12: 268. ‘But he advised against this and said that the people there are hard and difficult to deal with, “and if it is inevitable that this faith will be accepted, it shall be accepted at the *Alþingi*, and all the chieftains from each district will be there.”’

⁷⁶ *ÍF* 12: 268–69. “‘You have accomplished the most,” says Gestr, “even though it falls to others to make it law. But so it’s said, that the tree doesn’t fall on the first stroke.”’

an Icelander, and his view of successful conversion is very different. He says it will fall to others – that is to say, Icelanders, to *lög at leiða*, literally to conduct the new faith *into* the law. This misunderstanding of the nature of *lög* is reminiscent of the tragedy of Gunnarr, and it is surely no accident that this theme is here revisited after Gunnarr's death within the same saga.⁷⁷ In the same way that the very ground of Iceland absorbed Þangbrandr's horse, Gestr promises that Iceland's laws can absorb Christianity; but it will fall to others to do so. Þangbrandr is not the one who will convert Iceland, because he does not understand how to bring it about. The narrative imperative is that Christianity is an evolution of Icelandic identity, not a foreign imposition.

In contrast with other sources which treat Þangbrandr, it is important to observe that this – a failure to understand the social structures of Iceland which would permit conversion – is his primary flaw in *Njáls saga*. The saga, after all, can be read in its entirety as a prolonged interrogation of the legal system, and this failure for reality to match the horizons of one's expectations of how society ought to operate is, as noted above, exemplified in the case of Gunnarr. In other sagas, Þangbrandr is a much more explicitly disruptive character. His failure, as represented in these texts, thus becomes easier to attribute to his aggressive behaviour, rather than a more subtle misunderstanding of Icelandic society. For instance, in Snorri's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, it is Þangbrandr – not Guðleifr – who is described as a *vígamaðr*:

Hann var ofstopamaðr mikill ok vígamaðr, en klerkr góðr ok maðr vaskr.
En fyrir sakir óspekðar hans þá vildi konungr eigi hann með sér hafa ok
fekk honum sendiferð þá, at hann skyldi fara til Íslands ok kristna landit.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ See p. 99 above.

⁷⁸ *ÍF* 26: 319. 'He was a very overbearing man and a fighter, but a good cleric and a valiant man. But because of his turbulent nature the king did not want to have him around and tasked him with a mission, that he should go to Iceland and Christianize the country.'

The assessment of Þangbrandr's character here is highly ambivalent. Whilst he has his qualities as a good churchman and a valiant individual, he is clearly a disruptive force in any social situation by virtue of his *ofstopi* (arrogance) and *óspekt* (disruptiveness). Siân Grønlie notes that it is reasonably common that 'those who fall into the king's disfavour are assigned evangelizing missions in order to regain it,'⁷⁹ but the point still stands that the author is inevitably emphasizing how ill-suited Þangbrandr is for the task. More critical still is *Kristni saga*, where Þangbrandr is openly labelled a criminal:

Þá er Óláfr konungr spurði óspekðir þær er Þangbrandr gerði stefndi hann honum til sín ok bar sakir á hann ok kvað hann ekki skyldu vera í sinni þjónustu er hann var ránsmaðr.⁸⁰

Whilst one might be tempted to say that the author of *Njáls saga* was somehow better disposed towards the character of Þangbrandr than others, a more likely explanation is a simple shift of emphasis. Þangbrandr's role in the saga is decentred: conversion is seen to come forth as much from the early conversions of individuals such as Njáll and Síðu-Hallr and the decision of the *Alþingi*, as it does from Þangbrandr's mission. To stretch Gestr's proverb, Þangbrandr may have landed a blow on the tree of heathenism, but the work of its demolition is already underway by Icelanders. When he returns to the king in *Njáls saga*, Þangbrandr's description of the situation in Iceland is rather different from that found in other sources:

Þangbrandr sagði Óláfi konungi frá meingerðum Íslendinga við sik, segir þá vera svá fjölkunnga, at jörðin spryngi í sundr undir hesti hans ok tæki hestinn.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Grønlie, ed., *Íslendingabók, Kristni saga* 63.

⁸⁰ *ÍF* 15.II: 17. 'When King Óláfr heard of the disruptive things Þangbrandr was doing he called him to him and brought charges against him and said that he would not be in his service if he was a robber.'

⁸¹ *ÍF* 12: 269. 'Þangbrandr told King Óláfr of the Icelanders' offences against him, and says that they are so skilled in black magic that the earth sprang open under his horse and swallowed the animal.'

In comparison, one finds in *Laxdæla saga*:

Fyrir þessum ófriði stókk Þangbrandr til Nóregs ok kom á fund Óláfs konungs ok sagði honum, hvat til tíðenda haði borit í sinni ferð, ok kvazk þat hyggja, at eigi myndi kristni við gangask á Íslandi.⁸²

In the latter example, bringing the faith to the island is paramount – the verb *kristna* itself is used.

In the case of *Njáls saga*, on the other hand, Þangbrandr emphasizes that the Icelanders have such control over the very land itself that it can open up and swallow a horse. The issue of conversion is moved to the sidelines; in its place is a complaint which presents the Icelanders as commanding supernatural authority over their own territory. There is no mention of an opinion as to the likelihood of the adoption of Christianity, as seen in both *Íslendingabók* and *Laxdæla saga*.

The relatively positive light in which Þangbrandr is presented in *Njáls saga* simply draws further attention to the role of other Icelanders in acting as the real motors for change. The image of a chasm opening under Þangbrandr's horse and swallowing it is found in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and *Kristni saga* also, but as Siân Grønlie has noted, this only becomes a fully dramatized scene in *Njáls saga*.⁸³ Furthermore, it is only in *Njáls saga* that this episode is explicitly recounted by Þangbrandr to the king. This is peculiarly apt, since the author achieves in *Njáls saga* an absorption of the conversion-narrative into a wider narrative of Icelandic identity. The very placement of a redaction of the conversion narrative within *Njáls saga* has a domesticating effect on the events themselves, and also contributes to the theme of the importance of the legal process that is at the heart of the saga.

⁸² *ÍF* 5: 125. 'Because of this strife Þangbrandr fled to Norway and came to meet King Óláfr and told him the news of his journey, and said that he believed that Christianity would never be accepted in Iceland.'

⁸³ Duke (Grønlie), 'Recreating History,' 303.

There are clear similarities between the two narratives of Þorvaldr and Friðrekr, and Þangbrandr and Guðleifr. Whilst Þangbrandr arrives in the east of Iceland and travels west broadly along the southern coast, Þorvaldr and Friðrekr land in the northern quarter. With respect to the narrative of the latter mission, Jenny Jochens argues that the potential author, Gunnlaugr:

[M]ay have been inspired by the fact that the stories about the later missionary Þangbrandr – available when he was writing – stated that this man had been unable to bring the Christian message to the north despite his relative success in the south. Gunnlaugr's story tries to demonstrate that the new religion had arrived in the north a decade before similar events in the south.⁸⁴

As discussed in the chapter on law above, the four quarters of Iceland are themselves an aspect of Icelandic identity, and the presence of strikingly similar narratives, containing similar challenges by socially disruptive *berserkir*, to different parts of the island perhaps paradoxically work to unite what might appear to be regionalism through a process of shared literary experience. Furthermore, a potential resolution of the paradox of Norwegian interference begetting a strengthened literary identity is to view conversion as an opportunity for communal self-invention, even self-*reinvention*. As well as facilitating the entry of a community into the wider family of Christendom, conversion also presents an opportunity for the converted community to reassert difference and identity, in a different, new, and more vital way. This is something contemporary anthropology has observed in respect to modern missionary activity.⁸⁵ It has been argued that in the medieval period, the

⁸⁴ Jenny Jochens, 'Late and Peaceful: Iceland's Conversion through Arbitration in 1000,' *Speculum* 74.3 (1999): 644.

⁸⁵ See, for example, Christopher R. Duncan, 'Untangling Conversion: Religious Change and Identity among the Forest Tobelo of Indonesia,' *Ethnology* 42.4 (2003). In this article, Duncan observes how a forest-dwelling tribe of the Indonesian island of Halmahera accepted an American evangelical strand of Christianity spread by missionary activity, despite having repeatedly scorned missionary efforts by their coastal-dwelling neighbours with whom they had far closer ethnic ties. Duncan argues that to a greater or lesser extent this manifested a determination to preserve a distinct identity from their rivals, through the deliberate adoption of a different

popularity of the Arian heresy amongst early Germanic converts might have suggested a proclivity to ensure that entry into the faith did not come at the price of the loss of separate, Germanic, identities to that of the former western Roman Empire that they conquered.⁸⁶ Siân Grønlie has observed that within the *Íslendingasögur*:

[T]he conversion is not treated as an event in its own right, but in its impingement on the world and the characters depicted in the sagas.⁸⁷

For example, the events of *Fóstbræðra saga* are shown to occur after the conversion, but the author is careful to note that although Iceland has converted, it is still in the process of Christianization:

En þó at þá væri menn kristnir kallaðir, þá var þó í þann tíð ung kristni ok mjök vangor, svá at margir gneistar heiðninnar vǫru þó þá eptir ok í óvenju lagðir.⁸⁸

Fóstbræðra saga is a curious text in many ways, but by figuring the current status of Christianity in Iceland in these terms, it establishes a Christian norm against which various characters may later be measured. As it is hoped this thesis demonstrates, the world depicted by the sagas is a carefully constructed one, for which the elaboration of a new identity for the people who inhabit it forms a cohesive narrative substratum. If it is primarily the *Íslendingasögur* which participate in the debate on the nature of Icelandic identity that this thesis seeks to review, the conversion exists as a touchstone that unites disparate dialogues at a particular point: to extend Else Mundal's metaphor discussed

strand of Christianity. There is a considerable similarity between this case-study and the Arian hypothesis below.

⁸⁶ See Lesley Abrams, 'Germanic Christianities,' *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Early Medieval Christianities, c. 600-c. 1100*, eds. Thomas F. X. Noble and Julia M. H. Smith, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 107.

⁸⁷ Duke (Grønlie), 'Recreating History,' 310.

⁸⁸ *ÍF* 6: 125. 'And although people were then calling themselves Christian, in that time Christianity was still young and not fully developed, such that sparks of heathenism still flickered in deviant customs.' Björn Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson observe a very similar statement in *Grettis saga* (*ÍF* 7: 245) with reference to Þorbjörn ǫngull, ultimately responsible for Grettir's death by black magic. For the legal ramifications of this event, see pp. 110-11 above.

above, the *Íslendingasögur* exist as many independent narrative strands which flow together at certain points, the conversion being one of them. It is now important to look to the experiences of those Icelanders who interact with Christianity abroad, for it is in these cases that Icelandic identity is clarified even more distinctly. Without regional, autochthonic ties to fall back on, Icelandic converts abroad are presented as maintaining their difference in a number of different ways.

2. Christianity abroad

In *Laxdæla saga*, the conversion narrative has a very different focus. Compared to the efforts made in a text such as *Njáls saga* to emphasize the domestic role in the conversion, it is overtly concerned with the foreign, because two of the most prominent characters in the narrative, Kjartan Ólafsson and Bolli Bollason, are involved in the second phase of the conversion: the wrath of Óláfr Tryggvason towards the Icelanders in Norway upon Þangbrandr's failure. Events in Norway are also presented in such a manner as to emphasize the continuity of Icelandic identity in the face of the arrival of a 'foreign' faith. Þangbrandr's mission is concomitantly heavily condensed:

Óláfr konungr sendi til Íslands hirðprest sinn, er Þangbrandr hét; hann kom skipi sínu í Álptafjörð ok var með Síðu-Halli um vetrinn, at Þvátta, ok boðaði monnum trú bæði með blíðum orðum ok hvarðum refsingum.⁸⁹

There is not even a cursory reference to Þangbrandr's origins here, and Síðu-Hallr, one of his early converts, is his only noted companion. Síðu-Hallr, of course, is not a Christian by virtue of his own origins, like Guðleifr, but instead someone who has converted under the influence of Þangbrandr, himself an instrument of the Norwegian king. The saga-author's assessment of Þangbrandr's mission

⁸⁹ *ÍF* 5: 125. 'King Óláfr sent his royal chaplain to Iceland, who was called Þangbrandr; he arrived in his ship at Álptafjörðr and stayed with Síðu-Hallr for the winter at Þvátta, and preached the faith to people with both bland words and harsh punishments.'

is damning. *Blíðr* in a negative context connotes bland or fawning words, and the combination of this with ‘harsh punishments’ evokes a missionary who seeks to make up for his lack of persuasiveness with dismal violence. Þangbrandr’s role in the conversion in *Laxdæla saga* is thus an utterly ineffectual one, but in a very different sense to his sidelining in *Njáls saga*. His role is considerably diminished since he is presented as Óláfr’s second choice as missionary. Kjartan has the honour of being first instructed, but he:

[K]aus heldr at vera með konungi en fara til Íslands ok boða þeim trúna, kvazk eigi deila vilja ofrkappi við frændr sína; – „er þat ok líkara um fǫður minn ok aðra hǫfðingja, þá sem frændr mínir eru nánir, at þeir sé eigi at strangari í at gera þinn vilja, at ek sjá í yðru valdi í góðum kostum.“⁹⁰

This decision is, of course, one that precipitates the great tragedy of the saga: the development of a feud between Bolli and Kjartan, as Bolli returns to Iceland alone and, having told Guðrún that he does not expect Kjartan to return for some time, eventually arranges to marry her. The shift in focus from the conversion of a community to the conversion of an individual is one manifestation of the proto-romantic element within *Laxdæla saga*, since a great social upheaval is narratively subordinated to the development of a fatal love triangle.⁹¹ Kjartan’s reply is intriguing in further respects. The king replies that ‘[þ]etta er bæði kǫrit hyggiliga ok mikilmannliga’,⁹² but Kjartan is appealing towards the king’s sense of proper royal service, with no element of missionary zeal.

Christianity is forgotten; instead Kjartan is concerned not to cause *social* strife by undertaking the

⁹⁰ *ÍF* 5: 124. ‘Chose rather to stay with the king than to go to Iceland and preach the faith, and said that he did not want to quarrel with his kinsmen: “it is moreover likely that my father and the other chieftains who are close to my family would be no more reluctant to do your bidding, should I be in your power and in good standing.”’

⁹¹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson argues that the author of *Laxdæla saga* ‘verið snortinn af rómantísku stefnunni í bókmenntum og lífsskoðun samtímans,’ and that ‘[í] sögunni sjáum vér því mætast tvenns konar menningu, tvo heima.’ *ÍF* 5: vi. (‘was in touch with the themes of romance in contemporary literature and philosophy;’ ‘in the saga we see the meeting of two different cultures, of two worlds.’)

⁹² *ÍF* 5: 124. ‘that is both a wise and generous decision.’

king's mission, and uses the argument that the king's standing in Iceland can only be improved by the presence of duly honoured Icelanders in his court.

Kjartan's stay in Norway did not begin so auspiciously. His decision to travel to Norway is somewhat impulsive ('Guðrún mælti: „Skjótt hefir þú þetta ráðit, Kjartan“').⁹³ On arrival, there is perhaps one of the clearest examples in the literature of a distinction being made between Icelanders and Norwegians:

Í þenna tíma váru margir menn íslenzkir í Nóregi, þeir er virðingamenn váru; lágu þar fyrir bryggjunum þrjú skip, er íslenzkir menn áttu ǫll. [...] Báru nú Íslendingar saman ráð sín, ok kom þat ásamt með þeim, at níta sið þeim, er konungr bauð, ok hófðu þessir allir samband, þeir sem fyrr váru nefndir.⁹⁴

This scene establishes Icelandic identity through a clear differentiation against another. Although the saga-author observes that the uptake of the new faith in Norway was 'allmisjafnt',⁹⁵ there is no hint of any Norwegian allies for the Icelandic cause. Indeed when the *Þrændir* who have not accepted Christianity threaten to battle the king at the *þing* in Eyrar, it only takes a few words from the king for them to lose heart and all agree to be baptized.⁹⁶ The Icelanders thus are those who refuse the king's faith. This is not to say that they are outright heathens; as seen in *Vatnsdæla saga*, lack of Christian faith does not necessarily mean faith in anything else. Kjartan is not explicitly a pagan. Criticism of Icelandic literature pertaining to the conversion period has sometimes tended to adopt a binary model of Christianity supplanting heathenism, but this is to ignore a substantial class of

⁹³ *ÍF* 5: 115. 'Guðrún said, "You've made this decision hastily, Kjartan."'

⁹⁴ *ÍF* 5: 116. 'At that time there were many Icelanders in Norway, who were men of distinction; three ships lay by the quayside, all owned by Icelanders. [...] The Icelanders now came together in council, and they agreed amongst themselves to refuse the faith which the king preached; and those who were named here all formed an alliance.'

⁹⁵ *ÍF* 5: 116. 'very various.'

⁹⁶ *ÍF* 5: 118-19.

characters who profess no faith at all.⁹⁷ King Óláfr appears to recognize this, and Kjartan does not disagree:

Þat sér á yfirbragði Kjartans, at hann þykkisk eiga meira traust undir afli sínu ok vápnum heldr en þar sem er Þórr ok Óðinn.⁹⁸

Kjartan has proven this trust in his own might by admitting that his favoured solution to the hostage situation would be to ‘brenna konunginn inni,’ a threat relayed to the king by his spies.⁹⁹ But this almost comes across as bluster from Kjartan, since he has already, in the eyes of his fellow Icelanders, become too close to the king. During the oft-recounted swimming contest, also present in *Hallfreðar saga*, albeit in a different guise, following the revelation that the *bæjarmaðr* is King Óláfr, Kjartan accepts a cloak from the king:

Kjartan þakkar konungi gjöfina ok gengr til sinna manna ok sýnir þeim skikkjuna. Ekki létu hans menn vel yfir þessu; þóttu Kjartan mjök hafa gengit á konungs vald.¹⁰⁰

Gift-giving and gift-taking, a subject far beyond the remit of this analysis, is nonetheless key to the interpretation of this scene. Kjartan has placed himself in debt to the king by accepting the cloak: he may have made a studied effort earlier on to avoid communication with the *bæjarmaðr*, and he may have told Bolli that he intends to burn the king, but his interactions betray his susceptibility to

⁹⁷ *Hrafnkels saga* is one of the most famous examples of a pre-conversion Icelander losing his pagan faith. For a study of medieval Icelandic atheism, see Folke Ström, *Den egna kraftens män: en studie i forntida irreligiositet*, Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift 54, 1948:2 (Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri, 1948). Binary readings no doubt stem from Ari, whose emphasis on the *Alþingi* as the pivotal moment of conversion naturally presents a picture of two opposed camps each expressing belief in a rival religion.

⁹⁸ *ÍF* 5: 121. ‘It may be the case from Kjartan’s demeanour that he has more faith in his own might and weapons than he does in Þórr and Óðinn.’

⁹⁹ *ÍF* 5: 119. ‘burn in the king.’

¹⁰⁰ *ÍF* 5: 118. ‘Kjartan thanks the king for the gift and goes to his men and shows them the cloak. They were not pleased about this, and thought that Kjartan had put himself considerably within the king’s power.’

courtly interaction with the king. Christianity is something of a by-product of this: it is, in one interpretation, the gift Kjartan gives the king in return for the cloak.¹⁰¹

Conversely, the story of Kjartan can be placed within a thoroughly Christian typological narrative, as advanced by Gerd Wolfgang Weber:

Kjartan here represents the whole of Iceland. His behaviour and the way in which he accepts Christianity are both symbolic of Iceland and the circumstances of Iceland's conversion [...] the dunking under water prefigures Kjartan's later baptism (with the king as godfather) [...] The cloak which King Óláfr gives to Kjartan, prefigures the baptismal cloak given to the neophyte. We understand the story only if we grasp its Augustinian perspective. Divine providence has preordained the course of history, but man – like Kjartan, Þorgeirr or the Icelandic nation – must accept the course for himself of his own free will (*liberum arbitrium*). This *moral* self-liberation from the powers of the Devil entails the right to *political* freedom as well.¹⁰²

Weber's observation is an astute one, but it is further complicated by the reactions of Kjartan's fellow Icelanders. There is an acknowledgement in this narrative that accepting Christianity in Norway in the first instance, and more generally submitting to the will of a Norwegian king, is inherently problematic for the cause of Icelandic identity. The issue at stake, that of Christianity, is thus subordinated to a wider narrative of the vindication of Icelandic autonomy when abroad. The next chapter will examine this narrative in detail with respect to the *þættir* of *Morkinskinna*, but it

¹⁰¹ Elizabeth Ashman Rowe sees *Laxdæla saga*'s version of the events between Kjartan and King Óláfr as tellingly different from its later redaction in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*. She sees 'the depiction of Icelanders at the Norwegian court' as 'a mirror of contemporary Icelanders' hopes and fears about their relationship to their fatherland.' Rowe, 'The Adaptation of *Laxdæla Saga*,' 171.

¹⁰² Weber, 'Intellegere historiam,' 126. Perhaps one of the pithiest summaries of this trope of the reluctant Icelandic convert can be found in the often fantastical *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*. Bárðr's son Gestr arrives at the court of Óláfr Tryggvason, and declares: 'Líkligt þykki mér, herra, at yðarr siðr muni betri vera, en fyrir heit eðr kúgan læt ek ekki mína trú.' *ÍF* 13: 159. ('It seems likely, sire, that your faith is the better, but I will not give up my faith through threats or oppression.') The fact that the gift given to Kjartan is a cloak may also figure Óláfr as a type of Saint Martin, in which case Kjartan's role in the narrative might be figured as approaching the Christ-like.

would be remiss here not to address one of the most famous examples of a reluctant Icelandic convert, Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld Óttarsson. The final ‘conversion verse’ of Hallfreðr, recited before Óláfr in *Hallfreðar saga* ends ‘verðk ok neyddr frá Njarðar / niðjum Krist at biðja.’¹⁰³ Conversion becomes couched in the terminology of social groups; Hallfreðr is forced to renounce the *niðjar* of the old gods and instead pray to the solitary Christ. One is perhaps reminded of the way the Icelanders in *Laxdæla saga* saw Kjartan drift away from their *samband* and towards a more personal, courtly connection with the king. Certainly, it is possible to see in these texts which deal with the experience of Icelanders converting in Norway a sustained interrogation of the social, political, and individual spiritual problems such an activity involved. Transfer of allegiance from an (essentially imagined) community of gods to a single God is a dilemma analogous to that experienced by many Icelanders who sought favour in royal courts before the mid-thirteenth century.

It is sometimes possible to find the expected binary model of religious affiliation utterly subverted in the *Íslendingasögur*. An Icelander who *partially* took the faith abroad is Egill Skalla-Grímsson. When Egill and his brother Þórólfr, journeying abroad in continental Europe, hear that King Athelstan of England is in need of help fighting off the combined armies of the Welsh, Scottish and Irish, they decide to assist, in the knowledge that the king ‘gaf mála þeim mǫnnum ǫllum, er þat vildu hafa til féfangs sér, bæði útlenzkum ok innlenzkum.’¹⁰⁴ Egill and Þórólfr have yet to encounter Christianity, but England has been fully Christian for a substantial period of time. The solution

¹⁰³ *ÍF* 8: 159. ‘I am forced from the kinsmen of Njǫrðr to pray to Christ.’ For a detailed analysis of the conversion verses, see Russell Poole, ‘The “Conversion Verses” of Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld,’ *Maal og Minne* 1 (2002) and Diana Whaley, ‘The “Conversion Verses” in Hallfreðar saga: Authentic Voice of a Reluctant Christian?’, *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2003).

¹⁰⁴ *ÍF* 2: 128. ‘gave payment to all of those men who wanted to have such a reward, both foreigners and natives.’

reached to the problem of a Christian king employing non-Christian mercenaries is an interesting one:

Konungr bað Þórólf ok þá bræðr, at þeir skyldi láta prímsignask, því at þat var þá mikill siðr, bæði með kaupmönnum ok þeim mönnum, er á mála gengu með kristnum mönnum, því at þeir menn, er prímsignaðir váru, höfðu allt samneyti við kristna menn ok svá heiðna, en höfðu þat at átrúnaði, er þeim var skapfelldast.¹⁰⁵

This is hardly ‘proper’ conversion: Egill never fully takes the faith, and is buried with his weapons, although his son Þorsteinn ‘tók skírn, þá er kristni kom á Ísland, ok lét kirkju gera at Borg; hann var maðr trúfastr ok vel siðaðr.’¹⁰⁶ Egill’s bones are later translated to a churchyard. The process of prime-signing is clearly a matter of convenience that does not, in itself, represent any instance of personal conversion.¹⁰⁷ But it highlights the role of Christianity as a passport to wider social participation, as something to be performed and publicly articulated, rather than a matter solely of inward conviction.¹⁰⁸ Prime-signing is portrayed not as the preliminary ritual before baptism as perhaps it should be, but as a ceremony of convenience that allows the individual who receives it to

¹⁰⁵ *ÍF* 2: 128. ‘The king asked Þórólf and his brother to allow themselves to be prime-signed, since this was then very much the custom, both for merchants and those men who had dealings with Christians, because people who were prime-signed could have full interaction with Christians and heathens, but keep the faith that they preferred.’

¹⁰⁶ *ÍF* 2: 299. ‘took baptism when Christianity came to Iceland, and had a church built at Borg; he was a man of steadfast faith and good customs.’

¹⁰⁷ The circumstances are quite different, but it is an interesting analogue that *Grágás* stipulates that children who have been prime-signed but not baptized should be buried ‘við kirkiv garð út. þar er mætisk vigð mold oc ö vigð.’ *Gr.* Ia: 7. (‘by the churchyard wall where consecrated and unconsecrated ground meet.’)

¹⁰⁸ Ruth Karras has analysed the consequences of this form of conversion on the depiction of gender: ‘[c]onversion represented a transfer of loyalty, not an inner transformation, and as such was a matter for men. Women were not significant as political actors [...] and therefore their allegiance did not matter to the same degree.’ Ruth Mazo Karras, ‘God and Man in Medieval Scandinavia: Writing – and Gendering – the Conversion,’ *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, ed. James Muldoon (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997) 101. For a discussion of the role of prime-signing in a *fornaldarsaga*, see Joseph Harris and Thomas D. Hill, ‘Gestr’s “Prime-Sign”: Source and Signification in *Norna-Gests þáttr*,’ *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 104 (1989): 103-122.

access two communities. It is notable that this is apparently incompatible with the situation in Iceland itself; there is no hint that the problems which emerge at the *Alþingi* could be overcome by the non-Christian group accepting prime-signing but maintaining their former beliefs.

As Weber observed, when Icelanders convert abroad, they to a certain extent stand for Iceland itself. A more thorough examination of the phenomenon of the literary representation of the Icelander abroad is reserved for the next chapter, but it is clear from this preliminary investigation that the issue of conversion, when applied abroad, acts to sharpen a sense of Icelandic difference against the other members of the Norwegian court. In *Kristni saga*, it is Gizurr Teitsson and Hjalti Skeggjason who are ultimately responsible for the successful conversion of Iceland. They plead Iceland's cause before the king:

Gizurr sagði at honum þótti ván at kristni mundi við gangask á Íslandi ef ráðum væri at farit; – „en Þangbrandr fór þar sem hér heldr óspakliga; drap hann þar menn nokkura, ok þótti monnum hart at taka þat af útlendum manni.“¹⁰⁹

It requires the successful synthesis of Christianity and sensitivity to Icelandic customs for the faith to advance. These portrayals indicate quite clearly that the authors of this literature sought to establish the existence of Iceland as a distinct social space, which required the translation, not merely the transposition, of novel and foreign ideas. Christianity thus becomes part of the social mythology of medieval Icelandic literature through the same processes seen that have been seen to have generated a new people and a new law. To conclude, this chapter will look to how this line of argument is manifest in Icelandic accounts of the conversion in other communities.

¹⁰⁹ *ÍF* 15.II: 29. ‘Gizurr said that it seemed likely to him that Christianity would advance in Iceland, if it was done prudently, “but Þangbrandr acted there as here, in a rather turbulent manner, and he killed some people: it was hard for the people to take that from a foreigner.”’

3. Concluding excursus: Christianity at the edges

Óláfr Tryggvason was not only involved in converting Iceland. He also converted Sigmundur Brestisson of the Faeroes and Leifr Eiríksson of Greenland and commanded them to take the faith to their respective homes, as recounted in *Færeyinga saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða*. There are parallels between these figures and Gizurr and Hjalti in Iceland, and these sagas also contain similar figures of religious obstinacy: Eiríkr rauði in Greenland and Þrándr Þorbjarnarson in the Faeroes are both depicted as sorely reluctant to abandon the old religion. But there are also telling contrasts in these Icelandic narratives of the conversion of other lands.

In *Eiríks saga rauða* King Óláfr gives Leifr a similar mission to that he offers Kjartan in

Laxdæla saga:

„[S]kaltu þangat fara með ørendum mínum, at boða þar kristni.“ Leifr kvað hann ráða skyldu, en kvezk hyggja, at þat ørendi mundi torflutt á Grænlandi. Konungr kvezk eigi þann mann sjá, er betr væri til fallinn en hann, – „ok muntu giptu til bera.“¹¹⁰

In contrast to Kjartan, Leifr does take the challenge, and he is reasonably successful. It is important to note that Óláfr, as with the Icelandic missions, does not bestow his agent any special jurisdiction over Greenland: he simply sends the person he considers best suited to the job to preach the faith.

Conversely, when Óláfr appoints Sigmundur as his missionary to the Faeroes in *Færeyinga saga* something very different is in evidence, the transfer of monarchic jurisdiction:

¹¹⁰ *ÍF* 4: 211. ““You shall go there [Greenland] on my errand to preach Christianity.” Leifr said that it was up to him to decide, but said that he thought this mission difficult to take to Greenland. The king said that he saw no one better suited for the job than him: “and you’ll have the good luck to accomplish it.””

Skipaði konungr hann þá valdsmann yfir allar Færeyjar ok fekk honum kennimenn at skíra fólkit ok kenna þeim skyld fræði.¹¹¹

In Greenland, the conversion appears only to have caused Eiríkr rauði a few domestic problems when his pious wife refused to live with him until he accepted Christianity.¹¹² Conversion in the Faeroes was a different matter entirely. In what seems to be a deliberate analogue of the Icelandic conversion narrative, a *þing* is held and the question of conversion debated.¹¹³ However, whereas in the classic conversion narrative of *Íslendingabók* civil strife between Christian and heathen factions is averted by careful compromise at the *Alþingi* (involving the preservation of certain heathen customs, such as the exposure of children and the eating of horse meat), the absence of an effective legalistic tradition in the Faeroes, coupled with the resentment one may infer the Faroe Islanders felt towards Sigmundur not only wishing to convert their island but also having been given dominion over the land itself, leads to violence. It is notable that when Sigmundur tells the assembled *bændr* that he has been given jurisdiction over all the islands, '[t]óku flestir bændr því vel.'¹¹⁴ Trouble erupts when Þrándr whips up the crowd: 'sagði þat til heyra at bændr tali með sér þetta vandamál.'¹¹⁵ Here he clearly invokes thoroughly legalistic language: his words have the sense that converting to Christianity is a legal issue of great weight which the *bændr* have a legitimate interest in, and therefore should be allowed to have their say. There is almost outright conflict, but Sigmundur backs down when he sees that the majority are on Þrándr's side. After this brief victory, Sigmundur takes a force of men to apprehend Þrándr and compel him to convert. He is baptized under considerable

¹¹¹ *ÍF* 25: 71. 'Then the king appointed him ruler over all the islands and gave him priests to baptize the people and to teach them the faith.'

¹¹² *ÍF* 4: 212.

¹¹³ *ÍF* 25: 71.

¹¹⁴ *ÍF* 25: 71. 'Most of the farmers took this news well.'

¹¹⁵ *ÍF* 25: 71. 'He said that it was the farmers' right to discuss amongst themselves this complicated issue.'

duress, literally at axe-point, and this use of force to effect conversion must have been seen as the antithesis of the myth of peaceful conversion that was so important to Icelandic identity.

Furthermore, the failure of proper conversion in this instance leaves the Faeroes as a liminal territory, both spiritually and geographically. Traces of the ambivalent spiritual status of the islands can be found later in the saga. The passage containing the *kredda* ('creed') Þrándr taught Þóra's son Sigmundur is a strange and rather opaque episode towards the end of *Færeyinga saga*, which is easily overlooked, especially as it has no bearing on any of the saga's plots.¹¹⁶ But the implications of Þrándr's unorthodox creed are vital in seeking to understand the attitude of the Icelandic author of this saga to the description of a related, but distinct, culture. Peter Foote's analysis of the *kredda* argues that it would be intended as something of an aside to a more knowing audience: '[c]learly enough, the author expected his audience to be amused by the inadequacy of Þrándr's sacred learnings, contrasted as it is with his skill in secular law,¹¹⁷ and he goes on to explain how the incident can be read as demonstrating the relaxed attitude of the Icelandic church to heterodoxy:

Where this sort of comedy is permitted and enjoyed, we may not unreasonably look to find a tolerant society in which the Church is a firmly established institution and Christian devotion familiar and everyday, in which people can be broad-minded with confidence and good humour, and there is no serious tension or conflict between clerical and lay.¹¹⁸

This might very well have been the case in Iceland – one may never know – but Foote is assuming that the actions of the Faroese are being judged by the audience according to Icelandic norms. It is

¹¹⁶ The creed reads: 'Gangat ek einn út, / fjórir mér fylgja / fimm Guðs englar; / ber ek bæn fyrir mér, / bæn fyrir Kristi; / syng ek sálma sjau, / sjái Guð hluta minn.' *ÍF* 25: 115. ('I don't go out alone, four and five [i.e. nine] of God's angels follow me; I bear a prayer for myself, a prayer for Christ; I sing seven psalms, may God see to my lot.')

¹¹⁷ Peter Foote, *Aurvandilstá: Norse Studies* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1984) 197.

¹¹⁸ Foote, *Aurvandilstá* 197.

surely perfectly legitimate to interpret Þrándr's corrupted creed as another manifestation of the cultural corruption the Faeroes represent in contrast to the imagined success of Icelandic conversion, especially when the author of *Færeyinga saga*, on the basis of his geographical knowledge, seems unlikely to have known the Faeroes personally. The corruption of the creed may also quite naturally be seen as a microcosm of the corruption of Christianity itself on the Faeroes, due to the failure of truly effective conversion which not only demonstrated the weaknesses of the Faroese legal system, but also showed how, in contrast to Iceland, the Faroese were *not* ready to be Christians. The subtext found throughout these founding myths of Icelandic Christianity – that the conversion could not have been successful without an underlying propensity for it – is missing from the account in *Færeyinga saga*.

This brief excursus has demonstrated the degree to which belief in the myths of the legal society and the Christian society are interrelated. Both myths reinforce each other: the bloodless conversion demonstrates the power of the *Alþingi* specifically and the legal society generally to contain peacefully potentially highly disruptive events. Conversely, the manner in which the conversion ceases to be a matter of religion and is subordinated to legal procedure is clearly an attempt by the Christian authors to make as little as possible of the differences in belief and practice between heathenism and Christianity. In some respects the difficulty with which Þrándr foregoes his old faith is perhaps more psychologically realistic, as conversion at the point of a weapon is more historically likely. By transplanting the narrative abroad, the potential danger in questioning such a vital social myth is defused, because it may be read as no longer directly referring to Icelandic society itself.

Examined above are some examples of the manner in which saga-authors selectively manipulated the intertextual myth of the foundation of Icelandic Christianity in order to reaffirm a distinct Icelandic identity. The author of *Njáls saga* has selectively redacted the story of Þangbrandr's mission and has used it as an opportunity to establish the necessity of Icelandic institutions taking the primary role in conversion, rather than foreign proselytizers. *Laxdæla saga* witnesses the use of the conversion narrative in Norway as an opportunity to advance a key element of the saga's plot, and as a chance to affirm a myth of Icelandic self-determination. This concept of self-determination is nowhere more evident than in *Vatnsdæla saga*, where a typological reading may see the entire narrative of origins patterned around the turning-point of conversion. In his history of the Christianization of Iceland, Orri Vésteinsson argues that:

[I]t took a long time for the Nordic church to gain an identity of its own, and that before it did, the Church was simply one aspect of life – an aspect which grew in importance because of its intrinsic need to organize itself and conditions around it.¹¹⁹

This statement is important to bear in mind: by the late thirteenth century the Church was an integrated element of Icelandic society. Any story of Icelandic origins has to take it into account. The earlier history of relationships between the Icelandic church and the country's secular institutions is not an especially peaceful one, as *Sturlunga saga* demonstrates. Between the years 1238 and 1260 the bishoprics of Hólar and Skálholt were both occupied by Norwegians.¹²⁰ Even if, for example, *Njáls saga* was not composed during this exact period, the author would surely have lived through a time which saw Iceland pledge allegiance to a Norwegian king and its two principal

¹¹⁹ Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland: Priests, Power, and Social Change 1000-1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 4.

¹²⁰ Bóttólfur (1238-1247) and Heinrekr Kársson (1247-1260) of Hólar and Sigvarðr Þéttmarsson (1238-1268) of Skálholt. See Orri Vésteinsson, *Christianization of Iceland* 222.

ecclesiastical offices filled by Norwegians. In this context, a literary reaffirmation of a distinct Icelandic identity is far from surprising. It is thus probably natural that Icelandic authors used the event of the conversion as one basis for the construction of an intertextual myth of Icelandic identity. That an institution that arrived from Norway and represented, almost by definition, membership of that widest medieval social sphere, Christendom, could be compatible with the assertion of a nascent identity is certainly paradoxical. Its resolution demonstrates the permanent dialogue with issues of Icelandic identity that exists within Old Norse literature pertaining to Icelandic society.

3. The Icelander Abroad in *Morkinskinna*

In chapter 2.i above, it was observed that Haraldr hárfagri's tyranny is emphasized to a much greater degree in some sagas than in others, but that his status as an 'other' against which a new Icelandic identity is reified is nonetheless common to a number of the *Íslendingasögur*. Chapter 2.ii examined how the genesis of Icelandic *lög* was in the regional assemblies of Norway, but that the literature presents a transformative narrative that sees the reconfiguration of *lög* in a new social space. Finally, chapter 2.iii sought to describe how the origins of Icelandic Christianity in the missionary programme of Óláfr Tryggvason provided a further opportunity for Icelandic authors to balance the foreign origins of a vital element of their literary identity with an argument for an innate predisposition towards the new faith. Encounters with Norway transcend these three social myths, however.

Norway is omnipresent in Icelandic medieval literature; indeed it must be acknowledged that this thesis presents a skewed impression of medieval Icelandic literature, for it analyses principally those texts that pertain to Iceland itself. This, of course, counts for a substantial minority of medieval Icelandic literary production. It would be quite possible to analyse exclusively the Icelandic depiction of Norway over the length of an entire thesis, but within the bounds of this project this chapter will instead examine principally one text that ostensibly pertains to Norway, rather than Iceland, but which nevertheless contains elements of the same mission – the literary realization of an

Icelandic society and identity – that has been identified in the ‘sagas of Icelanders’ and related texts above.¹

‘Þar skal ek samtengja með Nóreg ok Ísland,’ declared Hreiðarr inn heimski (‘the fool’) Þorgrímsson to King Magnús inn góði Óláfsson at the end of the section of *Morkinskinna* later considered *Hreiðars þátttr.*² Hreiðarr was, ultimately, not allowed by the king to undertake his project of unifying Norway and Iceland by way of the gift of an island off the Norwegian coast – but then there was no need for him to do so. Norway and Iceland were already linked closely together.³ Norway is, of course, the ‘mother country’, the place from which Iceland’s settlers trace their descent, and Norway plays a continuing role in the construction of Iceland’s literary identity long past settlement, since the knowledge of Iceland’s ultimate return to Norway in the form of submission to the Norwegian crown between 1262–64, an event considered in further detail in chapter 4 below, cannot but impinge upon any reading of the narrative of the *Þjóðveldi*. Since this polity as a literary event begins and ends in Norway, no study of Icelandic identity can be complete without an examination of the presentation of Icelanders interacting with Norway.⁴

¹ It has often been argued that the very idea of ‘Icelandicness’ only arises in Norway, regional affiliations being paramount within Iceland. ‘Íslendinga- eða Breiðfirðingasögur?’ asks Sverrir Jakobsson, and ‘[I]and, hérað eða fjórðungur. Hvað af þessu skipti mestu máli fyrir venjulegan Íslending?’ Sverrir Jakobsson, *Við og veröldin: Heimsmynd Íslendinga 1100-1400* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2005) 279-82. (‘Sagas of Icelanders or sagas of the people of Breiðafjörður? [...] Land, district or quarter. Which of these was the most important for the everyday Icelander?’)

² *ÍF* 23: 164. ‘There shall I unite Norway and Iceland.’ *Hreiðars þátttr heimiska* is also edited separately in *ÍF* 10: 247-60.

³ The verb *samtengja* may literally be rendered ‘to knit together’: see ‘samtengja,’ *CI-Vg*. The sense is not merely, therefore, that of bringing two concepts into conjunction, but also actively binding them together.

⁴ Norway may have been as significant as a symbolic ‘orienteringspunkt’ within the Icelandic conception of space and geography as it was politically; for a discussion of this arising from the use of prepositions of movement, see Else Mundal, ‘Framveksten av den islandske identiteten, dei norske rotene og forholdet til Noreg,’ *Collegium Medievale* 10.1-2 (1997): 7-8.

The quotation above forms part of the conclusion to *Hreiðars þátr heimska*, one of the more celebrated of the so-called *Íslendinga þættir*. These tales of Icelanders have traditionally been plucked from their manuscript context and added to the Icelandic canon, by no less than inclusion as discrete texts in the *Íslensk fornrit* series, in order to editorially collocate a literary Iceland. Although outside the general remit of this thesis, the later editorial treatment, even creation, of the category or genre of *þátr* is a continuation of the project of the elaboration of literary identity examined here.⁵ The status of the *þættir* as discrete texts has long been controversial. This chapter will study their function within *Morkinskinna*, the earliest Icelandic collection of *konungasögur*. Despite its general concern with the kings of Norway, it contains a significant quantity of material pertaining to Iceland, as Theodore Andersson has observed:

One of the most interesting features of *Morkinskinna* is that roughly 20–25 percent of the text consists of interlarded stories in which the most common pattern transports a notable Icelander to the Norwegian court and pits him against the king in some trial of character or intelligence. This part of the text is, therefore, as much about Icelanders as it is about Norwegian kings.⁶

Furthermore, although more obvious within the so-called *þættir*, the text betrays a particular concern with Iceland throughout; towards the end of *Morkinskinna*, during the battle between the forces of Sigurðr slembir Magnússon and the brothers Sigurðr munnr Haraldsson and Ingi Haraldsson the compiler is meticulous in naming only the dead Icelanders on the battlefield and giving their genealogies.⁷ Placed back into the sagas of kings, Icelandic identities appear starker, therefore, than

⁵ Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson outline the editorial history of the *þættir* in their introduction to *Morkinskinna*; see *ÍF* 23: xl and *ÍF* 24: lii–liv. For a discussion of the semantic value of the term itself, see John Lindow, ‘Old Icelandic *þátr*: Early Usage and Semantic History,’ *Scripta Islandica* 29 (1978).

⁶ Theodore M. Andersson, ‘The King of Iceland,’ *Speculum* 74.4 (1999): 926.

⁷ *ÍF* 24: 205. ‘Þeir drápu í einum hólmi meirr en sex tigu manna. Þá fellu tveir íslenzkir menn, Sigurðr prestur, sonr Bergþórs Mássonar, annarr Klemet, sonr Ara Einarssonar.’ (‘They killed on one island more than sixty

they appear in modern editions alongside *Íslendingasögur*. In these contexts, these texts perform the very action Hreiðarr was ultimately forbidden from doing: switching the focus to individual Icelanders whilst embedded within sagas of Norwegian kings, they mediate and join together Iceland and Norway, both functioning within *konungasögur* and ‘writing back’ to Iceland.

This chapter will focus on *Morkinskinna* simply because it provides, within a narrative framework figuratively located in Norway, an active interrogation of the role of Icelanders in another country. It is by no means the only source of such narratives, but it is one of the earliest and, perhaps intrinsically, a product of Icelandic-Norwegian literary contact.⁸ Literally ‘rotten parchment’, the name itself is an ambivalent term. It refers both to the physical manuscript kept in the Royal Library in Copenhagen under the shelfmark ‘Gamle kongelige samling 1009 fol.’, and to the contents of this manuscript: a series of linked prose narratives, interspersed with skaldic verse, which, loosely, treat the kings of Norway from around 1030 to 1157. The two are not exactly alike. The *Morkinskinna* manuscript itself is defective – ten leaves and an entire seventh and final quire are

men. There fell two Icelanders, the priest Sigurðr, son of Bergþórr Másson, and Klémet, son of Ari Einarsson.’)

⁸ Before *Morkinskinna*, the genesis of the *konungasögur* tradition lies in the Norwegian catalogue of kings *Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sögum* on the one hand, and a now lost extended *Íslendingabók* with a section on the kings of Norway by Ari Þorgilsson, along with an entirely lost work by Sæmundr Sigfússon on the other, as texts with their origins in Iceland. One can only speculate about the relationship between these two traditions, but the dialogic nature of *Morkinskinna* must imply some degree of conversation. This argument is set out in full in the introduction to Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade, eds., *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030-1157)*, *Islandica* 51 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000) 1-5. The selection of *Morkinskinna* as the main text for examination here is, of course, at the expense of *Heimskringla*. As a later text, albeit drawing on potentially contemporary skaldic verse, *Heimskringla*’s presentation of Norwegian history is to some extent more systematized, arranged into sagas of individual kings. Such systematization is less evident in *Morkinskinna*, which thus decentres the text and allows for a closer analysis of the ‘peripheral’ Icelanders. For a detailed comparison of *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*, in which the argument is put forward for a moderation of political comment by the harbinger of Iceland’s submission, Snorri Sturluson himself, see Theodore M. Andersson, ‘The Politics of Snorri Sturluson,’ *JEGP* 93.1 (1994). For a discussion of Snorri’s *Ynglinga saga* in the context of myths of settlement, see pp. 20-26. above.

missing; the long, initial section of the text which intertwines the careers of Magnús góði and Haraldr harðráði has suffered particularly from the loss of six leaves. However, scholars have long used *Morkinskinna* to refer to a textual tradition which survives in later manuscripts, and indeed whose imprint is visible in *Heimskringla* itself. The conceptual relationship between manuscript witness and intertext has sometimes been confused. This is evident in Finnur Jónsson's introduction to his 1932 edition:

M[orkinskinna] er i dens nuværende skikkelse ikke den originale. Denne er i tidens løb, næppe først i den bevarede afskrift, bleven udvidet, interpoleret, hvad der kan bevises, ikke blot ved de gentagelser, der findes (hvorom senere), men også ved andre omstændigheder, hvad vi straks skal se.⁹

Jónsson's edition has conflicted aims, as both a diplomatic edition of the *Morkinskinna* manuscript, *and* as a reconstruction of that manuscript through the interpolation of material from other manuscripts, especially from the later *Flateyjarbók* in order to fill the large lacuna in the text Finnur labels *Saga Magnús góða ok Haralds harðráða*. There is a certain irony in the fact that Finnur Jónsson and many of his contemporaries believed that much of the extant *Morkinskinna* was a later interpolation, yet Finnur himself interpolated his diplomatic edition of the manuscript with extracts from *Flateyjarbók*. The most obviously non-original elements of *Morkinskinna* to Finnur Jónsson and others were the *þættir*, the short, apparently independent narratives, chiefly of Icelanders, that

⁹ Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Morkinskinna* (Copenhagen: J. Jørgensen & Co., 1932) ix. 'Morkinskinna is not, in its present form, the original. It has been, over the course of time, and not only in the preserved copy, expanded and interpolated, which can be shown not only by the repetition which is found (of which more later), but also by other important facts, which we will now see.' Finnur then examines *Flateyjarbók*, which also contains a redaction of roughly the first half of *Morkinskinna*, that relating to the reigns of Magnús góði Ólafsson and Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson. The editors of the 2011 *Íslensk fornrit* edition discuss both Finnur Jónsson's editorial principles (*ÍF* 24: liii) and their own (*ÍF* 24: liv-lviii); the recent edition makes use both of the *Hulda*, *Hrokkinskinna* and *Codex Frisianus* manuscripts in addition to *Flateyjarbók*, the only other witness used in Finnur's edition.

somewhat resemble prototypical sagas in miniature. Although there is undoubtedly a core group of *þættir* recognized as being contained within *Morkinskinna*,¹⁰ there are other narratives which have been classified as *þættir* mainly in order to treat them as separate from the surrounding narrative; that concerning the Norman knight Giffarðr is an indicative example.¹¹ Ármann Jakobsson has usefully summarized the historical tendency towards an Icelandic bias in the separation of *þættir* from the surrounding text:

These *þættir* have been the subject of much scholarly discussion, yet no agreement has been reached as to which narratives that seem to be loosely connected to the ‘main narrative’ ought to be called *þættir*, and there is no consensus either as to how many of these *þættir* were inserted after the original compilation. Traditionally, the narratives in *Morkinskinna* that concern Icelanders at the king’s court are called *þættir* and believed to be independent or semi-independent. This usually does not apply to similar episodes, where Norwegian courtiers play a similar role.¹²

Despite the long Icelandic tradition of doing so, the treatment of the *þættir* as discrete from *Morkinskinna* is counter-productive to this analysis, despite the focus here on Icelanders and Icelandicness rather than matters directly pertaining to Norway. The separation of the *þættir* may not

¹⁰ *Arnórs þáttur jarlaskálds*, *Hreiðars þáttur heimiska Þórgrímssonar*, *Halldórs þáttur Snorrasonar II*, *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka*, *Brands þáttur orva*, *Íslendinga þáttur sögufróða*, *Þorvarðs þáttur krákunefs*, *Sneglu-Halla þáttur*, *Stúfs þáttur blinda*, *Odds þáttur Ófeigssonar*, *Ívars þáttur Ingimundarsonar*, *Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttur* and *Einars þáttur Skúlasonar* seem to form the basis of scholarly consensus.

¹¹ See Kari Ellen Gade, ‘Morkinskinna’s *Giffarðsþáttur*: Literary Fiction or Historical Fact?’, *Gripla* 11 (2000).

¹² Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Individual and the Ideal: The Representation of Royalty in *Morkinskinna*’, *JEGP* 99.1 (2000): 72. See also *ÍF* 23: xlii. The *Íslenzk fornrit* series has institutionalized the ‘independence’ of some of the *þættir* of *Morkinskinna* since 1934, editing the following separately: *Brands þáttur orva* (*ÍF* 4), *Halldórs þáttur Snorrasonar* (*ÍF* 5), *Stúfs þáttur blinda* (*ÍF* 5), *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka* (*ÍF* 6), *Þorvarðs þáttur krákunefs* (*ÍF* 6), *Odds þáttur Ófeigssonar* (*ÍF* 7), *Sneglu-Halla þáttur* (*ÍF* 9), *Hreiðars þáttur heimiska* (*ÍF* 10) and *Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttur* (*ÍF* 11). *Morkinskinna* itself lacked a critical edition beyond Finnur Jónsson’s semi-diplomatic text of 1932 until the publication of *ÍF* 23 and 24 in 2011, in which the *þættir* are ‘prentaðir eins og hverjir aðrir kaflar í sögunni,’ in quite a break from the principles applied earlier in the series. *ÍF* 23: xliv (‘printed just as other chapters in the saga’).

only be a misunderstanding of medieval concepts of textual structure,¹³ but also a misunderstanding of the role Icelanders play within what is importantly an Icelandic depiction of Norway and its kings. Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson wisely argue that the independence or otherwise of the *þættir* does not alter their importance within the structure of *Morkinskinna*:

Þó að þættir kunni áður að hafa verið til sem sjálfstæðar frásagnir eru þeir eigi að síður varðveittir í Morkinskinnu sem hlutar stærri frásagnar.¹⁴

This chapter shall, therefore, use the term *Morkinskinna* to refer to the textual tradition rather than the oldest witness to this tradition, following the convention established by Finnur Jónsson and continued by Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson. It is worth observing that the corollary of the complexity of the textual history of the *Morkinskinna*-tradition is the wide circulation of the matter contained, and thus ample evidence of a widespread literary engagement with the relationships between Icelanders and Norwegians.

1. A cultural cargo: the skaldic vocation

Hreiðarr, as his epithet ‘heimski’ suggests, is considered a fool throughout much of the story, but is saved from obscurity by two related factors: his ability to compose good skaldic verse, and his status as an Icelander abroad at the Norwegian court. Having convinced his more socially astute brother Þórðr, a *hirðmaðr*, to take him abroad to Norway, Hreiðarr has a series of encounters with both kings Magnus inn góði and Haraldr inn harðráði, culminating in his delivery of a poem to King Magnús, who declares it ‘undarligt’, but who also declares:

¹³ For a detailed argument against the fragmentation of *Morkinskinna*, see Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Amplified Saga: Structural Disunity in *Morkinskinna*,’ *Medium Ævum* 70.1 (2001).

¹⁴ *ÍF* 23: xlv. ‘Although the *þættir* may have previously existed as separate stories they are nonetheless preserved within *Morkinskinna* as elements of a greater narrative.’

En kvæðit mun vera með þeim hætti sem ævi þín; hon hefir fyrst verit með kynligu móti ok einrænligu, en hon mun þó vera því betr er meirr líðr á.¹⁵

He then proceeds to offer Hreiðarr the island, precipitating the reaction above.

Hreiðarr is an unusual figure in many respects, but not in terms of his poetic ability. The entire Old Norse-Icelandic literary corpus presents Icelanders as unusually gifted in the art of poetic composition.¹⁶ However, Iceland itself was not a realm in which skaldic verse was depicted as having the same social or economic value as in Norway: indeed composition of praise or defamation was, according to *Grágás*, illegal.¹⁷ Norway and wider Scandinavia were ruled by monarchs, however, who generally both valued praise poetry as courtly performance and as a tangible gift of potentially significant value. In addition to the inevitable trade traffic between Norway and Iceland, there was also considerable cultural traffic, something made manifest most overtly in the *konungasögur* and *skáldasögur*.¹⁸

The majority of Icelanders depicted within *Morkinskinna* are designated as skalds. This is, indeed, true of probably most Icelanders featured in Norway within the Old Norse-Icelandic canon.

One should be wary, however, of assigning too much significance to this fact, of allowing their

¹⁵ *ÍF* 23: 164. ‘strange’; ‘the poem follows the course of your life; at first it had a strange and odd manner, but it gets better the further it goes on.’

¹⁶ Of course, this is even more the case in the so-called *skáldasögur*, amongst which some of the most frequently cited are *Kormáks saga* and *Hallfreðar saga vandræðarskálds*, although it ought to be noted that *Egils saga* is, arguably, a member of this group too. For an overview of the genre, see Margaret Clunies Ross, ‘The Skald Sagas as a Genre: Definitions and Typical Features,’ *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. Russell Poole (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001).

¹⁷ ‘Hvarke a maðr at yrkia vm man löst ne löf [...] Ef maðr yrkir þa víso vm man er eigi er háþung í, oc varðar iii. marca sekþ. ef hann yrkir fleira vm man oc varðar fiorbavgs garð. þot eigi se háþung í,’ *Gr. Ib*: 183. (‘A person is neither to compose defamatory or praise poetry about anybody [else]. [...] If somebody composes a verse about someone in which there is no disgrace, there is a fine of three marks. If one composes more about someone the penalty is lesser outlawry even if there is no disgrace in it.’)

¹⁸ For an analysis of this traffic, see Kevin J. Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda: The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2008), further discussed below.

activities – composing verse for the king – to be confused with their identities. ‘Being a skald’ was simply one function an Icelander could perform in the Norwegian context; it is analogous to ‘going on a viking raid’, insofar as it is a definitively mutable characteristic of an individual (the particular aptitude of some poets notwithstanding). Nevertheless, in the same way that viking raids can be seen as somehow formative experiences, often significant rites of passage, the experience of being a skald was almost always to be first involved in a transnational narrative. Skalds are, almost by definition, travellers. The journey itself from Iceland to Norway is an event which plays a significant role in the construction of a meaningful Icelandic identity. Benedict Anderson has elaborated more generally on the importance of the journey to the administrative/imperial centre both to the individual traveller, and to the significance of the points of origin and destination:

The anthropologist Victor Turner has written illuminatingly about the ‘journey’, between times, statuses and places, as a meaning-creating experience. All such journeys require interpretation [...] For our purposes here, the modal journey is the pilgrimage. It is not simply that in the minds of Christians, Muslims or Hindus the cities of Rome, Mecca, or Benares were the centres of sacred geographies, but that their centrality was experienced and ‘realized’ (in the stagecraft sense) by the constant flow of pilgrims towards them from remote and *otherwise unrelated* localities.¹⁹

Of course, the Icelandic model differs from this slightly, for the Icelandic ‘locality’ was not a pre-existing colony of Norway, or indeed directly politically influenced by Norway at all until the mid-thirteenth century. Nevertheless, the idiom of the ‘administrative pilgrimage’ is valuable, because it provides a model for the dynamics of power and status that existed between Iceland and Norway and, more importantly, ‘Icelanders’ and ‘Norwegians’. The importance of Norway in Icelandic *literature* is made concrete only by *Icelanders*, be they the original settlers, who are thus

¹⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 53–4. His emphasis. Anderson is referring chiefly to Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967).

retrospectively altered from Norwegians, or the skalds who later crossed the sea in the opposite direction. Anderson's concept has, of course, long been applied to literature, especially within the realms of postcolonial theory. The core of this theory is equally applicable to the Icelandic situation, as indeed Ato Quayson has argued for all medieval literature:

[P]ostcolonialism is inherently about relations of hegemony and resistance in the encounter between different cultures and peoples. Even though empire and colonialism established the parameters of this dynamic on a large historical scale, it is also evident that such encounters persist in miniature in various other contexts. It is this essential hegemonic/counter-hegemonic dialectic within postcolonial debates that makes ideas from the field amenable to productive transfer to other domains.²⁰

Morkinskinna incarnates nothing so simple as straightforward literary resistance to Norwegian hegemony, but instead a nuanced dialogue; an interrogation of what was almost a 'national' obsession: that of Iceland's history, present, and future in relation to its mother country. Skalds must come first in an interrogation of this dialogue, because they function so overtly to bridge these two polities.

The first *þáttir* usually identified in *Morkinskinna* is *Arnórs þáttir jarlaskálds*, highly appropriate to the beginning of the text, for Arnórr is in several ways the archetypal Icelandic skald.²¹ His first appearance in the text is not concurrent with the passage that has been labelled his *þáttir*. His name is first mentioned merely as the author of a stanza composed on the occasion of

²⁰ Ato Quayson, 'Translations and transnationals: pre- and postcolonial,' *Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures*, eds. Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 253.

²¹ For a useful analysis of the archetype in the *þættir*, see John Lindow, 'Skald Sagas in their Literary Context 1: Related Icelandic Genres,' *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. Russell Poole (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000).

King Magnús inn góði setting out from Russia.²² However, his reintroduction into the narrative as an individual rather than an attribution is indicative:

Nú er getit eitthvert sinn, er konungar báðir sátu í einni holl yfir matborðum, at þar var þá kominn Arnórr jarlaskáld ok hefir ort sitt kvæði um hvárn þeira. Ok þá er skáldit bræddi skip sitt þá koma sendimenn konunga ok biðja hann ganga at færa kvæðin. Hann fór þegar ok þó ekki af sér tjöruna.²³

The facts that Arnórr is first mentioned attending to his ship, and that he neglects to wash the tar from himself when called to the court, combine to assert a difference between himself and the Norwegian courtiers. The way in which this sentence is structured indicates that Arnórr's mastery of skaldic verse affords him a certain power: it is known that he has composed verses about the two kings, but they must request him to recite them.²⁴ Arnórr's subsequent presentation of his poem for Magnús subverts Haraldr's expectations:

Nú hefr skáldit upp kvæðit ok getr í fyrstu í kvæðinu jarla fyr vestan haf ok yrkir um ferðir sínar. Ok er þar er komit þá mælti Haraldr konungr til Magnúss konungs: „Hvat sitr þú, herra, yfir kvæði þessu, þó at hann hafi ort um ferðir sínar eða jarla í eyjum vestr?“²⁵

Ultimately, Magnús counsels caution, and Arnórr is allowed to continue to recite, although not without further interruption from Haraldr. Subversion of the patron's expectations is something very

²² *ÍF* 23: 21. This passage survives only in *Flateyjarbók*.

²³ *ÍF* 23: 143. 'Now it is told that on one occasion both kings [Haraldr harðráði and Magnús góði] were sitting at the table in the same hall when Arnórr jarlaskáld arrived, and he has composed a poem about each of them. And as the skald was tarring his ship, the kings' messengers arrive and ask him to recite the poems. He went there without cleaning off the tar.'

²⁴ Perhaps something of a career pattern can be discerned. Skalds out to make their name usually request that they be allowed to present the king with a poem, as shall be seen in the cases of Hreiðarr and Halli; 'later-career' skalds tend to be more reactive to kings' desires for poems, such as Þjóðólfr and Einarr Skúlason. Perhaps Arnórr's fame – his epithet is, after all, 'skald of the jarls' – means that he no longer need actively seek a patron for his verse.

²⁵ *ÍF* 23: 143. 'Now the skald begins to recite, and he first makes mention in the poem of the jarls from the west, and he recites about his travels. And when he got to that point then King Haraldr said to King Magnús: "Why put up with listening to this poem, when he talks of his own travels and the jarls of the western isles?"'

common to the depiction of the skald in the courtly context, because it permits the transfer of power within what appears to be a rigid, hierarchical situation. The skald's ability to subvert and to play with the expectations of his patron is intrinsic to his identity.

Einars þátrr Skúlasonar is one of the shorter *þættir*: the text itself comprises barely more than three linked anecdotes surrounding three stanzas of skaldic verse.²⁶ Einarr Skúlason, an Icelandic skald active in twelfth-century Norway, is depicted undertaking three poetic challenges at the behest of the Norwegian kings and brothers Eysteinn Haraldsson and Sigurðr Haraldsson gilli. The first is to compose a verse before the king can finish drinking; the second to measure the duration of the punishment of a thief by the time taken to compose a stanza; and the third to create a poem in praise of a woman before her boat sails past the harbour. Taken as a discrete unit, the *þátrr* itself forms a digression where the focus of authorial attention is on the skald rather than the king, an inversion of the norm present in the surrounding text. The *þátrr* is at least an affirmation, if not a celebration, of the skills of an Icelandic skald, written in all probability in Iceland by an Icelander; the protagonist of the *þátrr* is Einarr himself. But it is set within a text whose *materia* is the kings of Norway, and where Einarr appears elsewhere in the text, it is usually as the source of a piece of verse or merely as an authenticating witness. The *þátrr*, therefore, discrete or not, provides a valuable insight into the

²⁶ The editorial history of this *þátrr* is typical of the treatment of the genre: 'Så kommer tre anekdoter om Einarr Skúlason med vers, 446₂ – 48₁₅. De er åbenbare indskud; de har intet med kongesagaen at gøre. De er at same art som þættirne i de tidligere sagaer.' Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Morkinskinna* xxxiv. (Next come three anecdotes on Einarr Skúlason with stanzas, p. 446 l. 2 – p. 448 l. 15. They are obviously interpolations; they have nothing to do with the *konungasaga*. They are of the same character as the *þættir* in the previous sagas [within *Morkinskinna*]). The *þátrr* is printed as a discrete text in modernized Icelandic in Bragi Halldórsson, Jón Torfason, Sverrir Tómasson and Örnólfur Þorsson, eds., *Íslendinga sögur og þættir*, vol. 3, 3 vols. (Reykjavík: Svart á hvítu, 1987) 2114–6. Following this, a translation of the story based on the above modernized edition is found in Viðar Hreinsson, Robert Cook, Terry Gunnell, Keneva Kunz and Bernard Scudder, eds., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, 5 vols. (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfn Leifur Eiríksson, 1997) I: 337–39.

direct relationship between a named skald and his patron(s), an instance in which the active relationship between the two is explored along with the process of skaldic composition. Thus three moments of ostensible literary creativity are encapsulated within a wider narrative with a differing focus to that of the *þáttir*, one which pertains to Norwegian history. A digressive passage does not, of course, necessitate an interpolation: instead, the transfer of authorial focus to the peripheral, the skald, is a subtle subversion of the *konungasaga* which betrays a narrative substratum: that of affirming Icelandic identity.

The *þáttir* comprises three short anecdotes framing three stanzas of verse, each depicting a deceptively playful instance of poetic composition. On close inspection, an increasing concern with the social and political importance of poetic composition may be discerned. Furthermore, the text makes plain that what is most valuable is the *act* of composition, not the product itself. Whilst highly-wrought and skilful literary products, within the *þáttir* the *content* of the verses themselves borders on the irrelevant, as Bjarne Fidjestøl observes:

The skald appears to be the polar opposite, as it were, of the ordinary language-user, because his need for means of expression is of a peculiar kind. Although he is a professional user of language, he has in fact little he needs to say.²⁷

The genesis of *þættir* such as this one could perhaps be the creation of a framing narrative around extant skaldic stanzas whose context was lost or half-remembered. If this were to be the case, one witnesses a two-fold account of literary creativity, both in the prose narrative and the verses themselves. But it could equally be that the stanzas have no textual history outside the *þáttir*, and

²⁷ Bjarne Fidjestøl, *Selected Papers*, trans. Peter Foote, eds. Odd Einar Haugen and Else Mundal (Odense: Odense University Press, 1997) 41.

that they exist as deliberately ‘occasional’ pieces of verse betraying a particular attitude towards the courtly function of skaldic verse.²⁸

The first incident is a classic example of the estrangement and reconciliation of skald and king that Joseph Harris has identified as the ‘alienation’ topos in his analysis of thirty-one *þættir*, and which he observes to be universal to that corpus.²⁹ Within *Morkinskinna*, the situation is rather more subtle: Halldórr Snorrason, discussed below for instance,³⁰ is not obviously a skald, but his estrangement from Haraldr seems analogous to Harris’s topos; conversely, as shall be seen, *Sneglu-Halla þátr* provides an example of a far more complex set of interactions between the king and two, very different, models of ‘the skald’. Nevertheless, in this narrative, Einarr straightforwardly offends the king by not arriving on time for a meal:

Þá mælti konungr: „Víttr ertu nú, skáld, er þú kómst eigi undir borð ok ert þó konungs skáld. Nú munum vit eigi sáttr nema þú yrkir nú vísu áðr ek drekka af kerinu.“³¹

As instances of alienation go, Einarr’s is a mild one – Harris notes in contrast that ‘the most common variety of broken interdiction is the slaying of a retainer’³² – and perhaps concomitantly it is only a single stanza of verse that he is required to compose to make amends, as opposed to the *hofuðlausn* or ‘head-ransom’ required of other skalds such as, famously, Egill Skalla-Grímsson.³³ It is

²⁸ The relationship between prose and verse in medieval Icelandic literature is of considerable complexity. For a detailed analysis, see Heather O’Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁹ Joseph Harris, ‘Genre and Narrative Structure in Some *Íslendinga Þættir*,’ *Scandinavian Studies* 44.1 (1972): 10. See also Joseph Harris, ‘Theme and Genre in Some *Íslendinga Þættir*,’ *Scandinavian Studies* 48.1 (1976).

³⁰ See p. 188 below.

³¹ *ÍF* 24: 222. ‘Then the king said, “Now you’re in for a forfeit, skald, since you didn’t come to table even though you’re the king’s poet. Now we won’t be reconciled unless you now compose a verse before I drink this goblet.”’

³² Harris, ‘Genre and Narrative Structure in Some *Íslendinga Þættir*,’ 11.

³³ Composed before King Eiríkr blóðøx Haraldsson. See *ÍF* 2: 185–92.

here that the curiously playful – and somewhat subversive – tone of this *þáttr* becomes apparent. The ‘head-ransom’ poem had a two-fold value, both in terms of its artistic capital as an artefact bestowed on the king (comparable to a compensatory payment in gold or treasure), and as a public literary celebration and memorialization of the king and his accomplishments with concomitant social prestige. The verse Einarr composes before King Eysteinn reaches the bottom of his tankard is only a praise-poem insofar as it compares the presence of food at Eysteinn’s court favourably with its absence at the abbey at Baki, and this is only truly evident within the prose context. This, coupled with the challenge itself, places the emphasis on the value of the poem as an *artefact*, a crafted product to be admired. In the same way that the speed with which a craftsman performs their skill is frequently as impressive as the product itself, the challenge here is one of literary craftsmanship rather than originality or imagination. It is a game, in the same way that other members of a royal court, or, for that matter, Scandinavian society as a whole, might demonstrate their skill at a particular activity within an artificial, circumscribed arena – comparable, indeed, to the tournament-ground or ball-game court.³⁴ The importance of this scene within the *þáttr* as a whole is that it sets the standard precedent for the power relationship between king and skald. The king’s position of power is certain; he may demand a stanza from the poet at will, and indeed impose whatever conditions on it that he wishes, for he has the capability to impose the ultimate sanction of remaining unreconciled. It is a reflection of the Icelandic origin of the text that this is considered of equal importance in the *þættir* to death itself: it is thus analogous to the ‘social death’ outlawry represented at home. Without reconciliation, the Icelander cannot return to court safely; this is

³⁴ The issue of circumscribed arenas of interaction in the royal court is, of course, comparable to the function of *log* in establishing a common social space, and indeed the motif of dealings in the booth. This is discussed in more detail in chapter 2.ii above.

acknowledged even by Halldórr, who is not described as a skald and for whom alienation from the king appears to be intentional, for he sees only the *gálgi* (gallows) waiting for him should he ever return from Iceland.

The moment of transference of power comes only when Einarr begins composition. To use Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework, applied to medieval Icelandic literary culture by Kevin Wanner, Einarr converts the cultural capital he can produce as a skald into the ready ability to cement his status in court. Wanner explains:

Iceland had neither an army nor a true aristocracy, and while it could offer certain rare goods, it is certain that, in matters of trade, Icelanders needed Norway more than they were needed by that country. And yet, there was one type of capital that medieval Icelanders amassed more effectively than Norwegians: this was cultural capital, the most potent source of which was mastery of skaldic verse.³⁵

It is the capability to produce such capital 'on demand', therefore, which allows the Icelandic skald to play a role in the cultural economics of court life. But the *þáttr* goes on to demonstrate the ever-greater degree of power such cultural material can have.

In the second encounter, Einarr is accompanying a different king – Sigurðr munnr Haraldsson, Eysteinn's brother. This is significant evidence of the *þáttr*'s focus on Einarr as its chief concern, and thus with matters Icelandic rather than solely Norwegian, since multiple kings move around a single skald. This is in opposition to the superstructure of *Morkinskinna*, which is arranged around the chronology of the Norwegian kings. The stakes in this second verbal game between king and poet seem, from the poet's point of view, somewhat lower. There is no threat of expulsion from the court or angering of the king; instead, Einarr's only boon is that an unfortunate *leikarar*

³⁵ Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda* 54-5.

(‘musician’) named Jarlmaðr, who is caught eating goat meat on a Friday, will receive only as many lashes as may be dealt in the time it takes him to compose a verse. Again, the challenge is one of speed, and thus verbal dexterity, as with the first stanza above. But the power dynamic here has changed significantly. The Icelander’s verse now has direct influence over the sentencing of a Norwegian criminal by a Norwegian king. Indeed, the king declares to Einarr: ‘[þ]ú munt nú ráða.’³⁶ Royal authority is thus temporarily delegated to the skald. This transfer of authority takes place within a game. It may be seen as a game because the stakes for both parties are negligible, both know the parameters within which they are operating, and both know the status quo will resume afterwards. The game itself, after all, has a built-in time limit, and Einarr wryly observes ‘[þ]at myndi hann vilja, Jarlmaðr, at mér yrði eigi alltorfynt.’³⁷ Again, the verse itself is of merit, but has little bearing on the relationship between king and poet.³⁸ What is important is that moment of transference of power – an abbreviated form, perhaps, of the idea of the ‘king for a day’, simultaneously disrupting and affirming royal authority.

³⁶ *ÍF* 24: 223. ‘Now you shall decide.’

³⁷ *ÍF* 24: 223. ‘That Jarlmaðr will be hoping that I am not stuck for words.’

³⁸ ‘Austr tók illa kristinn / Jarlmaðr frá búkarli / – gróðr vas kjöts á kauða – / kiðling, hinns slær fiðlu. / Vöndr hrökk, vámr lá bundinn, / velmáll, á skip þíslar; / söng leikara lengi / lími harðan príma,’ *ÍF* 24: 223. (‘The ill-Christian Jarlmaðr, the fiddler, stole in the east a kid from the farmer. The rascal was greedy for meat. The twig lashed, the rogue lay bound to the cart. The well-spoken rod sang for the player a hard prime.’) Although Jarlmaðr is described as a *fiðlari* in this verse, it would be a conjectural step too far to argue that Einarr is demonstrating solidarity between public performers. The verse has value, however, as a more general comment on identity, ethnicity, and social status. Jarlmaðr is associated with the east and dubious Christianity (‘illa kristinn’). His punishment is couched in Christian language: ‘harðan príma’, and in combination this allows the stanza to serve not only as a piece of occasional verse that ends the punishment at five strokes, but also a vindication of the punishment of a man who is not only a thief, but perhaps also an easterner, of dubious religiosity. It is also important to note the mismatch between prose frame and verse. In the prose, Jarlmaðr’s crime is straightforwardly that of breaking fast; rather than being some form of interpolation, this seems to directly recall the madness of King Sigurðr jórsalafari Magnússon, who has to be talked out of breaking the Friday fast by a brave retainer of low rank, Áslákr hani (*ÍF* 24: 144–45). In the verse, there is no mention of Friday, and his crime instead seems to be of greed and theft: ‘gróðr vas kjöts á kauða’. Perhaps he is simply someone of such low social standing that a king might use his body as the field of a courtly game between himself and his poet.

If the first anecdote expounded the archetypal relationship of literary creativity to the skald's role in the court, the second extended this relationship to demonstrate how, through what was essentially a game, the Icelandic poet's skill allows him to temporarily acquire authority within the court. The third anecdote, however, is both a culmination and an inversion of the previous pattern. Einarr acquires yet more power within the court: the ability to set his own price for his verse.³⁹ Whereas before the king had always decided the rules of the game, here the rules are inverted, and the skald becomes the dominant focus of the narrative and the winner of a game of his own devising.

The final episode takes place in Bergen, presumably still with Sigurðr as king. He desires a verse be composed on the subject of the grand longboat of Ragnhildr, a beautiful noblewoman, but the skald with him at that moment, Snorri Barðarson, 'var ekki auðfynt, ok tók hann ekki svá skjótt til sem konungr vildi.'⁴⁰ One may infer from this incident that Einarr's skill for on-the-spot composition was a significant element in maintaining his status in court, and indeed that his particular acuity made him an especially valuable companion; or, more pertinently, that presenting Einarr in this way formed part of an idealization of the Icelander in the foreign court. Once Einarr has been located, the king gives him a challenge much akin to the previous two: 'Yrk nú vísu ok haf lokit áðr skipit gengr út fyr Hólm.'⁴¹ But from this point on, the dynamic is different. Einarr declares that accepting such a challenge cannot go unrewarded, and the king invites him to set his price. Einarr's challenge is that the king and seven of his followers should each remember and then recite a

³⁹ An interesting point of comparison here might be found in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, when the king of Dublin, Sigtryggr silkiskegg, has to discuss with his treasurer what an appropriate reward for a praise-poem is – his initial idea of it being worth two knorrs is quickly moderated by his more astute attendant. See *ÍF* 3: 76.

⁴⁰ *ÍF* 24: 224. '[He] was not able to extemporize (literally, 'be impromptu') and was not as quick as the king wished for.'

⁴¹ *ÍF* 24: 224. 'Now compose a verse and be finished before the ship goes out past Holm.'

line of the stanza he composes, and that he shall receive as many measures (*askr*) of honey as there are lines forgotten.⁴² Here there is an inversion of the power dynamic: the challenged becomes the challenger. But this is also a comment on the role of poetry as a courtly commodity. As observed earlier, the literal content of the stanzas has had no direct bearing on the subject matter of the *þáttr* itself: it has not interrogated court power dynamics, skalds, or kings; the stanzas have been in a very literal sense pieces of ‘occasional’ verse. This is not to say, of course, that they do not have literary merit within their own terms. Their value in court, however, is closer to the value of a material gift, especially as these are not instances of memorializing verse, which would have a dual function of pleasing a patron and ensuring the patron’s deeds are remembered. Here the poet himself encourages the dismembering of the verse, of splitting it into lines, an act which defies the logic of most skaldic verse, whose free word order and tight metrical rules demand skill in execution and have often been cited as protective devices against both oral and scribal mistakes in transmission. The division of the verse between the king and his retainers is also, of course, a playful parody of gift-distribution: the court poet, who is not economically independent, does have a monopoly on the distribution of pieces of verse, if not a monopoly on the distribution of gold. The breaker of rings becomes the breaker of verse.

This may now be related to the underlying narrative of the relationship between Iceland and Icelanders and Norway and Norwegians. If one accepts Wanner’s arguments for skaldic verse as

⁴² In addition to the reference to breaking fast on a Friday, which clearly recalls an episode concerning Sigurðr Magnússon, bizarre as it may seem, honey has already been mentioned in *Morkinskinna*. Within the passage concerning the killing of King Haraldr gilli Magnússon, two retainers ask him to settle a bet of a pot of honey as to who he will sleep with that night, his queen Ingiríðr or Þóra Gothormsdóttir. Although he thinks this is presumably no more than courtly high spirits – perhaps a pot of honey was an appropriately frivolous, if high-value, bet – they are in fact in league with his brother Sigurðr slembir Magnússon, who uses the information gained to assassinate him in his bed. See *ÍF* 24: 177ff.

cultural capital, something Iceland was rich in but Norway needed, the final anecdote materializes the inverted power dynamic that existed between these two countries in the realm of skaldic verse, despite the opposite being in effect in practically every other field. The position of this dialogue of power within the three games of the *þátttr* is also significant. The inevitable tension that exists in any overt discussion of the relationship between the mother country and colony is defused by placing this analysis within the confines of a game, an exchange that takes place within an artificial scenario. Indeed the *þátttr*'s position within *Morkinskinna* as a whole may be seen as a playful diversion, in which the expected centre of the narrative, a king, is transferred to the periphery, and the peripheral skald takes centre stage. Again, it is the final anecdote which is the most significant in this respect, for Einarr's acquisition of power within the game occurs only with the leave of the king. When the game is over, Einarr has his honey, but he is still the king's skald: albeit six pots of honey the richer. The king leaves the game with his position as the ultimate gift giver (the ultimate economic agent) intact: it is up to the reader whether to see this as royal indulgence of the poet's whim, or a real demonstration of the skald's absolute monopoly on an albeit limited aspect of court life. One ought to tend to the latter interpretation, if only because the king and his retainers' failure to memorize a line each of the verse demonstrates how abstracted they are from skaldic verse on its own terms. The skald must exist as the mediator of cultural capital to the court. The position of this *þátttr*, therefore, within a collection of *konungasögur*, affirms the concern of the text as a whole (interpolation or not), with not simply Norway, but Norway as a quasi-imperial centre: the realm of the colonial master, where an unequal power relationship is mediated by both parties through the elaborate conventions and games of court. The Icelander acquires a potency in the Norwegian court that is different from and incomparable to that which could be found at home. The *þátttr* exists within a wider dialogue

within this text and others that interrogates the relationship between the economically and militarily powerful centre and the (self-perceived) cultural potency of the periphery. As the figure of the skald has demonstrated here, Icelandic literature does not suffer the false illusion that Iceland was at the centre of their socio-political geography, but instead that the boundaries this geography contains precipitated the need for mediators, who are presented as frequently encoding their identity within their overtly submissive role. Just as the journey is transformative, so too is the act of composition. It is, to the skilled practitioner, an inexhaustible reserve of cultural capital. Whilst the direct recipients of this capital are the Norwegian kings the text purports to treat, the external *source* of this capital thus creates the substratum of a constructed, 'other' identity which this thesis has sought to tease out.

What happens, though, to the skald once he has made the journey? This chapter will now address the spectrum of skaldic identity, from affected Norwegianness to defiant Icelandicness, in order to understand how this dialogue of identity seeks to resolve itself into something more than a series of (sometimes contradictory) vignettes and stereotypes. The theme mirrors the text: 'how do *þættir* interact with each other and the *konungasögur*?' is essentially the same question as 'how do Icelanders interact with each other and kings?'

2. Going native: towards a literary ethnicity

This analysis does not seek to describe medieval Iceland as a historical reality, but instead as a literary construct. Nevertheless, theories and interpretative strategies developed in the study of history and anthropology can be extremely useful in understanding the social dynamics of this construct. It is possible to discuss the concept of Icelanders abroad only because the literature

incarnates this idea: the very concept of Icelanders continuing to be Icelanders when they are not physically located within Iceland is a concept not read into the text by modern understandings of identity and ethnicity, but present within the text itself: for example, Icelanders can be subject to ethnic slurs such as *mǫrlandi* ('suet-eater'),⁴³ or indeed general stereotyping, such as when Haraldr harðráði refuses Þorvarðr krákunef's gift of a sail.⁴⁴ To put it another way, there are few, if any, Icelandic characters in sagas of kings who are fully assimilated into the Norwegian court or society. Many have moved closer to Norwegian social roles and norms than others, but the fact of being an Icelander – something that is constructed, arguably, as a literary ethnicity in *Morkinskinna* – is immutable. In his study of ethnicity, the anthropologist Fredrik Barth sets out the view that:

[E]thnic identity implies a series of restraints on the kinds of roles an individual is allowed to play, and the partners he may choose for different kinds of transactions. In other words, regarded as a status, ethnic identity is superordinate to most other statuses, and defines the permissible constellations of statuses, or social personalities, which an individual with that identity may assume. In this respect ethnic identity is similar to sex and rank, in that it constrains the incumbent in all his activities, not only in some defined social situations.⁴⁵

⁴³ As used by Ingimarr of Þórðr in *Gull-Ásu-Þórðars þáttr*, *ÍF* 24: 113. For further analysis of the bullying of Icelanders in Norway, see Mundal, 'Framveksten av den islandske identiteten,' 22–23. Ethnic slurs were no doubt common between all groups, of course. A proverbial expression derogatory towards Finns is used within the context of a dispute between King Magnús Ólafsson and his local chieftains: 'Sami maðr ríss upp ok fyrr, varpar nakkvat svá hettinum ok mælti: „Snæliga snuggir, sveinar, kváðu Finnar, áttu andra fala.“' *ÍF* 24: 32. ('The same man gets up and throws back his hood a little and said: "It looks like snow, boys' said the Finns; they had snowshoes to sell.") The implication is that Magnús's words of warning to the chieftains exist solely to benefit himself, and one may infer an ethnic stereotype of Finns as self-serving.

⁴⁴ 'Konungr var nǫkkvat svá brúnvǫlvi ok segir: „Eitt sinni þá ek segl at yðr, Íslendingum,“ segir hann, „ok bjósk þá til at mér myndi þat verða at skaða; gekk þat í sundr í siglingu, – ok vil ek eigi þiggja.“' *ÍF* 23: 237. ('The king frowned somewhat and says: "Once I accepted a sail from you Icelanders," he says, "and it so happened that to my mind I nearly came to harm; it split during a voyage, and so I'll not accept another.")

⁴⁵ Fredrik Barth, 'Introduction,' *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, ed. Fredrik Barth (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969) 17.

The ‘superordinate’ status of Icelandic origins in defining the social role of certain characters in these ‘transnational’ texts is the most important element of this argument. The compiler of *Morkinskinna* participates in the construction of an Icelandic identity of the page through the subtle emphasis of the immutable nature of Icelandic ethnicity: an ethnicity which itself is constructed upon the various foundation myths discussed above. Writing of Norwegian kings allows Icelandic writers to bring their own constructed identity into sharper focus, when held against a similar, yet also fundamentally different, comparator. But the interrogation of this identity may be taken further when Icelanders encounter each other abroad, with differing views of the meaning of their origins to their new, constructed, identities.

The most celebrated and extensive clash between more- and less-assimilated Icelanders takes place within *Sneglu-Halla þátr*.⁴⁶ Sneglu-Halli is introduced as a skald who ‘foryfðisk heldr fás í orðum sínum.’⁴⁷ His epithet is derived from ‘snegla’, literally a ‘weaver’s shuttle’,⁴⁸ but has been interpreted as indicating a quickness with words.⁴⁹ His home is specified as northern Iceland, and on the journey from Iceland to Norway his ship encounters another on which Haraldr harðráði is aboard, and a strikingly indecorous exchange follows. It is not insignificant that this exchange occurs at sea. Such *lèse-majesté* is rare without consequence on land, especially within the king’s court. Yet the exchange here takes place outside either Iceland or Norway, and serves to establish a certain degree of equality between Halli and Haraldr:

⁴⁶ This frequently anthologized *þátr* exists in two traditions, that found in the *Morkinskinna*, *Hulda* and *Hrokkinskinna* manuscripts, and that found in *Flateyjarbók* and AM 593b 4^{to}, which is substantially expanded. Both variants are edited in parallel-text format in *ÍF* 9: 261-95.

⁴⁷ *ÍF* 23: 270. ‘shirked from little in his words.’

⁴⁸ ‘snegla,’ *Cl-Vg*.

⁴⁹ ‘Viðurnefni Halla bendir til þess að hann hafi þótt orðhvatur og snefsinn.’ *ÍF* 23: 270 n. 1. (‘Halli’s nickname suggests he was considered quick with words and irascible.’)

Halli svarar: „Sigurðr heitir stýrimaðrinn, en vér várum í vetr á Íslandi, en ýttum frá Gásam, en kómum við Hítrar ok várum í nótt við Agðanes.“
 Maðrinn mælti: „Sarð hann yðr eigi þá Agði?“ Halli svarar: „Eigi enna.“
 Maðrinn mælti: „Var þó nokkut til ráðs um?“ „Já, herra,“ svarar Halli,
 „beið hann at betri manna, vænti þín þangat í kveld.“ Þar var Haraldr konungr er orðum skipti við Halla.⁵⁰

Clearly Halli's skill with words is quickly demonstrated within the narrative, but furthermore the potential here for an itinerant Icelander and a Norwegian king to joke about male homosexual intercourse is only possible because as yet neither are socially attached or obliged to one another, and they exist within different social frameworks.⁵¹ Male homosexuality is usually presented as the ultimate taboo, especially in the *Íslendingasögur*, and within Iceland defaming someone in such a way was certainly punishable by outlawry.⁵² Halli's use of 'herra' both befits his sarcasm in the moment of the exchange and makes oblique reference to Haraldr's real identity. From the outset, Halli's use of language to subvert authority is made evident, and the extremes of language seen here – 'serða' is an offensive term usually reserved for animal intercourse – are exercisable only because of the liminal position of the two actors. Halli is not bound to Icelandic restrictions on the socially disruptive potential of verbal insults, and Haraldr is not within the bounds of his own kingdom where his fiat applies. The crudity of this exchange seems to represent an absence of inhibition on both parts, taking advantage of the opportunity for the unrestricted use of language. This is not even an insult couched in the 'courtly' form of skaldic verse, where insults are more frequently concealed

⁵⁰ *ÍF* 23: 270-71. 'Halli answers: "The captain is called Sigurðr, and we overwintered in Iceland and departed from Gásir, and we made landfall at Hítrar and last night we were at Agðanes." The man said: "Didn't Agði bugger you?" Halli answers: "Indeed not." The man said: "Was there any reason for that?" "Yes, sire," answers Halli, "he was waiting for a better man and expected you there this evening." It was King Haraldr who swapped words with Halli.'

⁵¹ Agði is a male name. Jónas Kirstjánsson notes that Agðanes is probably named after the local farmer, and cannot be that of a woman or *landvættur*. *ÍF* 9: 265.

⁵² See chapter 2.ii, and for a more detailed analysis of the function of accusations of effeminacy, Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*.

within a more claustrophobic social situation. This initial anecdote, odd as it may seem, serves as a useful contrast to the power dynamics which are established later in the narrative, when the characters take their places within confined social and communal spaces.

Andersson and Gade have commented on the relationship between the attitude towards Haraldr in this *þáttr* as against its portrayal elsewhere:

In contrast to these idealizations of loyal service, the author included a series of *þættir* that function as a sort of opposition literature. “Halldórs þáttr” is the most obvious case, but there are others that suggest a programmatic resistance to King Haraldr (notably “Odds þáttr Ófeigssonar” or “Sneglu-Halla þáttr”).⁵³

Andersson and Gade go on to suggest that the author’s conflicting accounts of Icelandic relationships with kings was due to a personal ambivalence, perhaps borne out of royal service, and realized in the conflicting presentations of king-retainer relations. But there is a more fundamental conflict within *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* itself, between two different models of cultural mediation represented by two Icelanders: Halli himself, and the court skald Þjóðólfr Arnórsson. When Halli arrives ‘í bæinn’ (‘in the town,’ presumably Niðaróss) his fellow Icelander first appears at the same moment as Halli’s different status on dry land is clearly indicated:

Nú koma þeir í bæinn, ok ferr Halli á fund konungs ok kveðr hann, – „ok vildim vér, herra,“ segir hann, „til yðar fara.“ Konungr svarar: „Vant verðr þat útlendum mönnum, ok ábyrgsk þik sjálf, en eigi spari ek mat við þik.“ Nú fór Halli þangat ok var með hirðinni. Þar var ok Þjóðólfr skáld með konungi ok þótti vera nokkvat ofundsjúkr við þá men er kvámu til hirðarinnar.⁵⁴

⁵³ Andersson and Gade, eds., *Morkinskinna* 80.

⁵⁴ *ÍF* 23: 271. ‘Now they came to town, and Halli goes to find the king and greets him. “And we wish, sir,” he says, “to join you.” The king answers: “That’s no possibility for foreigners, and you should find lodgings yourselves, but I will not be stingy with food to you.” Now Halli went there and stayed with the king’s retinue. The skald Þjóðólfr was also with the king and seemed to be a little jealous towards the men who came to the king’s troop.’

This passage is telling, for unlike the apparent display of Icelandic brotherhood between Halldórr and Már seen in faraway Constantinople,⁵⁵ the Icelander Þjóðólfr is explicitly jealous of the presence of another Icelander staying with the king's men. Haraldr seems somewhat equivocal in his dealings with Halli. At once he warns that foreigners rarely get such treatment and that he will provide food but not lodging, yet nevertheless Halli is 'með hirðinni' a moment later. It is possible to infer that Icelanders have no *right* to be given hospitality by the Norwegian king; although one might argue that most Norwegians lacked this right also, the king makes clear that this applies especially to *útlendingar*. To be an Icelander *and* 'með hirðinni' is thus an honour, and one that Þjóðólfr guards jealously. In so doing, he affirms his 'other-ness' through his insecurity; shortly afterwards, his ambiguous status is further interrogated by his apparent shame at his Icelandic ethnicity. Halli, meanwhile, is playing his required role – no ribald wordplay now – and the heartfelt and required use of 'herra' here stands in ironic juxtaposition to its earlier, subversive, inclusion. The issue here seems to be related to dependency. Halli is a visitor who comes from Iceland; he enjoys the king's hospitality, but he remains an Icelander and uses his status as a non-Norwegian to acquire certain benefits not available to Norwegians. On the high seas, he can insult the king in the worst possible way, and even within the king's court, as a guest he can claim hospitality. Þjóðólfr's jealousy, at least in part, lies in a recognition that these benefits are not available to himself because he has abrogated his Icelandic-ness in favour of a permanent position within Norwegian society.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ See subsection 3 below.

⁵⁶ Here postcolonial theory can be extremely productive. Þjóðólfr's crisis of identity is a direct result of his removal to the imperial centre: '[a] valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by *dislocation*, resulting from migration [...] [o]r it may have been destroyed by *cultural denigration*, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model.' Bill

The composition of skaldic verse in Norway can be analysed as predicated upon an economic model of exchange, as seen in the case of *Einars þátr Skúlasonar* above. In the following section of *Sneglu-Halla þátr*, Þjóðólfr and Halli both receive rewards for verses, but in conspicuously different circumstances and of markedly different kinds. After a series of challenges to poetically depict a street brawl in mythological terms, Þjóðólfr is rewarded: ‘Konungr mælti: „Gott skáld ertu, Þjóðólfr,“ – ok gaf honum þegar eitt fingurgull.’⁵⁷ The reward is very much a courtly one – precious, but of no practical value; visible proof of affluence, but also of dependency on a patron.⁵⁸ There is also, surely, a degree of condescension in calling Þjóðólfr a ‘gott skáld’, for Þjóðólfr has not composed any great work, but merely satisfied the king’s whim for an amusing juxtaposition of registers in transferring a brawl between a tanner and a blacksmith to the mythological stage. Later, in the king’s hall, Halli is baited by the king’s men, who claim he cannot be as good a poet as Þjóðólfr. Poetry is established as a skill closely associated with Icelanders, for the challenge is paradoxically an attack on Halli’s Icelandicness – or at least the Norwegian stereotype of what an Icelander should be. Just as they are all suet-eaters, they should also all be able to string a few verses together: not an assumption that seems often to be made of non-Icelanders. Perhaps in order to settle matters, the king announces a poetry contest, and sets the challenge: a verse on the ridiculous appearance of Túta, a diminutive Frisian decked out in the king’s armour:

Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002) 9.

⁵⁷ *ÍF* 23: 272. ‘The king said: “You are a good skald, Þjóðólfr,” and gave him at once a gold ring.’

⁵⁸ *Morkinskinna* emphasizes the economic reliance of skalds on patrons elsewhere. A Norwegian chieftain, Ívarr, is immediately suspicious when Sigvatr Þórðarson attempts to present him with a poem: ‘[þ]at verðr yðr mjök opt skáldunum þá er konungi leiðisk of skvaldr yðart þá leiti þér undan ok vilið draga fé af búqndum.’ *ÍF* 23: 241. (‘Ívarr said: “That’s what you always get from you skalds when the king gets tired of your poetry: you then set off and want to pester the farmers for money.”’)

Þá mælti konungr: „Sá maðr er nú yrkir umb hann, þar sem hann stendr, skal þiggja af mér kníf þenna ok belti.“ Þat vǫru gorsimar. Þá kvað maðr vísu á bekkinn, ok var þar Halli.⁵⁹

The reward here is slightly different. It is certainly not beyond the courtly realm, but it is also practically useful; it is a gift that Halli can take back to Iceland and use outside the context of the royal court, and it is not perishable when set against Einarr's honey. Furthermore, the dynamic of the process of economic exchange is here substantially different. Whereas Þjóðólfr had no choice as to whether to compose the verses on the tanner and blacksmith – '[h]ann mælti: „Óskylt er þat, herra.“ „Gör sem ek mæli,“ segir konungr'⁶⁰ – Halli undertakes a challenge which he entered through his own free will. Clearly, on a simple level, the narrative sets up an antithetical character to Halli who provides the foil to his witticisms and bravado. But Þjóðólfr was a historically significant and prolific skald,⁶¹ and thus his use in this *þáttr* must also be a comment on the nature and status of the Icelander abroad, and the different ways in which these pilgrims to the centre are presented as expressing their identity.

The humiliating climax of the *þáttr* for Þjóðólfr comes as Halli seeks to conform to the default behaviour of the Icelandic skald abroad: he asks to present Haraldr with a praise-poem. Halli claims that he has never composed one before, but Þjóðólfr reveals that the truth is otherwise. The manner in which this is revealed is itself important:

⁵⁹ *ÍF* 23: 273. 'Then the king said: "The man who now composes a verse about him as he stands will receive this knife and belt from me." They were costly things. Then someone recited a verse from the bench, and it was Halli.'

⁶⁰ *ÍF* 23: 271. 'He said: "That's unnecessary, my lord." "Do as I say," says the king.'

⁶¹ The two most substantial poems attributed to him are *Magnússflokkur* and *Sexstefja*. For further biographical information and editions of his poetry, see Kari Ellen Gade ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 2, 2 vols. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009) I: 57-176.

Konungr mælti: „Þat mun þá sumra manna mál at þú takisk mikit í fang fyrsta sinni, slík skáld sem of mik hafa ort, eða hvat sýnisk þér ráð, Þjóðólfr?“ Hann svarar: „Ekki kann ek þér ráða ráðin, herra,“ segir hann; „hitt mun nær fara at ek kunna ráða Halla heilræði.“ Konungr segir: „Hverru þau?“ Þjóðólfr svarar: „At hann ljúgi eigi at yðr.“⁶²

The manner in which Þjóðólfr addresses the king here: ‘[e]kki kann ek þér ráða ráðin [...] hitt mun nær fara at ek kunna ráða *Halla*’ (my emphasis) is a subversion of the intent of the king’s question which is reminiscent of Halli’s ribald engagement with the king on board his boat earlier in the narrative, except that it has been thoroughly sanitized. Þjóðólfr’s attempts at playing the *orðhvatur* Icelander fail because he speaks only with the king’s permission, and not in order to assert his own verbal dexterity as much as to find an opportunity to denigrate Halli. What follows, however, is a scene which explains Þjóðólfr’s chronic insecurity at the presence of Halli in the royal court.

It is exposed by Þjóðólfr that Halli has composed a substantial piece of verse before, but not for a king, and certainly not in a courtly context: ‘Þjóðólfr svarar: „Þat heita Kolluvísur er hann orti of kýr út á Íslandi er hann gætti.“⁶³ Þjóðólfr seeks to make Halli look even more ridiculous: not only does he, a foreigner with no established status within the court, wish to present a verse to the king, but his only experience is a poem about cows. Furthermore, not only were his verses about cows, but they were composed *út á Íslandi*. Part of the humour of this scene derives from a category error, the inherent absurdity of composing a poem in praise of cows (although it might well be remembered that Halli was forbidden by law to compose a poem about another person). It is also to

⁶² *ÍF* 23: 276. ‘The king said: “Some people might say that you’re taking on a lot for a first-timer, such are the skalds who have composed for me; but what seems advisable to you, Þjóðólfr?” He answers: “I cannot give you counsel, lord,” he says; “but it’s closer to the mark that I can give Halli good advice.” The king says: “What is it?” Þjóðólfr answers: “That he not lie to you.”’

⁶³ *ÍF* 23: 276–77. ‘Þjóðólfr says: “It is called the ‘Cow-verses’ which he composed about the cattle he tended out in Iceland.’

some extent an attempt at cultural denigration, of associating the traveller from the periphery with menial, non-courtly activities. It scarcely troubles Halli, however, and as usual he is entirely capable of returning the gesture. When asked to recite the ‘Kolluvísur’, he replies:

„Skemmta mun þá fleira skulu, herra.“ „Hverju þá?“ spyr konungur.
 „Kveða skal Þjóðólfr Sóptrogsvísur er hann orti út á Íslandi.“ Konungur
 spyr: „Hvernig er þat kvæði?“ Halli svarar: „Þjóðólfr hafði þat verk, er
 hann var heima, at hann bar út ǫsku með ǫðru ungmenni ok þótti til
 enkis annars færr, ok varð þó at at hyggja at eigi væri eldr, svá at mein
 yrði at.“⁶⁴

It is telling that Halli possesses the capability to recognize the absurdity of his own past

compositions. His use of ‘fleira’ is indicative of the entertaining potential of his own juvenilia.

Þjóðólfr is not depicted as having this capacity, because to do so would risk invalidating the new identity he has constructed for himself by associating his past with a cultural identity he considers inferior to that which he has adopted in Norway. Þjóðólfr tries to justify the fact that he composed such a trivial poem – that he intended to make the work more enjoyable for the children – but the king barely notices this, and declares ‘þat er þó enn fengminna, Þjóðólfr, er þú ortir.’⁶⁵ It is from this Þjóðólfr’s increasing anger stems; his voluntary sublimation of his identity into a new, Norwegian, courtly version has failed to protect himself from his past, and now an unsophisticated Icelander has humiliated him in what he considers his own home. Halli’s insistence in, once more, mirroring his opponent’s language when he talks of Þjóðólfr composing his dust-pan verses ‘út á Íslandi’ and describing this as Þjóðólfr’s *heima* is, surely, crippling to his sense of identity. The verbal sparring

⁶⁴ *ÍF* 23: 277. “Then there should be more entertainment, sire.” “Of what sort?” asks the king. “Þjóðólfr should recite the ‘Soot-pan verses’ which he composed out in Iceland.” The king asks: “What’s that poem like?” Halli replies: “Þjóðólfr’s job when he was at home was to carry out the ashes with the other youngsters, and he wasn’t considered able to do anything else; he nevertheless was to mind that no fire might break out.”

⁶⁵ *ÍF* 23: 277. ‘The one which you composed is the more trivial, Þjóðólfr.’

continues when Þjóðólfr receives further ridicule for the accidental death of his father who is strangled by the leash on an errant calf, after he had tried unsuccessfully to show up Halli's failure to avenge his father's killing. The two Icelanders almost come to blows but are separated by the king, who essentially sides with Halli in their argument and leaves Þjóðólfr with the impression that he was lucky not to receive a reprimand from the king himself over his behaviour.

Þjóðólfr's humiliation in *Sneglu-Halla þátr* is possible because he is presented as ashamed or embarrassed of his origins, or at the very least, that he believes his background to be inferior – not just in social rank, but in a wider, perhaps even ethnic sense – to the role he has made for himself in Norway. Ármann Jakobsson observes of Þjóðólfr's experience:

Um leið er þessi saga til marks um að hann lifir tvöföldu lífi. Hann er skáld konunga og þykist hafinn yfir Sneglu-Halla. En hann er tveir menn. Á bak við skáldagrímuna er munaðarlaust barn sem lifði á sníkjum á úthjara. Það er engin furða að Þjóðólfr reiðist og vilji höggva Halla. Í sögunni er afhjúpað að í gervi hins fagaða hirðskálds er fátækur og ósiðaður eyjarskeggi.⁶⁶

Þjóðólfr's anger, therefore, is not simple jealousy, but a product of an unwanted recognition of his true identity. Much of the abuse levelled against Þjóðólfr could be seen as a form of straightforward snobbery at poverty, redolent of Ingimarr's 'mǫrlandi' insult found in *Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þátr*. But Ingimarr of Askr is the prototypical arrogant Norwegian chieftain, whereas Halli is a fellow Icelander. This would seem, therefore, to be evidence against a discrete Icelandic identity, for there seems little unity or comradeship between the two Icelanders of this *þátr*. But this is resolved by

⁶⁶ Ármann Jakobsson, *Staður í nýjum heimi* 250. 'This story indicates straight away that he [Þjóðólfr] lives a double life. He is a king's skald and considers himself superior to Sneglu-Halli. But he is two men. Behind the skald's mask is an orphaned child who subsisted begging out in the back of beyond. It is no wonder that Þjóðólfr becomes angry and wants to attack Halli. It is exposed in the story that beneath his costume of the mannered court-poet is a poor and uncultivated islander.'

Þjóðólfr's apparent rejection of his Icelandicness. In *Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttr* King Eysteinn sides very much with Þórðr against the bullying Ingimarr,⁶⁷ but Haraldr sides with Halli. Halli rejoices in his Icelandicness: he would rather hunt through the streets for gruel – a poor person's food – than enjoy the feasting at the king's table, but this seems to do nothing but endear him further to the king. Halli neatly asserts his right to different tastes to the king in his defence for running off after gruel:

„Ver eigi reiðr, herra,“ svarar Halli; „þiggja viljum vér fagnað er í hendr berr, ok jafnan sé ek yðr á kveldum ekki drepa hendi við góðum sendingum.“⁶⁸

Put simply, Halli lacks pretension, and paradoxically this allows him to position himself closer to the king. Halli implicates the king in the 'vér' construction he uses above: although it certainly contains a proverbial aspect, it also heavily implies an identification between the essential character of Halli and the king.⁶⁹

The great irony at the heart of *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* is that Halli emerges as the more successful cultural mediator than his apparently more courtly and established compatriot Þjóðólfr. The Icelander abroad is required to act differently to how he would at home; as seen above, the figurative journey to Norway is a transformative one, but one that is presented as changing Icelanders in different ways. Although Halli gains the upper hand and rejoices in this 'other-ness', Þjóðólfr is equally valuable as evidence of the persistence of a discrete Icelandic identity, evinced in his reaction

⁶⁷ See *ÍF* 24: 113.

⁶⁸ *ÍF* 23: 274. “Don't be angry, sire,” says Halli, “We all like to take pleasure when it passes into our hands, and anyhow I never see you turn down tasty offerings in the evening.”

⁶⁹ Compare this with the *Flateyjarbók* redaction of this *þáttr*: ‘„Látið eigi svá, herra,“ segir Halli, „jafnan sé ek yðr eigi drepa hendi við góðum sendingum,“’ *ÍF* 9: 273. (“Don't be so, sire,” says Halli, “I never see even you turn down tasty offerings.”) The lack in this version of Halli's insinuation of common ground between Icelander and king could be the result of a 'toning down' of the text's concern with positive reinforcement of Icelandic identity; comparably Theodore Andersson argues that this is so in the case of the relationship between *Fagrskinna* and *Morkinskinna*. See Andersson, 'The King of Iceland,' 929.

to Halli. The king's apparent preference for Halli demonstrates that servitude is not the only successful model of interaction between Icelander and Norwegian monarch. There is an attribute of Þjóðólfr's character which is immutable – his Icelandic ethnicity – however much he seeks integration into a Norwegian social order. Originating in Iceland, this story appears to participate, alongside the other material examined here, in an interrogation of the consequences of the combination of physical and social displacement of members of a certain society. Skalds had a unique status as cultural mediators and suppliers of an artistic product much admired in Norway. But they were not the only Icelanders abroad, and *Morkinskinna*'s treatment of other 'vocations' can be equally illuminating, especially as they encounter kingship in situations not always governed by the conventions of the presentation of skaldic verse.

3. Beyond the skald: travelling Icelanders and perceptions of kingship

Literature tends to value literature. The centrality of skalds and skaldic composition to a substantial portion of the *Íslendinga þættir* and the bulk of *Morkinskinna* itself is likely to be due not only to the authenticating value of skaldic verse, but also to an inherent self-reflexivity. The question of the relationship between verse and prose frame is enormously complex, as noted above, but whichever came first and whatever their *original* relationship, the interplay of verse and prose is so fundamental to the structure of *Morkinskinna* and a great many Old Norse-Icelandic texts that the corollary is a special interest in the attributed authors of skaldic stanzas. Stanzas and skalds frequently operate as

auctorites, and thus these texts use skalds as indicators of historical verisimilitude.⁷⁰ Iceland produced more than its fair share of skalds, and thus the focus on Icelanders abroad tends naturally to concentrate on the most visible and literarily prolific examples. Where the literature treats Icelanders whose vocation was not solely skaldic composition, one can often discern yet more elements of a literarily constructed identity. As was argued above, being a skald was only one mode of behaviour; it was a job, not an intrinsic attribute, and it was not a job that had to be performed all the time. *Morkinskinna* provides a number of useful anecdotes concerning Icelanders who did not operate solely as cultural mediators.

Halldórr Snorrason, mentioned above, is the first major Icelandic character to be introduced in *Morkinskinna*,⁷¹ although the initial reference to him is somewhat oblique. He is not a skald, but he is a member of the king's men. Haraldr harðráði arrives with his retainers in Constantinople and places himself at the emperor's disposal, but takes on a pseudonym, 'Norðbrikt', because:

[V]ar þat eigi í vitorði alþýðu at hann væri konungborinn, heldr það hann alla sína því leyna, því at þat er at viðsýn gørt ef útlendir menn eru konunga synir.⁷²

The king, therefore, has to masquerade as an individual of different origins, an unusual and transgressive act for a monarch, whose authority rests more than anything else on recognition.⁷³

⁷⁰ This is, of course, especially the case when skalds are described as being at the king's side, for they fulfil the same role of 'witness continuity' seen demonstrated in, amongst others, *Íslendingabók*: 'svá sagði Teitr oss' *ÍF* 1: 7. ('so Teitr told us.')

⁷¹ It is necessary to observe that the *Morkinskinna* manuscript is defective at this point; this first episode is supplied by *Flateyjarbók*. Halldórr's presence in the text is also important in assessing the utility of reading the text as a whole rather than as a group of disparate *þættir* around a historical core, since Halldórr's earlier appearances with Haraldr harðráði cannot but inform the later, greater attention paid to him in *Halldórs þáttir Snorrasonar*.

⁷² *ÍF* 23: 88. 'It was not widely known amongst most of the people that he was of royal blood; on the contrary, he told everyone to conceal the fact since foreigners are shunned who are the sons of kings.'

What follows is worthy of some attention: Haraldr's retinue presumably meet up with the multitude of *Norðmenn* who form the *Væringjar* (the 'Varangian Guard'), which naturally includes an Icelander:

Þar var sá maðr íslenzkr er Már hét ok var Húnroðarson, faðir Hafliða Mássonar, ok var þar ágætr sveitarhøfðingi. Honum var mikill grunr á um menn þessa ina útlendu hvárt allt myndi eptir því sem þeir sögðu. Ok síðan hitti hann at máli Halldór Snorrason, er þá var með Harald, er kallaðisk Norðbrikt, ok vildi Már tala við Harald, en Haraldr vildi ekki við hann eiga, ok fekk Már ekki þar af. Ok síðan rézk hann ór Miklagarði ok þótti einskis ørvænt nema nokkur stórræði kæmu upp af stundu.⁷⁴

Icelanders in *Morkinskinna* perpetually to-and-fro across the North Sea, but they also exist on a more static, but by no means entirely rigid, continuum of distance from Iceland and proximity to the Norwegian centre. This is not a spatial distance, but a socio-cultural difference, and the above quotation illustrates two such positions. Már, established in the first instance as a 'maðr íslenzkr', is then established within Icelandic society through a brief genealogy. Már both penetrates the king's disguise and recognizes the presence of his compatriot Halldórr Snorrason: a perspicacious nature seems to be commonly attributed to Icelanders. The fact that Már possesses this peculiarly Icelandic insight and that he goes straight to a fellow Icelander for answers, coupled with the fact that he is placed immediately within an Icelandic genealogical context, places him closer to Iceland on the continuum posited above than Halldórr, who does not benefit from a genealogical context and is squarely within the king's retinue. Nevertheless his very name was presumably indicative of non-

⁷³ But, perhaps, a common romance motif. The reason why foreigners of royal birth would be shunned in Constantinople is unclear; there is a suggestion it was a Byzantine deterrent against usurpers (see Andersson and Gade, eds., *Morkinskinna* 426.)

⁷⁴ *ÍF* 23: 88-89. 'There was an Icelander who was called Már; he was the son of Húnroðr and the father of Hafliði Másson, and was a renowned commander there. He was very suspicious of these foreigners, and of whether things were really as they said. And he then sought to talk to Halldórr Snorrason, who was then with Haraldr who was calling himself Norðbrikt. Már wanted to talk with Haraldr, but Haraldr didn't want anything to do with him, and Már didn't get anywhere with it. He then left Constantinople; it seemed to him that it was not unlikely that some great undertaking would soon begin.'

Norwegian origins, given the extended narrative he is the subject of later in *Morkinskinna*. Halldórr may be placed somewhere within the middle of this continuum of assimilation, and in his eponymous *þáttr* he is seen moving substantially back towards Iceland: not, importantly, through arbitrarily falling out of favour, but rather through a combination of homesickness and a desire to leave the courtly social environment for the importantly *different* social context of Iceland. As has been seen, it was frequently retained skalds such as Sigvatr Þórðarson and more obviously Þjóðólfr Arnórsson who are depicted as the most thoroughly assimilated into the Norwegian social space: despite being geographically closer to Iceland than Már, they are figuratively further from the concept of Iceland.

Halldórr Snorrason was once at the heart of the king's retinue, but his removal of himself from the Norwegian court demonstrates both a conscious assertion of identity and a comment on the Icelandic conception of kingship. His growing dissatisfaction with courtly life is narrated in *Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar*,⁷⁵ which appears within *Morkinskinna* sometime after the depiction of Haraldr harðráði's campaigns in the east. Halldórr complains to the king that he is eager to return home to Iceland, and the king diagnoses him as being *heimfúss* (homesick). Halldórr clearly feels some form of dislocation even alongside a king whom he has accompanied far and wide across Europe. King Haraldr is enormously accommodating, equipping Halldórr with a ship with which to make the voyage and tricking the other merchants so that Halldórr can find sufficient crew by forbidding all but Halldórr to sail under the excuse of the threat of war from King Sveinn of Denmark. The

⁷⁵ *ÍF* 23: 178-87. It is important to note that there are two, entirely distinct texts labelled *Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar*; the text within *Morkinskinna* and referred to here is often known as *Halldórs þáttr II*. The first *þáttr* is found in the *Flateyjarbók* tradition. The plots are dissimilar; both are edited in *ÍF* 5: 251-77.

embargo on shipping lasts only a day, and is clearly a ruse. Halldórr goes to Iceland, but his trip does not appear to improve his mood:

Hann fór útan eptir um sumarit ok þá enn til hirðar Haralds konungs. Ok er svá sagt at Halldórr var þá eigi jafn fylginn konungi sem fyrr, ok sat hann eptir um aptna þá er konungr gekk at sofa.⁷⁶

If the earlier examples of Halli and Þjóðólfr are used in comparison, Halldórr seems stuck between these two poles. He clearly enjoys a favoured position with the king's troop, but he also appears to lack something in Norway for which he can only compensate by returning to Iceland. This is, perhaps, a crisis of identity. Halldórr does not apparently have the requisite skill to compose verse and be a skald, a role in the court that, as seen in the example of Einarr Skúlason, can allow a subtle assertion of identity, or at the very least *difference*, from the other members of the court. To feel 'Icelandic', Halldórr can only return to Iceland, because his identity within the court is only that of a retainer, a role that does not intrinsically acknowledge his different ethnicity. His special treatment is only at the king's discretion; it is not his right.

The collapse in the relationship between Halldórr and King Haraldr occurs as part of an event that is also important for what it reveals about kingship. One morning, the timing of the bells is changed presumably by the intervention of the king, and as a result a large number of men arrive late and have to drink a scone sitting in the straw before they can take their places at table:

Halldórr sitr í rúmi sínu, ok fœra þeir honum eigi at síðr vítit, en hann lézk eigi drekka mundu. Þeir segja þá konungi til. „Þat mun eigi satt,“ segir konungr, „ok mun hann við taka ef ek fœri honum.“ Tekr síðan vítishornit ok gengr at Halldóri, en hann stendr upp í móti honum. Konungr biðr

⁷⁶ The opening of *Halldórs þátr II* is absent from the *Morkinskinna* manuscript; the editors supply the above from the *Hulda* recension. *ÍF* 23: 180. 'He set out again in the summer, and then back to King Haraldr's retinue. And it is said that Halldórr was not as attached to the king as before, and that he stayed up in the evening even after the king went to bed.'

hann drekka vítit. Halldórr segir: „Ek þykkjumk ekki vítr at heldr, þó at (þér) setið brögð til hringinga til þess eins at gera monnom víti.“ Konungr svarar: „Þú munt drekka skulu vítit þó, eigi síðr en aðrir menn.“ „Vera má þat, konungr,“ segir Halldórr, „at þú komir því á leið at ek drekka, en þat kann ek þó segja þér at eigi myndi Sigurðr sýr fá nauðgat Snorra goða til,“ – ok vill seilask til hornsins, sem hann gørir, ok drekk af. En konungr reiðisk mjök ok gengr til rúms síns.⁷⁷

What Halldórr rejects here is more than simply the king's request to drink from the sconce-horn. He rejects the punishment because he can see that the king deliberately brought about a situation in which his retainers would have to drink a sconce. Halldórr thus mistakenly believes that the operations of the court should follow some form of equitable principle – that there should be some justice behind the actions of the king. This is not the case, for in Norway, under a king, the king's word is final, and although legal institutions exist, generally speaking the king exists above them.⁷⁸ Halldórr's rejection of the king's demand is thus related to the knowledge that such arbitrary punishment would not be possible in the society from which he comes, or that even if it were to occur, he would have recourse to the law. Whilst Halldórr's rebuke to the king sounds like a case of 'my dad's bigger than your dad', it is in fact an acknowledgement that all things being equal, a

⁷⁷ *ÍF* 23: 181-82. 'Halldórr sits in his seat, but nonetheless they bring him the sconce, and he says he will not drink it. They then tell this to the king. "That cannot be true," says the king, "and he'll surely drink it if I take it to him." He then takes the sconce-horn and goes to Halldórr, who stands up to meet him. The king asks him to drink the sconce. Halldórr says: "I do not consider myself penalized, since you hatched the plot to ring the bells for one reason, to fine people." The king answers: "You will still have to drink the sconce, just like everyone else." "It may be, king," says Halldórr, "that you get me to drink, but I can tell you yet that Sigurðr sýr could never have forced Snorri goði to do so." And he makes to reach out for the horn, which he does, and drinks from it. But the king becomes very angry and goes to his seat.'

⁷⁸ Legal procedures are sometimes used to arbitrate *between* kings. See the section of *Morkinskinna* known as *Þinga saga*, *ÍF* 24: 114-31. Ideologies of kingship were in a process of development throughout the medieval period. Although composed long after the events of *Morkinskinna*, Sverre Bagge has observed how the author of the *Konungs skuggsjá* ('King's mirror') 'regarded the king as responsible to God and as bound by the principles of justice which He had laid down. Within this general framework, however, there may be room for more or less arbitrary power.' Sverre Bagge, *The Political Thought of the King's Mirror* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1987) 156.

Norwegian king should have no jurisdiction over an Icelander. As a member of the king's company, Halldórr is forced to abandon this principle on this occasion. But after this point, it becomes clear in the *þáttr* that not only can Halldórr never be reconciled to the king, he cannot become reconciled to an existence within the Norwegian court, or perhaps within any monarchic social system at all. Later in the *þáttr* Halldórr complains that his pay is in debased silver, but one of his Norwegian friends remonstrates with him that '[v]el máttu þér þat líka láta er lendra manna synir hafa.'⁷⁹ Halldórr is not satisfied, of course, and despite Haraldr's many accommodations, Halldórr pushes his luck too far when he demands the balance of his pay in the form of a gold ring that Haraldr's queen is wearing. After that, he leaves for Iceland and never returns, fearing the king's revenge.

Halldórs þáttr thus demonstrates the potential incompatibility of an Icelander in Norway, stemming from the very heart of their expectations of how social structures are meant to operate. But *Morkinskinna* is not an anti-monarchist text. Shortly after *Halldórs þáttr*, which saw how the often truculent will of the Icelander overcame the often accommodating king, there is a direct authorial comment on the relationship between Haraldr harðráði and Iceland:

Hann hefir verit allra Nóregskonunga vinsælastr við Íslendinga. Þá er á Íslandi var mikit hallæri þá sendi Haraldr konungr fjögur skip ok hlaðin ǫll með mjöl ok kvað á at ekki skipund skyldi dýrra en þrim mǫrkum vaðmála.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ *ÍF* 23: 183. 'you should be well pleased with that which the sons of aristocratic men have.'

⁸⁰ *ÍF* 23: 205. 'He has been of all Norwegian kings the most friendly towards Icelanders. When there was a great famine in Iceland King Haraldr sent four ships fully laden with flour and declared that no ship-pound should cost more than three marks of woollen stuff.' This is supplied from *Flateyjarbók*. If this manuscript was, as Elizabeth Ashman Rowe has suggested, initially conceived as a gift to the Norwegian King Óláfr Hákonarson (d. 1387), this special relationship between Norway and Iceland may well have been deliberately magnified. See Rowe, 'Origin Legends and Foundation Myths in *Flateyjarbók*,' 212.

There has been some critical debate on the attitude towards kingship evident in *Morkinskinna*.⁸¹

Kingship was certainly a pertinent issue for the authors and readers of *Morkinskinna* because of the close relationship Iceland experienced with Norway: the above quotation highlights a moment of dependency on the goodwill of a foreign king. But kingship, whilst ostensibly the centre of *Morkinskinna*, is pushed conceptually to the periphery by its inherent incompatibility with Icelandicness. This is hardly surprising, since as seen in chapter 2.i above, part of the literature revolves around a myth of flight from kingship. It is indicative that it is Þjóðólfr who suggests to Haraldr in the short anecdote *Brands þátr qrova* that Brandr is of sufficiently good character to be the king of Iceland,⁸² since Þjóðólfr occupies an uncomfortable space within the text, stuck between two worlds.

Other narratives within *Morkinskinna* further demonstrate how kingship may be used by Icelanders, without necessarily subscribing to it as a preferred system of social organisation. *Auðunar þátr vestfirzka* is one of the most celebrated of the *Íslendinga þættir*, and frequently anthologized separately from *Morkinskinna* and its related manuscripts. The plot is probably one of the best

⁸¹ Theodore Andersson suggests that the author was especially predisposed to the *rex pacificus* such as Óláfr kyrri over more adventurous kings such as Haraldr, and that the author 'is against foreign adventurism and for domestic prosperity. In turn there can hardly be any doubt that this preference for domestic tranquillity is related to an overt threat to Icelandic stability emanating from Norway in 1220, when, as a result of mercantile quarrels, Jarl Skúli of Norway proposed to launch a fleet against Iceland.' Andersson, 'The King of Iceland,' 927. Conversely, Ármann Jakobsson argues: 'I think the interest in kingship of the *Morkinskinna* author is deeper and more general. Though the kings can certainly be divided into major types, the peaceful and the warlike kings, most of them are intricate characters who may behave at different times in a manner either tough or clement, rash or prudent, restrained or out of control.' Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Individual and the Ideal,' 80-1.

⁸² 'Ok svá hafði hann mælt, Þjóðólfr, at honum þætti eigi sýnt at annarr maðr væri betr til konungs fallinn í Íslandi fyrir sakir qrleika hans ok stórmennsku,' *ÍF* 23: 231. ('And Þjóðólfr had also told him that it was not evident that any other man would be better suited to be king of Iceland on account of his liberality and his munificence.')

known in Old Norse.⁸³ As observed above, the critical atomization of *Morkinskinna* has reduced the potential for the interpretation of the *þættir* as elements of a larger, coherent whole. In this case, Ármann Jakobsson has argued for the integral nature of this story to the wider narrative of the relations between King Haraldr harðráði of Norway and King Sveinn Úlfsson of Denmark:

The *þáttr* is of paramount importance in the development of the feud between the two kings and thus a vital part of *Morkinskinna*. When King Haraldr decides not to thwart Auðunn's plan to give his rival a precious gift, he is making a gesture of goodwill. [...] Even though they still occasionally clash, their antagonism is considerably diminished and they eventually make peace between their respective kingdoms. The *þáttr* paves the way for this. On the stage of *Auðunar þáttr* the two kings appear as generous men of honour and supreme rulers, each in his own realm. This is also how they emerge from their long strife.⁸⁴

This interpretation is certainly valid, for taken separately, the political consequences of Auðunn's movement between warring kings has little resonance when the readership is not aware of their past animosity. But there is a parallel narrative which *Auðuns þáttr* interacts with, in addition to that of the kings: it is that of the Icelander in the wider world. In the same way that Ármann Jakobsson sees the two kings using the Icelander as a mediator between them in a time of war, Auðunn himself uses the two kings to further his own goal, that of a pilgrimage to Rome. The introduction to the *þáttr* appears fairly straightforward, but within the text as a whole conceals deeper layers of meaning:

Maðr hét Auðun, vestfirzkr at kyni ok féltill. Hann fór útan vestr þar í fjörðum með umbráði Þorsteins, búanda góðs, ok Þóris stýrimanns er þar hafði þegit vist of vetrinn með Þorsteini. Auðun var ok þar ok starfaði fyrir honum Þóri ok þá þessi laun af honum, útanferðina ok hans umsjá. Hann Auðun lagði mestan hluta fjár þess er var fyr móður sína áðr hann stigi á skip, ok var kveðit á þriggja vetra björg.⁸⁵

⁸³ It has indeed recently been the subject of an entire monograph; see William Ian Miller, *Audun and the Polar Bear: Luck, Law, and Largesse in a Medieval Tale of Risky Business* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

⁸⁴ Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Amplified Saga,' 32.

⁸⁵ *ÍF* 23: 217. 'There was a man called Auðunn, a native of the Westfjords and poor. He went abroad out from the fjords in the west with the guidance of Þorsteinn, a good farmer, and the captain Þórir, who had lodged for

Auðunn is immediately placed within an Icelandic conceptual framework: first geographically, and then socially. Although he is leaving Iceland, he is retaining all manner of conceptual ties to the island. Unlike many skalds, and indeed Halldórr in his earlier career, Auðunn never leaves Iceland as a conceptual space. This is how one may resolve the most striking aspect of Auðunn's narrative, the fact of the relative ease with which he is able to negotiate his way across and between warring nations. Auðunn makes both an actual, Christian, pilgrimage and a figurative, political one. The *þáttr* is structurally very simple: Auðunn's will, his determination at doing what he set out to achieve, is pitted against the politics of the outside world. Auðunn remains an isle of steadfastness. His return to Iceland at the end of the *þáttr* makes his trajectory circular in a manner less common amongst skalds, who are obliged to involve themselves in court politics. Auðunn scrupulously exchanges gifts, ensuring that he never leaves anywhere with a debt outstanding.⁸⁶ Icelanders can indulge, therefore, in differing levels of engagement with the Norwegian centre, and, as has been seen, sometimes mediate between foreign powers to their own benefit.

As the above has demonstrated, *Morkinskinna* is a text which looks overtly to Norway and covertly to Iceland. But although it is clear that Icelandic characters present a fertile opportunity for the development of a literary identity, one cannot ignore the fact that the accounts of the kings in *Morkinskinna* – the displaced centres of the text – are inflected by their origins in Icelandic literary

the winter with Þorsteinn. Auðunn had been there too and worked for Þórir, and received as recompense for this the passage abroad and [Þórir's] supervision. Auðunn left the greater part of his money behind for his mother before he went aboard the ship, and that was considered to provide for three years.'

⁸⁶ For an anthropological examination of *Auðunar þáttr* which argues for the tale as that of an initiation ritual from youth to manhood, see Edward G. Fichtner, 'Gift Exchange and Initiation in the *Auðunar þáttr Vestfirzka*,' *Scandinavian Studies* 51.3 (1979). This argument is conducive to this reading that Auðunn never leaves an Icelandic conceptual space; he may travel abroad, but the ritual journey he makes is interior, from boyhood to manhood.

culture. If it may be established that the cultural milieu which produced *Morkinskinna* believed itself somehow different to and separate from Norway, then the picture of kingship seen in the text is an outsider's view, albeit informed by the Icelander's special ability – which has been explored above – to mediate between the two communities. Ármann Jakobsson sees the issues of the structure of *Morkinskinna* as inseparable from the issue of kingship:

The 'main narrative' is complemented by anecdotes that depict individual kings, especially King Haraldr harðráði, in greater depth and with added dimensions. The *þættir* also have a general moral point to make, for example, about kingship. Thus, the individual and the idea, past and present, a single event and the general morality of it, are intertwined in the royal portrayals of *Morkinskinna*, which makes it of special interest for any student of medieval political thought.⁸⁷

An Icelandic interest in kingship is inevitable given the island's political and historical situation. As observed above, the founding myth of Iceland rejected it, but the *Sturlungaöld* precipitated its return. Kingship was the medieval norm, which is the reason for Adam of Bremen's telling description of Icelandic society as having no king but the law.⁸⁸ The wheel turns full circle when one acknowledges that the patronage kingship could offer was fundamentally responsible for much of Icelandic literary culture that survives to this day. This chapter has demonstrated how *Morkinskinna* is, through this reading, a de-centred text, which contributes fully to the construction of a literary polity. A state and an ethnicity can only exist through distinction from others, and Norway always provides the most obvious point of comparison. But the literary relationship is more subtle than simple contrast, and the presentation of Icelanders abroad and, crucially, Norwegians at home, contributes towards an interrogation of how Iceland was different, how it was new, and where it

⁸⁷ Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Individual and the Ideal,' 86.

⁸⁸ See pp. 62-3 above.

came from.⁸⁹ The social mythology has it that Iceland was created, as a society, through the transformative acts of journeys and migrations. The later journeys of its inhabitants thus re-enact these transformations within a literature that also participates in the construction of a wider, Scandinavian, textual society. But, having examined the genesis of this social mythology, and its re-enactment throughout the literary setting of the *Þjóðveldi*, this analysis must now return to Norway once more, and to the literary depiction of the return not of individuals to Norway, but of the Icelandic polity itself.

⁸⁹ There is, of course, fruitful variance in the treatment of this theme between Icelandic texts. For an example with reference to the skald Sighvatr Þórðarson, see Margaret Clunies Ross, 'From Iceland to Norway: Essential Rites of Passage for an Early Icelandic Skald,' *alvíssmál* 9 (1999): 55-72.

4. A Violent Transformation – *Sturlunga saga*

The texts of the *Sturlunga saga* compilation, and especially *Íslendinga saga*, by far the longest discrete text, present a paradox when set against the literature pertaining to the period of the *Þjóðveldi* discussed thus far. Their scope is broader than much examined here, neither regionally focussed like the majority of the *Íslendingasögur* nor as personality-driven as the *þættir* of *Morkinskinna*. Instead these texts bring together domestic, regional, national and international narratives. *Íslendinga saga* contains a description of the moment when Gizurr Þorvaldsson negotiated the tribute by which Iceland became a vassal of Norway.¹ This scope seems to vindicate the argument this thesis presents, that the literature of medieval Iceland contains a narrative substratum charting the development of a discrete Icelandic identity. It is no longer merely single families, districts or regions which form the organizing principle behind the narrative of *Íslendinga saga*, but, as the name suggests, the Icelanders themselves. But at the same time, more and more chieftains are depicted as going to Norway to seek honour in the royal court, and Icelandic political independence is surrendered with little comment. That the *Þjóðveldi* passes so quietly may lead one to doubt that any sense of a distinctly Icelandic polity existed, if it was given up with so little comment. Paradoxes and inversions abound in the interactions with the social mythology that has been expounded above once the setting has been transposed to the narrative ‘present’, the thirteenth century.

¹ See *Stur.* I: 523 ff. The emphasis here ought to be on ‘negotiated’; Patricia Pirez Boulhosa argues persuasively from a historian’s perspective that the ‘submission’ to Norway was not a single, catastrophic event, but rather a gradual and indeed consensual process. Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway* 43-86.

A stanza attributed to Óláfr Þórðarson hvítaskáld, composed in honour of Aron Hjörleifsson, provides a distillation in verse of the legal and religious environment of *Sturlungaöld*-Iceland, found within *Íslendinga saga*:

Fór, sás fremð ok tíri,
 fleinrýrir, gat stýra,
 — mest lofak mikla hreysti
 manns —, Jórsali at kannu.
 Nafn rak út við ítra
 Jórðán við þrek stóran
 skjaldar Freyr inn skýri
 skógarmanns at gnógu.²

Not only is the Christian pilgrim figured in terms of Freyr, a stock skaldic formula, but Aron washes away the sentence of outlawry, imposed on him by Sturla Sighvatsson after defending Bishop Guðmundr Arason during a battle on Grímsey, in the streams of the Jordan. Icelandic secular law is negated or overruled by religious law; no longer is the stain of the outlaw a permanent one. In one sense secular outlawry is reconfigured as merely another sin that the transcendent law of Christianity can absolve. But when one ponders this stanza further, its message becomes more complex. How can Aron's outlawry be meaningful to him in Jerusalem? Surely outside the Icelandic community, his outlawry is an irrelevance? Here, then, an inversion and a transformation may be observed. No longer is Icelandic *lög* the unifying force it once was for Icelandic identity. It can come out in the

² *Stur.* I: 308. 'He set out, the spear-warrior / who commanded honour and fame, / to see Jerusalem. Much I praise / that man's great courage. / The Freyr-of-shield [warrior] / expunged full well the outlaw's name / with great vigour / in the streams of the mighty Jordan.' In addition to appearing in *Íslendinga saga*, Aron is the subject of his own saga, *Arons saga Hjörleifssonar*, which charts his advocacy for Bishop Guðmundr Arason, conflict with the Sturlungs, pilgrimage and time in Norway with King Hákon Hákonarson. See *Stur.* II: 237-78; *MSE* 21-22. The saga is not usually considered a component of *Sturlunga saga* since it shares no extant manuscript witnesses, but it is indisputably an example of a *samtíðasaga*.

wash. Nor, as discussed above, is the Icelandic territory itself at the centre of Icelandic identity.³ The mythology which sustained the creation of Icelandicness has corroded and fallen away. But this mythology is still celebrated in a piece of skaldic verse. The *idea* of outlawry persists, even if its function is not what it once was. *Sturlunga saga* charts the transformation of the depiction of the social mythology of medieval Iceland away from a narrative realization of practice, and towards survival as a literary and cultural concept.⁴ This chapter will seek to integrate some of the texts of the *Sturlunga saga* compilation, principally *Íslendinga saga*, with a wider literary tradition, and thus demonstrate how this transformation of an ideology of identity is achieved. The grand narrative sweep of *Íslendinga saga* is to an extent the reason it shall form the centre of this discussion, although it ought to be noted that some have suggested that it is in itself atypical of the genre it has come to define. William Ian Miller argues that:

Sturla Thordarson, the author of *Íslendinga saga*, was not making up the expansive conflicts of his saga, but some of the appearance of utter turmoil in the last decades of the commonwealth is a function of *Íslendinga saga*'s peculiar style, its confusing mass of names and detail, its length and scope.⁵

This is a fair comment in comparison to the other elements of *Sturlunga saga*, which *Íslendinga saga* certainly dominates. But *Íslendinga saga*'s 'length and scope' are the very reasons why it demands

³ It is far beyond the scope of this project, but nineteenth-century Romanticism saw, to an extent, a reconnection: 'where the country and the people form a whole.' Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years: The History of a Marginal Society* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000) 203.

⁴ An analogy may be made, therefore, with the pseudo-religious mythology of the *Eddas*, whose survival has been attributed to its literary and cultural value rather than to any religious reverence. See p. 170 above, and Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda*.

⁵ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking* 51.

close analysis. In its breadth of subject matter it has few analogues in the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus, and arguably none that pertain to Iceland itself.⁶

Although the *Íslendingasögur* discussed above near-universally engage with feud, dispute and death, the *Sturlungaöld* is depicted as a period in which disorder came to be normative over order. The extension of Norwegian sovereignty over Iceland was, then, an attempt at restoring something once lost. It occurred not through force but through negotiation:

Hier j mot skal konungr lata oss næ fridi og íslenskum laugum.⁷

This is the second clause of the text known as *Gizurarsáttmáli* ('Gizurr's covenant'), a record of the agreement made between the Icelanders, represented by Gizurr Þorvaldsson, and King Hákon Hákonarson of Norway (1217-1263). The first clause stipulates that the Icelanders will pay a permanent tax to the King.⁸ The agreement is conceptualized not, therefore, as one of surrender or capitulation, but instead of exchange: the construction *hér í mót*, 'in return', precedes the two overriding conditions of the compact, those of peace and Icelandic laws for the Icelanders. This single sentence masks a fear that Icelandic laws had apparently failed in the late twelfth and early

⁶ Theodore Andersson views it as a 'regional or chronicle saga,' analogous to *Eyrbyggja saga* or *Laxdæla saga*, but these sagas are very different in taking place principally in a specific region of Iceland. This permits an in-region/out-of-region dichotomy not evident in *Íslendinga saga*, which treats the entire island, from the Vestmannaeyjar to Grímsey. As Andersson observes, the most pertinent analogues are perhaps *Orkneyinga saga* and *Færeyinga saga*. See Theodore M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180-1280)* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006) 17.

⁷ *Diplomatarium Islandicum: Íslenskt fornbréfasafn*, 16 vols. (Copenhagen and Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmentafélag, 1857-1952) I: 620. 'In return the King will allow us to have here peace and Icelandic laws.'

⁸ '[A]t þeir jatudu [æfinlegan skatt herra N. konungi land og þegna med suordum Eidi .xx. alnir huer sa madr. sem þingfarar kaupi a at gegna. þetta fie skulu saman færa hreppstiorar og til skips og fæ j hendr konungs vmbodz manni og vera þa vr a byrgd vm þat fie.' *Diplomatarium Islandicum* I: 620. ('That they, the country and citizenry with sworn oaths, agree to pay as tribute in perpetuity to the liege King of Norway twenty ells for every man who is required to pay þing-dues. This money will be collected by the *hreppstjórar* ('overseers') and brought to ships and given over to the king's stewards, and they will then cease to be responsible for that money.')

thirteenth centuries to secure *friðr* ('peace'), much in evidence within *Sturlunga saga*.⁹ Early in *Íslendinga saga* a series of accidents and minor disputes between the kinsmen of Þórðr rauðr and Hámundr Gilsson coalesce into a pitched battle at the *Alþingi*. Following this, the author declares:

Þau missiri eftir váru dylgjur miklar með mönnum ok ófriðr á landi.¹⁰

The 'great narrative' of Iceland has thus turned full circle, and the *ófriðr* of Haraldr hárfagri's rule that is sometimes depicted as precipitating the emigration, as discussed in chapter 2.i, is now within Iceland itself. The Norwegian king, once figured as the source of strife, is now approached as the guarantor of peace. This inversion of the norms established by many of the *Íslendingasögur* is characteristic of the *samtíðarsögur*, but it is essential to recognize that the apparently aberrant – for example, the sudden permissibility of appalling torture – only appears so because the *Íslendingasögur* have been placed at the centre of the canon. The values and ethics present in the 'family sagas' have become normative; the reader experiences a discomfiting jolt when presented with scenes such as the torture of Órækja Snorrason, discussed below. Given the fact that the *Íslendingasögur* are the likely products of the same historical epoch as the *samtíðarsögur*, it perhaps ought to be the 'cleaner' violence and relative tranquillity of the *Íslendingasögur* that should seem surprising; either way, this difference cannot be put down merely to changing literary tastes.

⁹ From a historical perspective there is a lack of clarity here regarding which laws the Icelanders wished to keep, since the Norwegian law code *Járnsíða* was quickly imposed in 1271. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson sees this as the true end of the *Þjóðveldi*, because of its radically different constitutional measures. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'The Icelandic Aristocracy after the Fall of the Free State,' *Scandinavian Journal of History* 20.3 (1995): 156. Boulhosa suggests it was to mean more generally that Icelanders would still be involved in legislation, rather than it being any specific reference to, e.g., *Grágás*. See Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway* 140. It may be argued in the context of this thesis, however, that the wider sense of *lög* as metonymic of the Icelandic collectivity more generally might be a suitable literary interpretation.

¹⁰ *Stur.* I: 234. 'The following season there was much suppressed enmity between people and strife throughout the land.'

Nonetheless, it has been the *samtíðarsögur* whose role in the Old Norse-Icelandic canon has proved problematic for modern critics. Vésteinn Ólason acknowledges that:

[T]hese sagas differ in several respects from the *Íslendingasögur*, although this distinction is unlikely to have seemed important at the time of their writing.¹¹

Vésteinn does not elaborate to any great degree on what these distinctions are, but an obvious place to begin is the question of creative freedom. Although political bias may encourage deviation from objectivity, the degree of narrative manipulation possible when the characters within the texts relate directly to ‘real’ people must have been less than that possible for narratives of earlier times. But this difference as set against the *Íslendingasögur* is merely one of degree; the qualitative difference generic categorization can imply is misleading. A corollary of the greater temporal distance between composition and event in the case of the *Íslendingasögur* compared to the *samtíðarsögur* is the potential for the presence of a longer oral tradition. The issue of orality was discussed in the introduction and it is not to be rehearsed here in any great detail, but it is the case that critics have attempted to differentiate between these texts by appealing to the ‘oral’ nature of the *Íslendingasögur* against the ‘literary’ nature of the *samtíðarsögur*. Theodore Andersson argues that the *samtíðarsögur* ‘have their dramatic moments, but in general they are narratively flatter than the classical sagas,’

¹¹ Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, trans. Andrew Wawn (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1998) 61. Vésteinn’s assertion that this distinction would not have been important at the time of writing is curious; it is only possible to speculate, but it seems far-fetched to argue that medieval Icelandic authors would not have seen the act of narrating the events of the recent past as, at the very least, much more overtly political acts than narrating stories of the more distant past. See also Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, trans. Jean Lundskær-Nielsen (Odense: Odense University Press, 1999) 26–28.

although he acknowledges that saga-authors were adept at switching from ‘oral’ to ‘literary’ or ‘chronicle’ modes.¹²

In a manner now very much out of fashion in criticism of the *Íslendingasögur*, the saga-author’s detailing of the links between real lives and real testimony behind the narratives of some of the *samtíðarsögur* has been used to argue for the texts as history, and to use historicity as a generic distinction. In her study of *Íslendinga saga* Guðrún Nordal espouses this dichotomy:

Íslendinga saga is, however, not portraying a fictional ‘heroic’ society, such as the family sagas purport to depict, but actual history.¹³

Guðrún’s expression is problematic, since it attributes agency to a saga whose author was not necessarily cognizant of a history/fiction dichotomy: the binary opposition between truthful ‘contemporary’ sagas and fictional ‘family sagas’ is not corroborated by the texts themselves, and is an artificial opposition that masks something closer to a continuum. This is not to accuse the author of naivety. It is the case that an organizing narratorial voice is present, sometimes redolent of the role of Ari within *Íslendingabók*, and this voice openly interrogates the issue of truth. In the opening to *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*, the author explains his sources for his relation of the death of Einarr Þorgeirsson:

Hann fekk líflát á Grænlandi í óbyggðum, ok eru tvennar frásagnir. Sú er önnur – sögn Styrkårs Sigmundarsonar af Grænlandi, – ok var hann sagnamaðr mikill ok sannfróðr, – at skip þeira hefði fundizt í óbyggðum[.]¹⁴

¹² Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* 13. Andersson provides a summary of the theory of ‘oral’ and ‘literary’ styles, and the limitations of this model.

¹³ Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and Action in Thirteenth-century Iceland* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998) 21.

¹⁴ *Stur.* I: 116. ‘He died in Greenland in the wilds, and there are two narratives. This is one of them, told by Styrkár Sigmundarson of Greenland, and he was a great and well-informed author of sagas: that their ship was found in the wastes.’ Compare Ari’s reluctance to decide on the number of men Þangbrandr killed; see p. 132 above, and the uncertainty with regard to the role of Haraldr hárfagri in precipitating the settlement of Iceland in *Geirmundar þáttur Heljarskins*; see p. 95 above.

It is notable here that the author does not give the other version of the story. Perhaps he deemed it insufficiently reliable. But the acknowledgement that another version does exist, and his selection of this version in particular, with a concomitant appeal to the authority of Styrkár, shows how he wishes to place the ‘best’ story within the written narrative. The motivation is to *create* the best narrative from the materials available. This, arguably, is microcosmic of the wider Icelandic literary project, but it also has resonances within the compilation. The rather misnamed *formáli* (‘prologue’) to *Sturlunga saga*, found in the surviving manuscripts between *Sturlu saga* and *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*, is rightly famous for its self-reflexive description of the act of saga compilation. It begins ‘[m]argar sögur verða hér samtíða, ok má þó eigi allar senn rita.’¹⁵ Although this short text, which attributes the authorship of *Íslendinga saga* to Sturla Þórðarson, amongst other things, has been used as evidence of an authorial or compilatorial intention towards historicity, it is, in fact, something much subtler.¹⁶ This is an admission of the overtly literary quality of the work. The compiler who wrote the preface (who was almost certainly not Sturla Þórðarson) is aware of the limitations of the written word, and of the inability of a single narrative, which can only follow a single chain of causation at any individual moment, to replicate anything like the simultaneity of experience. In many respects the act of compilation is an attempt to circumvent this inherent restriction in the narrative form; by going on to explain how the time-spans of the various texts within the compilation overlap with one another, the author of the *formáli* is describing how all of

¹⁵ *Stur.* I: 115. ‘Many of the stories here happened at the same time, but one cannot write them all at the same time.’

¹⁶ For example, ‘[t]he *Sturlunga* prologue is incontestable evidence that the compilation was seen as a historical text.’ Úlfar Bragason, ‘Sagas of Contemporary History (*Sturlunga saga*): Texts and Research,’ *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) 433. For a collection of essays on the place of Sturla Þórðarson in Icelandic literary history, see Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir and Jónas Kristjánsson, *Sturlustefna: Ráðstefna haldin á sjö alda ártíð Sturlu Þórðarsonar sagnaritara 1984* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1988).

these texts interact differently with the single underlying narrative of the *Sturlungaöld*; to use Formalist terminology, the contrast is essentially one between *sjuzet* and *fabula*.¹⁷

Íslendinga saga itself presents evidence of an author more *self-consciously* literary than is generally found in the *Íslendingasögur*. When the brothers Snorri and Þórðr Þorvaldssynir are attacked by a force led by Sturla Sighvatsson, they are depicted as thinking immediately to something akin to their literary legacy:

Þá er þeir bræðr vissu, at eigi var friðar ván ok þeir váru allir skriftaðir, skipuðust þeir til varnar, því at þeir vildu með engu móti upp gefast, sögðu, at þá væri lítit til frásagnar.¹⁸

In one interpretation, this is nothing unfamiliar: criticism of *Beowulf* has long placed the juxtaposition of transient fame and Christian salvation at the heart of the narrative. Surely Snorri and Þórðr here are merely following in these footsteps, *lofgeornost* ('most eager for fame') to the last, seeking a kind of immortality through their posthumous reputations. The difference, of course, is that Snorri and Þórðr ensure they go into battle absolved of their sins ('allir skriftaðir'). They are Christians, and as such their reward is in heaven, not in the stories of those who survive them. In both *Íslendingasögur* and *samtíðarsögur* there is no lack of characters who willingly run to fight another day. What, then, to make of this concern, at a moment of great crisis, that their actions make a good story? On the one hand it is merely a way of saying that they wish to die with honour; but on the other, it is an explicit admission of the literary nature of the text, a text that is part of the

¹⁷ That is, between the narrative realization of a chronology and the chronology itself. Gérard Genette's expansion of Formalist analysis is perhaps yet more pertinent to this example, for it allows one to distinguish the underlying sequence of events (*histoire*) both from its literary realisation (*récit*) and the overt *narration* itself. See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980) 25-32.

¹⁸ *Stur.* I: 352. 'When the brothers were certain that there was no hope of peace and they were fully shriven, they prepared to defend themselves, because on no account did they intend to surrender; they said that would not make much of a story.'

much wider narrative of Icelandic identity and society this thesis has sought to explicate. To return to Vésteinn Ólason's remark, Snorri and Þórðr themselves do not see a difference between their own actions and those of *sögur* in the broadest possible sense. Certainly no generic differentiation is made within the texts themselves. The true distinction between *Íslendingasögur* and *samtíðarsögur* may be figured, after Bakhtin, as a chronotopic one. Bakhtin argued that within the narrative the 'image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic,' that is to say that the literary depiction of the individual collocates that individual within a temporal and spatial matrix.¹⁹ This is easily extensible to include the image of society. Time is the fundamental element: applied to the medieval Icelandic example, the sense of *difference*, of deviation from norms, is the result of the differing chronotopes of the texts under examination. Although the place is still Iceland, the spatial and temporal nexus that lies behind the narrative is altered by virtue of its distance in time. A more figurative interpretation of the chronotope further permits differentiation within the *samtíðarsögur* themselves. For example, the *Biskupa sögur* have also long been regarded as 'contemporary' sagas.²⁰ It may be helpful to regard the variation within the chronotope here as one of socio-political place, rather than physical location. There are further methods of differentiation. Martin Arnold distinguishes them thus:

[W]hile *biskupasögur* serve as authenticating narratives of Christian ideology and *konungasögur* testify to the power and prestige of the Scandinavian monarchs as well as the prominent role played by Icelanders at Scandinavian courts, the demotic *Íslendingasögur* attribute a comparable

¹⁹ M. M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,' trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981) 85.

²⁰ This generic label is itself problematic, because it demands a temporal reference point for 'contemporary' to be meaningful. For example, *Kristni saga* is counted amongst the *Biskupa sögur* for the purposes of the *Íslenzk fornrit* series (*ÍF* 15, *ÍF* 16 and *ÍF* 17), despite the conversion being at the centre of the narrative and not any particular bishop. Conversely, *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða* is also considered an element of *Sturlunga saga*, despite Bishop Guðmundr being the subject matter, and is not found in the most recent *Íslenzk fornrit* edition of the texts.

value to the beliefs, customs, heroics and controversies that circumscribed the lives of the acknowledged ancestors of Icelanders, the land-takers of the Settlement Age.²¹

Arnold regards the *samtíðarsögur* as an ‘exceptional case’, because they are critical of the values they are recounting.²² But Arnold’s analysis risks perpetuating an artificial divide between the ‘contemporary’ sagas and the other texts under discussion here. His attribution of a value-judgement to the sagas is problematic, since as it is hoped this thesis has in part demonstrated, the *Íslendingasögur* interact not uncritically with the values and wider social mythology of Icelandic identity. An abandonment of ‘exceptionalism’ and a reconciliation with the wider corpus is eminently desirable.

1. Violence to the person

To understand a text such as *Íslendinga saga* as interrogating the same cultural values as the *Íslendingasögur* demands an analysis of the apparently stark differences in attitudes towards violence. It is hard not to be shocked by *Íslendinga saga*. For all the copious bloodletting of the *Íslendingasögur*, depictions of torture and mutilation are rare: Theodore Andersson and William Ian Miller note only two occurrences,²³ once in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*,²⁴ mentioned above, which does not appear to cause Hrafnkell any lasting physical damage worthy of note, and once in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*,²⁵ a late saga probably of the fifteenth century, which may legitimately be considered an exception given its clear elements of pastiche and parody. This is not to say that

²¹ Arnold, *The Post-Classical Icelandic Family Saga* 43–44.

²² Arnold, *The Post-Classical Icelandic Family Saga* 44.

²³ Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature* 45.

²⁴ Hrafnkell is strung up by his heels; see p. 82 above and p. 213 below.

²⁵ Atli inn litli cuts the ears from some captives; see *ÍF* 6: 352.

maiming is uncommon; a great many of the *Íslendingasögur* detail appalling injuries received in fights, which often lead to death or disability, and references to torture carried out by Icelanders or quasi-Icelanders abroad can be found.²⁶ But the presentation of the wounds as *deliberate* attempts to maim rather than kill is usually absent. Depictions of torture and mutilation form, therefore, something of a watershed: practically absent from the *Íslendingasögur*, such practices are common throughout *Sturlunga saga*, and the most substantial text, *Íslendinga saga*, provides numerous examples. These examples frequently, although not exclusively, involve dismemberment, usually the amputation of limbs. The most common limbs to remove were the feet, often as a prelude to a *coup de grâce*, but not exclusively so. In the following example, Sturla Þórðarson notes deaths and maimings separately in the aftermath of a fight:

Þar váru ok drepnir tveir menn aðrir, Þorgeirr Steingrímsson ok Bergþórr Oddason. Tvá fóthjuggu þeir, Jón Þórðarson ok Halldór Klasason. En öðrum váru grið gefin.²⁷

Although it is more a product of the potential for compound verbs in Old Norse than any direct comment on medieval Icelandic society as a whole, the existence of the verb *fóthoggva*, to hew off the feet, is somewhat indicative, and employed frequently within the saga. The consequences of losing one's feet are undoubtedly severe and probably fatal. It is thus an act of violence that rejects a quick resolution: it leaves a living and dismembered body on the landscape, without the finality of a quick death.

²⁶ Leifr Eiríksson, perhaps a Greenlander rather than an Icelandic, has three accomplices of the errant Freydis Eiríksdóttir tortured in Vínland: see *Grænlandinga saga*, *ÍF* 4: 267–68. Vínland is of course as liminal territory as one might find in the corpus.

²⁷ *Stur.* I: 288. 'Then two other men were killed, Þorgeirr Steingrímsson and Bergþórr Oddason; they cut off the feet of two, Jón Þórðarson and Halldór Klasason, but the others were given quarter.'

The most savage occurrence of torture in the saga is endured by Órækja Snorrason at the bidding of his cousin Sturla Sighvatsson, and this does not involve the harming of his feet. This incident deserves scrutiny for a number of reasons, not least because of the excruciating detail with which Órækja's torment is described, but also because of the potential for this scene to illuminate the allusive nature of Sturla's writing.

Lögðu þeir þá hendr á Órækju, ok kvaddi Sturla til Þorstein langabein at meiða hann. Þeir skoruðu af spjótskafti ok gerðu af hæl. Bað Sturla hann þar með ljósta út augun. En Þorsteinn lézt eigi við þat kunna. Var þá tekinn knífr ok vafiðr ok ætlat af meir en þverfingr. Órækja kallaði á Þorlák biskup sér til hjálpar. Hann söng ok í meiðslunum bænina Sancta Maria, mater domini nostri, Jesu Christi. Þorsteinn stakk í augun knífinum upp at vafinu. En er því var lokit, bað Sturla hann minnast Arnbjargar ok gelda hann. Tók hann þá brott annat eistat.²⁸

The torture all the more offends modern sensibilities given the familial connection between Sturla and Órækja, and the fact that Órækja had come to see Sturla under the impression that they would be peacefully discussing matters of inheritance. The use of the verb *meiða* in this instance is important to elucidate. The term essentially means 'to harm' or 'to maim', actions that frequently occur during battle when the intent is to kill (it being the only alternative to being killed). Here, however, maiming is deliberate, and is coupled with mental torture: Órækja is present as Sturla orders the instrument of his blinding to be made, watches its creation, and in an act of abject humiliation, is told to remember his wife as he is emasculated. The act of torture relies upon the victim being conscious and surviving at least the majority of the experience, and indeed in this case

²⁸ *Stur.* I: 395. 'There they seized Órækja, and Sturla called on Þorsteinn langabein to maim him. They cut off part of a spear-shaft and made it into a point. Sturla told them to strike out his eyes with it, but Þorsteinn said he didn't know what to do with it. Then a knife was taken and wrapped up by more than a finger's breadth. Órækja called upon Bishop Þorlák to help him. He sang and prayed during the maiming to the Virgin Mary, mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. Þorsteinn stabbed the knife in his eyes, up to the wrapping. And when this was over, Sturla told [Órækja] to think of Arnbjörg, and castrated him: he then cut off one testicle.'

Sturla's intention seems to be to physically scar Órækja in such a way that he will re-enter society bearing the marks of Sturla's ascendancy. In this respect, it is at odds with the treatment of violence seen in the family sagas, where violence is almost exclusively prosecuted with the intent of extinguishing life. Torture in a wider, perhaps psychological sense does occur, when a valued member of a family is killed as an act of vengeance on a family rather than an individual, but such acts are exclusively mental torture. Killings in family sagas are often reported with merely a single phrase, frequently employing the compound noun *banahogg* (death-blow) with sparse further detail, and incidences of outright torture are restricted to those few examples noted above.

However, despite the close detail of Órækja's torture, the scene is rather defective as a historical account. It is unclear exactly what is happening: the device made from the spear-shaft which Þorsteinn is not versed in using seems a strange event to relate, and quite *what* was wrapped around the knife and *why* is equally obscure: it could be a strip of cloth to allow extra purchase on the handle, or perhaps something wrapped around the blade itself to prevent him cutting too deeply. The latter seems the most likely, and would correlate with this apparent pattern of intention to harm rather than to kill, the wrapping ensuring the blade would penetrate Órækja's eyes but not his brain. Nevertheless, the resultant scene is confusing, and becomes even more confounding when one reads later in the same chapter that after the incident 'Órækja hefði sýn sína ok var heill.'²⁹

This scene is a demonstration in miniature of the irresolvable gap between the literary representation of events and events themselves that was discussed above. From a purely literary-artistic point of view, the abortive construction of a torture device that Þorsteinn cannot use serves no narrative purpose, and the fact that Órækja's eyes are pierced but he retains his sight rather

²⁹ *Stur.* I: 396. 'Órækja had his sight and was healthy.'

beggars belief. In the same way that dialogue must necessarily be recreated in saga-literature, here in a rather more transparent manner misrememberings have been conflated into a clearly defective simulacrum of an event.³⁰ To return to one of the exceptional cases of torture in a family saga first mentioned above, a comparable episode may be found in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*:

Þá taka þeir Hrafnkel ok hans menn ok bundu hendr þeira á bak aptr. Eptir þat brutu þeir upp útibúrit ok tóku reip ofan ór krókum, taka síðan knífa sína ok stinga raufar á hásinum þeira ok draga þar í reipin ok kasta þeim svá upp yfir ásinn ok binda þá svá átta saman.³¹

In a similar manner to the example above, this scene does not quite ring true. The detailed description of the torture leads one to presume that it was something of an exceptional event and therefore demanded close explication to allow the audience to understand what was happening. The phrase ‘stinga raufar á hásinum’ is especially confusing: the word *hásin* is translated variously as ‘hough sinew’ or ‘Achilles’ tendon’; in either case, piercing this would surely hamstring Hrafnkell and his men, and would seem unlikely to be able to bear their weight.³² In a similar manner to Órækja, Hrafnkell seems to suffer no long-term damage from this torture. Both tableaux are to some extent exceptional: that *Hrafnkels saga* contains scenes of violence at all is unusual for a saga of its setting, and whilst maiming is more common in *Íslendinga saga*, it is not usually dwelt on in the same manner as is the case with Órækja; as seen in the case of *fóthoggva*, maiming was not usually

³⁰ This perhaps falls slightly short of Andersson’s presentation of medieval Icelandic historiography as something that can only ‘be judged in terms of shrewdness and plausibility.’ Theodore M. Andersson, ‘The Conversion of Norway according to Oddr Snorrason and Snorri Sturluson,’ *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 10 (1977): 91.

³¹ *ÍF* 11: 120. ‘Then they seize Hrafnkell and his men and bound their hands behind their back. After that they broke into the outhouse and took down ropes from the hooks; they then take their knives and pierce holes in the [captive’s] heels, then draw the ropes through them and throw them over the pole, and so bind the eight all together.’

³² For ‘hough sinew’, see ‘há-sin,’ *Cl-Vg*. ‘Achilles’ tendon’ may be found in Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910).

accorded such detail, and as shall be seen in the case of Þorbjörg, the laconic, matter-of-fact mode was still employed for moments of extreme violence. The exceptional nature of the scene within *Íslendinga saga* rests not so much on the violence itself, but on the manner of its representation.³³

If the stark depiction of violence, especially that intended to cause excruciating pain or humiliation as well as death, is to be maintained as a distinguishing characteristic of *Íslendinga saga* when set against the *Íslendingasögur*, and thus as an indicator of a different ethical climate, other literary comparators ought to be sought. One is perhaps initially struck by analogues in *Eddaic* poetry: in *Völundarkviða*, in order to prevent Völundr escaping, the queen orders ‘[s]níðið ér hann / sina magni’, a scene reminiscent of that observed in *Hrafnkels saga*, although with greater physical implications for Völundr.³⁴ As with *Hrafnkels saga* and *Íslendinga saga*, the ethics of the text are bewildering, for despite his unjust imprisonment, Völundr’s killing of the king and queen’s sons and his return of them to their parents as items of jewellery is especially repugnant. In ‘heroic’ *Eddaic* poetry, dismemberment before one’s eyes is also apparent in *Hamðismál*, as Iǫrmunrekkr is dismembered by Hamðir:

Fætr sér þú þína,
hǫndum sér þú þínom,
Iǫrmunrekkr, orpit
í eld heitan.³⁵

³³ Kari Ellen Gade suggests that this scene is another manifestation of *Íslendinga saga*’s literary nature. She sees the entire event as fiction, albeit a fiction concocted by the characters themselves with Órækja’s complicity to allow Órækja to have a reason for fleeing without loss of honour. She sees a number of analogous maimings in chronicles and sagas relating near-contemporary events outside Iceland, including *Orkneyinga saga*, and suggests that Sturla Þórðarson must have been aware of them since some of the figures involved are mentioned in his *Hákonar saga hins gamla*. See Kari Ellen Gade, ‘1236: Órækja meiddr ok heill gǫrr,’ *Gripla* 9 (1995).

³⁴ Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda* II: 248. ‘Cut from him the strength of his tendons.’

³⁵ Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda* I: 166. ‘You see your feet, you see your hands, Iǫrmunrekkr, cast into the hot fire.’

Similar to Sturla's injunction to Órækja to think of his wife, the order to Iormunrekkr to observe actively his own dismemberment makes him somehow complicit in his own destruction. It adds a dimension of mental torture. Skaldic poetry is also replete with violent imagery, although it is almost always martial, and rarely purely punitive; this does not prevent depictions of the results of battle, as may be observed in *Magnússdrápa*:

Svá hlóð siklingr hóvan
 snarr af ulfa barri
 – hrósa'k hugfulls vísa –
 hrækost – fíra ævi,
 at áleggjar Yggjar
 allnóttföru máttit
 – öld lá vítt – þótt vildi,
 vífs marr yfir klífa.³⁶

Skaldic poetry emerges from a tradition with its own conventions and stock images. As in the above example, it tends toward archetypal images of violence on an epic scale, lacking the visceral nature – or indeed plausibility – that is tended toward in the *samtíðarsögur*. It is also an intensely political form: the skald required patronage, and thus would usually write towards the unequivocal praise of his benefactor; this necessarily modulates the role of violent imagery such as in the above, since it is just (on the side of the skald's patron) and glorious (the result of a military success).

But despite these many echoes from the postulated 'native' tradition, it is impossible not to be struck, above all, by the similarity between the depictions of killing and torture in *Íslendinga saga* and the suffering endured by Christian martyrs in hagiographic writing. Henry Kratz notes that saints' lives 'are among the oldest records of vernacular literature that have come down to us from

³⁶ Diana Whaley, ed., *The Poetry of Arnórr jarlaskáld* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998) 121. 'I praise the courageous leader: so the swift king heaped up a carrion-mound of wolves' barley so high that the steed of the spouse of river-limb-Óðinn (wolf) could not climb over it, although he wished to – widely men lay.'

Norway and Iceland',³⁷ and are potentially alluded to as a genre of literature by the author of the *Fyrsta Málfræðiritgerðin*, one of the earliest extant Norse texts in the vernacular, as 'þyðingar helgar': it is worth mentioning that sagas *per se* are not referred to as a kind of literature in this text, the only other 'genres' being laws and genealogies.³⁸ Saints' lives were almost certainly in currency throughout the period in which all saga-literature was composed. This being the case, echoes in *Íslendinga saga* are perhaps not surprising: for example, Þorbjörg ysja has her breasts cut off in the attack on Sturla Sighvatsson's home at Sauðafell.³⁹

Hon sagði ok konu þá, er brjóstin bæði váru af höggvin, yfrit þungt at tekna, þótt þau næði smyrslum þeim, er til væri.⁴⁰

The motif of the removal of a woman's breasts is common in the lives of female martyrs, such as Saint Agatha, whose life was available in the vernacular:

Þa reiddiz Kvincianus iarl ok let slita briost af henni med iarnkrokum.⁴¹

A companion motif is the ability of martyred saints to choose the point at which they finally expire, usually after having frustrated their tormenters by surviving their earlier tortures. Back in her cell, Agatha decides the moment at which she will die:

³⁷ MSE 562.

³⁸ Hreinn Benediktsson, ed., *The First Grammatical Treatise* 208. Literally 'holy interpretations, translations'; this has, however, also been argued to refer to exegetical texts: see Margaret Cormack, 'Christian Biography,' *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) 29.

³⁹ Or at least, a certain woman does; the text is unclear, as the quotation below demonstrates. In the edition of *Sturlunga saga* by Jón Jóhannesson *et al*, the 'kona' of the passage is identified in the textual notes as Þorbjörg; Guðrún Nordal, however, appears to differ, noting in her analysis of the saga that '[t]he circumstances of Þorbjörg's killing are not recounted.' (Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and Action* 217.) Given the fact that the saga notes that she died three days later of her wounds, it seems reasonable to identify her with the woman attacked.

⁴⁰ *Stur.* I: 328. 'She [Kristrún] said also that the woman, both of whose breasts had been cut off, would have suffered abundant ill-treatment even if she could get the ointment which was there [in the chest.]'

⁴¹ Carl Rikard Unger, ed., *Heilagra manna sögur: Fortællinger og legender om hellige mænd og kvinder*, 2 vols. (Christiania: B. M. Bentzen, 1877) I: 9. 'Then Kvincianus jarl became angry and had her breasts torn from her with iron hooks.'

Enn biðr ek þik, guð minn, at þu takir nu anda minn or likam ok sendir helga engla þina moti salo minni.⁴²

Attempts at controlling the moment of death are also present in *Íslendinga saga*; whilst this is partly a result of the increasingly popular habit of executing prisoners rather than restricting killings to battles or duels, it must also be seen as something of a statement of control, that choosing the manner and moment of one's expiration in some way mitigates death itself (especially on occasions which allow for reconciliation with God). An example of this may be found during the aftermath of the battle at Qrlygsstaðir:

Kolbeinn mælti til Gizurar, er hann kom út: „Þat vilda ek, at þú létir mik fyrir höggva en Þórð, bróður minn.“
Gizurr kvað svá vera skyldu.
Þá hjó Einarr kollr Kolbein.⁴³

Of course, choosing when to give up one's life is not exclusive to these violent acts of execution in the *samtíðarsögur*; a similar motif is indeed found in the family sagas, the archetypal example being Njáll's acceptance of his fate by burning when he takes to his bed as his house is consumed by flame:

Þau leggjask niðr bæði í rúmit ok lögðu sveininn í millum sín. Þá signdu þau sik bæði ok sveininn ok fálu qnd sína guði á hendi ok mæltu þat síðast, svá at menn heyrði.⁴⁴

This form of submission to fate, or indeed a general posture of quiet and dignified submission to death does not necessitate a specifically Christian ethos, but it seems likely that the trope of

⁴² Unger, ed., *Heilagra manna sögur* I: 12. 'Yet I ask you, my God, that you now take my soul from my body, and send your holy angels toward my cell.'

⁴³ *Stur.* I: 437. 'Kolbeinn said to Gizurr, when he came out, "I want you to strike me down before Þórðr, my brother." Gizurr said it would be so. Then Einarr kollr struck Kolbeinn.'

⁴⁴ *ÍF* 12: 331. 'They both laid themselves down in the room and laid the boy between them. Then they crossed themselves and the boy and gave over their souls to God, and this was the last that they were heard to say.'

martyrdom pervaded the *Íslendingasögur* to a similar extent as the contemporary sagas, given the fact that they arose from the same cultural tradition.

Íslendinga saga contains several examples of more violent deaths (by the sword rather than by fire) in which the victim still determines to die in a ‘Christian’ manner, sometimes even evoking Christ himself, as in the case of Eyjólfur Kársson when he is killed by one of Sighvatr Sturluson’s men:

Maðr hét Þórir, er hjó eftir honum, – kom á fótinn við ökklat ok tók af, svá at lafði við. Ok hnekkti hann þá á sjóinn ok lagðist í sker eitt. Þat váru tólf faðmar.

Hljópu þá menn Sighvats á skip. En er þeir kómu í skerit, lá Eyjólfur á grúfu ok hafði lagt hendr í kross frá sér. Ekki blæddi, þá er þeir lögðu til hans.⁴⁵

Perhaps this is no surprise, since Eyjólfur was one of Bishop Guðmundr’s men; but nevertheless, there are clear biblical parallels, and there are yet more explicit examples. This appears to be an analogue of the crucifixion in the posture of the body and the piercing of the side: later in *Íslendinga saga* echoes emerge of John’s account of doubting Thomas:

Thomas, called the Twin, who was one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. When the disciples said, ‘We have seen the Lord’, he answered, ‘Unless I can see the holes that the nails made in his hands and can put my finger into the holes they made, and unless I can put my hand into his side, I refuse to believe’ (The Jerusalem Bible, John 20.24-5).

This occurs during the killing of Þórðr Þorvaldsson:

Sturla bað Þórð þá niðr leggjast.
Hann gerði svá ok signdi sik. Ok í því er hann lagðist niðr, hjó Þormóðr um þverar herðar honum, ok varð þat mikit sár.

⁴⁵ *Stur.* I: 292. ‘A man called Þórir struck out at him, caught him in the foot at the ankle and struck it off so that it dangled from him. He then hobbled back into the sea and swam to a skerry twelve fathoms away. Then Sighvatr’s man ran to the boats. When they came to the skerry, Eyjólfur was lying face down and had his hands laid out in the shape of a cross. He did not bleed when they struck at him.’

Sturla mælti: „Högg þú annat.“
 Hann gerði svá, ok kom þat útan á hálsinn.
 Sturla mælti: „Högg þú it þriðja, ok er illa unnit at góðum dreng.“
 Eiríkr birkibeinn þreifaði í sárit ok mælti: „Eigi þarf nú meira við, at
 fullu mun þetta vinna.“⁴⁶

The manner in which these scenes recall biblical precedent is important to analyse. There is not an explicit invitation to see these individuals as types of Christ. Sveinn Jónsson's death is identified by Guðrún Nordal as 'the only time in the saga when an execution is laced with martyr-like elements';⁴⁷ he asks that his limbs be cut off before he is killed outright and sings devotional songs as this takes place.⁴⁸ Although Nordal's claim is perhaps true of *outright* executions, the examples examined here demonstrate that the idiom of martyrdom permeated *Íslendinga saga* and was probably present in the *Íslendingasögur* themselves too. Thus the manner in which violence was depicted was not necessarily simply a direct reflection of the state of medieval Iceland during the Sturlung era, but a depiction moderated through a number of literary idioms. The most important literary idiom was surely that of Christianity, one of the central planks of the Icelandic social mythology under discussion here. It is paradoxical, but perhaps unsurprising, that a faith which privileged peace is more evident in times of strife than in times of tranquillity.

Some caution ought to be exercised when comparing the idiom of violence across these generic boundaries. Linguistic differences are present. As seen above in relation to its usual use in the course of battle, the term used to describe the injuries inflicted upon Órækja is the verb *meiða*,

⁴⁶ *Stur.* I: 356. 'Sturla then told Þórðr to lie down. He did so and crossed himself, and as he lay down, Þormóðr struck him across his shoulders, and that was a great wound. Sturla said, "Strike again." He did so, and that came out at the neck. Sturla said, "Strike a third time, that was a poor blow against a good warrior." Eiríkr birkibeinn felt in the wound and said, "There is no need for more, this is quite sufficient."

⁴⁷ Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and Action* 205.

⁴⁸ See *Stur.* I: 253.

whose meaning is simply ‘to hurt, maim or injure’, and is thus a term which does not necessarily convey a sense of intent behind such actions.⁴⁹ Conversely, in saints’ lives the term generally used is *pína*, both a noun and a verb, ultimately cognate with the Latin *poena* (punishment, hardship). In Norse, *pína* carries a sense of punishment and torture, and thus a psychological effect is intended. This is not necessarily the case with *meiða*, and whilst this may seem a minor point, it is salutary to realize that the idiom of hagiographic suffering may not have been transposed to saga-literature as neatly and directly as a translation might indicate. What does separate the torments and deaths of martyrs from those of the chieftains and warriors of the *Sturlungaöld* is that the latter existed in a fractured ethical and social framework, and that the violence to the body these sagas describe is metonymically translatable to the violence done against the polity. The tool of the chronotope may once more be employed; what sets apart the violence of *Sturlunga saga* is the collocation of a specific type of violence not associated with literary depictions of the *Þjóðveldi* in the *Íslendingasögur* and thirteenth-century Iceland. Practices that the literature relishes describing in foreign or liminal places are brought back home in the presentation of the *Sturlungaöld*.

2. Violence to society

There is a clear temptation to draw an analogue between the dismemberment of individuals witnessed in the discussion of violence, mutilation, and torture above, and the dismemberment of society. The depiction of violence, a touchstone of continuity across the literary canon, also

⁴⁹ It is nonetheless interesting to note that in *Íslendingabók* King Óláfr Tryggvason threatens to ‘meiða eða drepa’ (maim or kill) any Icelanders residing in Norway unless the Icelanders agreed to convert to Christianity (see *ÍF* 1: 15 and p. 119 above).

functions as a differentiator. Lois Bragg has touched on this issue in an article which primarily treats disability:

Like the random, congenital disfigurement or disability, the random, intentional mutilation incarnates the dis-integration – the loss of wholeness – of the society through the loss both of its key members, like Snorri, and of its key values, like the inviolability of an oath.⁵⁰

This ‘dis-integration’ might be seen as constituting a change or fluctuation in the narrative substratum – the ‘national’ narrative – which manifests itself within the literature as the changes seen between the *samtíðarsögur* and its predecessors in narrative time discussed above. This issue of ‘incarnation’ or transference is important: the damage to the single body as metaphor for damage to the *family* is an established motif in Old Norse literature, perhaps best exemplified in *Hamðismál*, when Hamðir and Sqrli kill their half-brother Erpr on their way to battle Iqrmunrekkr. Erpr argues for the necessary unity of the familial body:

Svaraði inn sundrmæðri,
svá kvaz veita mundo
fulting frændom,
sem fótr qðrom.
‘Hvat megi fótr
fæti veita,
né holdgróin
hond annarri?’⁵¹

It is possible to extend this analogy, from the body as family to the ‘body politic’ in the widest sense.⁵² There are two aspects of *Íslendinga saga* which would encourage such a reading, both related

⁵⁰ Lois Bragg, ‘Disfigurement, Disability and Dis-integration in *Sturlunga saga*,’ *alvissmál* 4 (1994): 19.

⁵¹ Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda* I: 164. ‘The one born of a different mother answered; he said that he would give help to kinsmen as one foot does to another. “How may a foot assist a foot, or a hand of the same flesh help another?”’

to the social geography of Iceland as portrayed in the saga. First, there is the matter of the collapse of any sense of internal unity to Iceland, something intimately connected to the atrophying power of *lög*. Then, it will be necessary to look briefly to Iceland's relations with other countries – a situation dominated, of course, by Norway.

As this thesis has shown, the social mythology of the *Þjóðveldi* hinges upon the principle of fostering consensus. To recapitulate some of the themes discussed above, the moment at which Iceland is depicted as becoming a coherent polity was when the *Alþingi* was first convened, an event which probably introduced many of the settlers to one another for the first time. It must surely have stimulated trade, and it is clear from the *Íslendingasögur* that the *Alþingi* (and, for that matter, the regional assemblies) are consistently portrayed as forums of social interaction in which new familial or kinship ties – marriages, alliances, fostering of children, and so on – could be forged. The sanction of outlawry formed an absolute distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' the community. In *Íslendinga saga* the fragmentation of both social and legal unity begins within Iceland itself. If one recalls Óláfr hvítaskáld's poem above, the interaction (conflict is perhaps too sweeping a term) between the Church and secular institutions began to manifest itself in the bifurcation of laws. In the early years after the conversion secular and religious governance were not clearly distinct; the *Alþingi* appointed bishops and the local *goði* would have likely as not established a church and administered it himself. Although they have frequently been seen in opposition, Orri Vésteinsson argues of the early members of the church that:

⁵² For a comparable shift from family to body as metaphor for the polity in a Middle English romance, see Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, 'The Female Body Politic and the Miscarriage of Justice in *Athelston*,' *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 17 (1995): 79-98.

[T]heir objectives were [...] humble and in no way can they be seen as hostile to the existing societal structure. There were of course aspects of society, notably those associated with heathen practice, which the early church struggled against, but in general it is safe to say that the first generations of indigenous churchmen viewed their society as a unitary phenomenon and they viewed their task as one of adding to the cohesion and quality of this society.⁵³

This is important, because when one observes conflict ostensibly between secular and ecclesiastical spheres in *Íslendinga saga* this should not be seen necessarily as the direct collision of two incompatible sources of authority, but instead as a dislocation of the community: a severing (an incident of dismemberment, if you will) of elements within a previously functioning society due more to political expediency than ideology; much, indeed, to do with the growing concentration of power amongst a small group of families. In the following case, in which Bishop Guðmundr exempts priests from secular law, Sturla Þórðarson acknowledges this when he notes that previous disagreements with Kolbeinn Tumason generally over matters of regional government were the cause of the problems: '[m]eð því upphafi reis deila með Guðmundi biskupi ok Kolbeini Tumasyni ok hans venzlamönnum.'⁵⁴ Nonetheless, Guðmundr's declaration is a pivotal moment in the saga, as he comes to the defence of a priest against whom Kolbeinn has a monetary claim:

En biskup þóttist eigi dóm á prestinum, en kallar hann frjálstan fyrir Kolbeini. Nú sækir Kolbeinn prestinn [at landslögum] til dauða ok útleððar. En er þeir véltu um dóminn á þingi, þá gekk biskup til dóms með staf ok stólu ok fyrirbauð þeim at dæma prestinn. En þeir dæmdu eigi at síðr.⁵⁵

⁵³ Orri Vésteinsson, *Christianization of Iceland* 4.

⁵⁴ *Stur.* I: 244. 'This was the beginning of the disagreements between Bishop Guðmundr and Kolbeinn Tumason and his kinsmen.'

⁵⁵ *Stur.* I: 244. 'But the bishop believed judgement should not be passed on a priest, and declared him free of Kolbeinn. Now Kolbeinn prosecutes the priest under public law (the law of the land) for death and outlawry, but while they considered judgement at the assembly the bishop came to the court with staff and stole and forbade them passing judgement on the priest. But nevertheless they passed sentence on him.'

In retaliation, Guðmundr effectively excommunicates Kolbeinn and his followers. Analogues with the conversion narrative are clear, only in this case there is no law-speaker Þorgeirr to mediate the parties, and essentially both declare themselves ‘out of law’ with one another, redolent of the phrase ‘ýr lögum’ found in *Íslendingabók*.⁵⁶ Relations between Guðmundr and the *goðar* do not improve, and *Íslendinga saga* chronicles a series of battles between the *goðar* and the bishop’s followers. The events surrounding these battles are even more telling regarding the shattering of a single legal ideal. Sturla describes thus the aftermath of a battle that probably took place around 1209, between a coalition of seven chieftains and the bishop’s men:

Þeir, er sekir váru, váru færðir í urð ok lágu þar tvá mánuði.

En sína menn, þá er þar fellu án iðran ok lausn, grófu þeir at kirkju, ok kölluðust þeir þat allt líkja eftir biskupi, er hann lét seka menn í kirkju ganga. Biskup lét ok einn mann, er fallit hafði af Kolbeini iðrunarlaus, eigi at kirkju liggja mánuð.⁵⁷

The conflict between the bishop and the *goðar* is presented as one between two interpretations of *lög*. Guðmundr’s propensity to shelter secular outlaws infuriates the *goðar*, and the bishop’s response is to use excommunication: fundamentally, outlawry by another name. From the point of view of the *goðar*, the bishop is acting against *lög* because he is giving assistance to outlaws, something expressly prohibited under Icelandic law as recorded in *Grágás*, and considered taboo throughout the

⁵⁶ See p. 107 above.

⁵⁷ *Stur.* I: 253. ‘Those who were outlawed were buried under a heap of stones and lay there for two months. But their own men, who fell there without repentance or absolution, they buried by the church, and said that this was exactly in the manner of the bishop, who allowed outlawed men to go into church. The bishop did not allow a certain man of Kolbeinn’s, who had died unrepentant, to lie in the churchyard for a month.’

literature.⁵⁸ But for the bishop, the burial of those in consecrated land who have been excommunicated or died without absolution is in contravention to God's law.

There is no hint within *Íslendinga saga* itself that this legal crisis ties Iceland firmly to convulsions within European Christendom, but Guðmundr's excommunication of Kolbeinn is analogous, in a modest way, to Pope Gregory VII's excommunication of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV over the investiture controversy in 1076, perhaps the most significant confrontation between secular and ecclesiastical power in the medieval period. Gregory's excommunication followed the decision of a synod of German bishops at Worms to cease to recognize him as pope.⁵⁹ Gregory VII's disdain for secular power verged on the immoderate, and he died without seeing the supremacy of the church affirmed.⁶⁰ It was some time after this that the relationship between *goðar* and church became a troubled one in Iceland; Saint Þorlákr Þórhallsson, bishop of Skálholt from 1178 to 1193, was in regular dialogue with the Norwegian church which encouraged him to assert the church's freedom from secular law and, conversely, the supremacy of God's law over matters

⁵⁸ 'Ef menn sja scogar man er þeir fara leiðar sínar. oc varðar þeim eigi við lavg þoat þeir take hann eigi ef þeir eiga ecki við hann. En ef þeir eiga við hann kavp eða avnor mavc nokor eða raða honom ráð þav er hann se þa nær lífe sino en aðr. oc er þat biörg við hann. oc varðar þat fiör vavgs garð.' *Gr.* II: 402. ('If people see an outlaw while they are journeying they are not breaking the law if they do not capture him, as long as they have nothing to do with him. But if they trade with him or have any other dealings or give him advice such that his life is more secure than it was before, that is assistance to him and the penalty for that is lesser outlawry.') *Grágás* also provides for four classes of corpse which are not to be buried in consecrated ground: the unbaptized, full outlaws, suicides, and simply those that the 'byskop vill bannat hafa at grafa at kirkio,' *Gr.* Ia: 12. ('the bishop forbids from being buried in the churchyard.') Furthermore, under these rules outlaws may not be buried in the churchyard 'nema byskop sa lofi er yfir fiorþvngi þeim er,' *Gr.* Ia: 12. ('unless the bishop of that quarter permits it.')

⁵⁹ See Colin Morris, *The Papal Monarchy: The Western Church from 1050 to 1250* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 115–16.

⁶⁰ 'Gregory's most extreme statement on kingship [claimed] that all secular authority had a diabolic origin.' I. S. Robinson, 'Reform and the Church, 1073–1122,' *The New Cambridge Medieval History vol. 4: c. 1024–c. 1198*, eds. David Luscombe and Jonathan Riley-Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 276.

such as marriage.⁶¹ It is of some significance, therefore, that the focus within *Íslendinga saga* remains resolutely one of jurisdiction. The conflict is not figured as one between two sources of power as such, but as two factions competing for the claim to be holding to the true *lög*, something that can no longer be regarded as a unity. This competition produces a different kind of violence to that seen in the *Íslendingasögur*, for it is a violence that refuses to be contained when the agents involved do not view it as having occurred within the same legal framework. *Lög* in the sagas is the coming together of various discrete agents to determine boundaries, sometimes literal, but usually figurative. Law involves making a ‘finding’; it is an active process of description. The desired outcome is consensus; an agreement amongst individuals that they will all see a certain part of the world in the same way. If the *lög* becomes bifurcated, such agreement becomes impossible.

From this point onwards, the equivalence of *lög* with any concept of a coherent polity begins to fall down, and within both *Íslendinga saga* and its narrative predecessor *Sturlu saga* there are physical manifestations of this. The construction of fortifications around settlements is not exclusive to *Sturlunga saga*; Óspakr Kjallaksson fortifies his farm in *Eyrbyggja saga*:

Þetta sumar áðr hafði Óspakr látit gera virki á bæ sínum á Eyri; þat var öruggt vígi, ef menn væri til varnar.⁶²

However, Snorri goði’s defeat of Óspakr is an archetypal example of the correct functioning of Icelandic society: he assembles a coalition of Icelanders to defeat a clearly socially disruptive group. Instead, in *Sturlu saga*, Einnarr Þorgilsson, a *goði*, fortifies his farm after forcibly seizing property from Oddr Jóseppson which he felt was owing to him:

⁶¹ See Orri Vésteinsson, *Christianization of Iceland* 168–71. Archbishop Þórir of Niðaróss likewise uses the epistolary medium to intervene on behalf of Guðmundr Arason against the *goðar*; see *Stur.* I: 255.

⁶² *ÍF* 4: 158. ‘The previous summer, Óspakr had had fortifications built at his farm at Eyrr; it was a secure stronghold, should it be [well] defended.’

Dá var gert virki um bæinn á Staðarhóli ok þar byrgð í nautin um nætr ok vakat yfir ok setit at um daga yfir undir fjallinu gegnt Staðarhóli.⁶³

Sturla Þórðarson (or Hvamm-Sturla, the eponymous protagonist of *Sturlu saga*, grandfather of the putative author of *Íslendinga saga*) became involved in the escalating feud (in which bishops join either side), and when legal resolution fails, Sturla suggests that he and Oddr form a joint household which is promptly fortified:

Sturla lét ok engi gjöld um sumarit, því at hætt var kallat milli þeira. Hann hafði látit gera virki um húsin í Hvammi.⁶⁴

The saga-author's juxtaposition of the collapse of trust and the fortification of farms is apt and incisive in its conciseness. The fortified farms become calluses on a dismembered body politic. The lawless associations of the traditional liminal zones of the saga-imagination – the interior, the outlying islands (Drangey, for instance, the last home of Grettir) – are transposed to the entire country. Similarly, whereas Iceland was once one (one state, country, territory, realm – the term used is ultimately insignificant), for much of the course of *Íslendinga saga*, it was many: 'abroad', the liminal zones examined above, could be found at home, which may be why rather than the younger generations of men going out on viking raids overseas, viking raids are carried out by land on fellow Icelanders. Órækja Snorrason, for instance, is behind a raid on a prudent farmer called Einarr:

En er þeir fundu Einar, föluðu þeir föstum at honum. En hann vildi engan selja ok bauð þeim vætt hvals ok aðra riklinga. Þeir vildu þat ekki ok hljópu inn sumir í húsin.⁶⁵

⁶³ *Stur.* I: 84. 'Then a stronghold was constructed around the farm at Staðarhóll and the cattle were shut in there at night and guarded, and in the daytime put out beneath the mountain opposite Staðarhóll.'

⁶⁴ *Stur.* I: 87. 'Sturla paid no compensation during the summer, because no-one dealt trustfully with one another. He had ordered outworks be built around his farmhouse at Hvamm.'

⁶⁵ *Stur.* I: 380. 'And when they met Einarr, they asked him for fasting-food. But he didn't want to sell any and offered them a weight of whale and dried halibut instead. They didn't want that and some of them charged into the house.'

Food, of course, is not necessarily equivalent to the riches raiding might return, and the very fact that bands of warriors were roaming Iceland searching for food may well indicate more fundamental environmental problems affecting society, although the fight over the meat of a beached whale is a common trope.⁶⁶ Where once raiding had fulfilled a socially beneficial and indeed necessary function as something of a safety valve on disruptive elements, it now turned inward on the very society that originated it.

Similarly, with the exception of Norway, relations with other Northern lands fade in *Íslendinga saga*, such as in the following example regarding the Orkneys and Sæmundr Jónsson:

Eigi var Sæmundr eiginkvænt, ok fóru orð milli þeira Haralds jarls
Maddaðarsonar, at hann myndi gifta honum Langlíf, dóttur sína. Ok var þat
milli, at Sæmundr vildi eigi sækja brúðkaup í Orkneyjar, en jarlinn vildi
eigi senda hana út hingat.⁶⁷

It is tangential, but nonetheless worth considering that for much of Iceland's post-medieval existence under the Danish crown it was subject to strict trade monopolies, essentially channelling all economic contact with the world through the 'mother country'. The beginnings of a similar sense of isolation and utter dependence on a single, powerful neighbour are in evidence here in *Íslendinga saga*; Norway becomes the only other place Icelanders appear to be interacting with, and these motifs – the fragmentation of the land into fortified camps, the fragmentation of the idea of 'Iceland' under one *lög*, and the diminishing role of any 'abroad' other than Norway – combine, narratively, to form a stifling and oppressive atmosphere. With the Icelandic polity itself in question, and thus

⁶⁶ It is important to remember the unusually large number of ash-falls recorded in *Íslendinga saga*, such as the 'sandvetr' ('sand-winter') that kills 120 of Snorri Sturluson's livestock (*Stur.* I: 314).

⁶⁷ *Stur.* I: 242. 'Sæmundr was not lawfully married, and discussions began between him and Haraldr jarl Maddaðarson, that he would offer in marriage Langlíf, his daughter. But they had it between them that Sæmundr would not go to the wedding-feast in the Orkneys, and the jarl would not send her out from there.'

perhaps the very nature of Iceland itself, reversion to Norway is perhaps a natural process of searching for a new – or, perhaps, long-forgotten – and more importantly stable identity. Sverrir Jakobsson has argued that:

Fyrir 1262 voru íslenskir bændur þjóð erlendis en eftir það þurftu þeir líka að vera það heima hjá sér. Að því leyti markar árið 1262 upphaf íslensks þjóðernis.⁶⁸

This statement may seem counterintuitive, but it encapsulates the transformation occurring of the *idea* of Iceland in *Íslendinga saga*. Just as violence to the individual body involves the breaching of boundaries both physical and figurative, so the violence to the body politic depicted in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation involves the breaching of the conceptual boundaries of the Icelandic social mythology here under investigation. But *Sturlunga saga* is most productive as a text when seen in dialogue with the corpus as a whole; these breaches, reconfigurations and resonances would be ineffective without a literary context. *Sturlunga saga* is at once in synchronic dialogue with the canon as a whole, whilst also fulfilling its role at the diachronic ‘end’ of the narrative of the *Þjóðveldi*.

3. Writing new mythologies

The social mythology this thesis has examined gives the appearance of stasis, confined as it is to ‘ancient’ texts. But, as was demonstrated above with respect to the ‘myth’ of Haraldr hárfagri, the mythologization of Icelandic identity was a dynamic one, always *in process*. Pernille Hermann has noted that:

⁶⁸ Sverrir Jakobsson, ‘Hvers konar þjóð voru Íslendingar á miðöldum?’, *Skírnir* 173 (1999): 140. ‘Before 1262 Icelandic farmers were a people when they were abroad, but after this they needed likewise to be one at home. In this respect 1262 marks the beginning of Icelandic nationality.’

Íslendingabók most likely was considered to be history at the time it was written, but it seems reasonable to assume that at the same time it took on the function of myth, central to the perception of the origin of Icelandic culture and having an explanatory power in relation to specific features of the twelfth century and beyond.⁶⁹

Hermann's double use of 'time' is a tacit admission of the inextricability of history from myth. John Lindow goes as far as to argue that this act of mythologizing was a function of authorship – indeed saga-authorship – itself. *Íslendingabók* is history, he concedes, but:

[A]lso to some extent a saga, that is, a narrative about the past with a more or less self-effacing author careful to establish an aura of even-handedness and source criticism but drawing on and furthering certain cultural myths.⁷⁰

Both these assessments could surely be made of *Íslendinga saga* as much as *Íslendingabók*. If the *materia* of a text was Iceland, it falls within a cultural field of the semiotics of identity. Jürg Glauser espouses this essential point in his description of a 'große Erzählung', mentioned in the introduction above.⁷¹ Saga literature which pertained to Iceland, therefore, was always, by definition, in dialogue with a concept of 'Iceland', and this was itself a construct of a social mythology.

Even within *Íslendinga saga* itself ideas of identity are fluid and dynamic. It seems appropriate to conclude this discussion of the development of Icelandic identity within *Sturlunga saga* with a brief examination of linguistic identity. Language is a cultural artefact always in flux, yet across history has been a touchstone of stability, a conceptual 'centre' to group identity. This is a topic generally beyond the purview of this thesis, but *Íslendinga saga* provides an important use of

⁶⁹ Pernille Hermann, 'Íslendingabók and History,' *Reflections on Old Norse Myths*, eds. Pernille Hermann, Jens Peter Schjødt and Rasmus Trandum Kristensen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007) 19.

⁷⁰ John Lindow, 'Íslendingabók and Myth,' *Scandinavian Studies* 69.4 (1997): 462.

⁷¹ Glauser, 'Begründungsgeschichten,' 41.

linguistic nomenclature to effect group identity.⁷² During one of Bishop Guðmundr's numerous clashes with the local *goðar*, in this instance Kolbeinn Tumason, the Bishop deliberately uses a vernacular tongue to ensure that Kolbeinn's men understand that they are being excommunicated:

Biskup ok hans menn váru á húsum uppi, ok var hann skrýddr, ok las hann bannsetning á norræna tungu, svá at þeir skyldi skilja.⁷³

Latin was presumably the normal language of excommunication, and it is for this reason that the Bishop's translation of the sentence into *norræna* is noteworthy. If one accepts Jón Jóhannesson *et al*'s reconstruction of the chronology of *Íslendinga saga*, this incident probably occurred around 1207. But much later in the saga – though barely thirty years later chronologically, in 1238, a new linguistic distinction is made. During a tense meeting between Sturla Sighvatsson and Gizurr Þorvaldsson's factions, Gizurr is made to swear that he will go to Norway and remain loyal to Sturla. Sturla sees Gizurr as his chief rival in Iceland, and thus wants him out of the country.⁷⁴ It is perhaps rash of him to let Gizurr live, for both Sturla and his father Sighvatr Sturluson will perish in the

⁷² For a detailed analysis of Icelandic linguistic identity, see Stephen Pax Leonard, 'Language, Society and Identity in Early Iceland.' Leonard's thesis essentially views linguistic identity as analogous to the emergence of a communal identity: '[i]f Ari's history of the Icelanders may be said to have created the 'Icelanders', then the First Grammarian's work must be given credit for having created the 'Icelandic' language – as a specific branch of *dönsk tunga*' (45).

⁷³ *Stur.* I: 245. 'The bishop and his men were on top of the house. He was robbed, and he read the sentence of excommunication in the *norræna* tongue, so that they would understand it.'

⁷⁴ '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.“' *Stur.* I: 414. ('Sturla told him never to doubt that he intended for himself a greater role than other men in Iceland. "But it seems to me that all will be lost if you are [here], for you are the one man in Iceland I fear when things do not go well between us.") The author himself seems to wish to indicate Sturla's near-total power at this point in the saga: '[í] þenna tíma var svá mikill ofsi Sturlu Sighvatssonar, at nær engir menn hér á landi heldu sér réttum fyrir honum. Ok svá hafa sumir menn hermt orð hans síðan, at hann þóttist allt land hafa undir lagt, ef hann gæti Gizur yfir komit.' *Stur.* I: 402. ('In that time Sturla Sighvatsson's tyranny was so great, that no-one in this country could hold their rights from him. And some people have since heard it said that he thought he could control the entire country if he could overcome Gizurr.') There are similarities here too to descriptions of the reign of Haraldr hárfagri.

battle of Qrlygsstaðir at the hands of Gizurr's men.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, Gizurr complies in swearing the oath, although its terms are rendered inconsequential by the battle soon to follow:

Síðan var bók tekin ok fengin Gizuri. Bað Sturla hann sverja útanferð sína ok at halda trúnað við hann.

Gizurr spyrr, hvárt hann skyldi vinna norrænan eið eða íslenzkan.

Sturla bað hann ráða.

„Þá mun ek norrænan eið vinna,“ segir Gizurr, „er ek skal þangat fara.“⁷⁶

A full discussion of the semantics of the terms *norræna* and *íslenzka* is unnecessary here; one can only guess at what the difference between them might have been, although it seems far-fetched to suggest that a distinctive Icelandic language has emerged in the space of thirty-one years.⁷⁷ Both Sturla and Gizurr have been to Norway in the past, and both have been received by King Hákon, although Gizurr's time in the King's court before this point was perhaps less distinguished. He was involved in a scuffle between Jón Snorrason murtr and Óláfr Leggsson svartaskáld, in which he was indirectly responsible for Jón's death.⁷⁸ Sturla's time in Norway mirrors far more closely the classic account of the Icelander winning recognition in Norway, as discussed in chapter 3: the king receives Sturla 'allvel', 'ok töluðu þeir konungrinn ok Sturla jafnan.'⁷⁹ Indeed after the death of Sturla and his father Sighvatr at Qrlygsstaðir, the news provokes mourning in the court. The author then relates a piece of information not mentioned during his account of Sturla's stay with Hákon:

⁷⁵ Indeed Gizurr personally delivers the *coup de grâce* to a dying Sturla. See *Stur.* I: 435–36.

⁷⁶ *Stur.* I: 414. 'Next the book [i.e. the Bible] was taken and given to Gizurr. Sturla asked him to swear that he would go abroad [i.e. to Norway] and keep his word to him. Gizurr asks whether he should swear the oath in *norræna* or *íslenzka*. Sturla told him to decide. "Then I shall swear the oath in *norræna*," says Gizurr, "since that's where I'm going."

⁷⁷ Furthermore, there are obvious similarities between this speech act and that made by Guðmundr: both are public, quasi-legal declarations. If *íslenzka* connoted some kind of dialect, this would seem unusual for a circumstance in which the form of the words themselves would doubtless be of considerable importance.

⁷⁸ *Stur.* I: 342–43.

⁷⁹ *Stur.* I: 364. The king received Sturla well, 'and the king and Sturla were always talking.'

Hákon konungr 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 konungr skyldi gera hann höfðingja yfir landinu. Hafði Hákon konungr þar mest varaðan Sturlu við, at hann skyldi eigi auka manndráp á landinu ok reka menn heldr útan.⁸⁰

Sturla, it appears, is following these instructions by seeking to force Gizurr abroad, although it is curious that this explanation only follows the climactic battle and Sturla's death. In the scene in which Gizurr is forced to swear the oath, what is significant is that Gizurr initiates this discussion. Despite being held captive by Sturla and ordered to leave the country, his question is a demonstration of power, designed to show Sturla that he will be no less able to foil Sturla's ambitions whether in Iceland or in Norway. It does not matter what linguistic difference Gizurr is referring to; the significance is in the collapse of a conceptual border between the two territories. Although Sturla may have felt that to follow Hákon's advice to exile rather than to kill might be a way of reducing the increasing level of violence in Iceland, it is, effectively, the ceding of any semblance of Icelandic independence. Icelandic *lög* and Icelandic conventions cannot contain Gizurr, who, figured through this bilingualism, is a capable agent in both polities, something that is approached, but never quite realized, in the narratives of Icelanders abroad during the *Þjóðveldi* discussed above. The final irony of the scene, surely part of the author's narrative art, is that Gizurr's response, that he will speak *norræna* since that is to where he is going, refers not to any real intention to exile himself. He remains resolutely in Iceland until Qrlygsstaðir, and is first mentioned

⁸⁰ *Stur.* I: 439. 'King Hákon was also a great friend of Sturla, for it was often said that he and Sturla had agreed that [Sturla] should bring the country under King Hákon's rule, and that the king would make him ruler of the land. King Hákon had warned Sturla most of all that he should not increase the killing in the country and instead drive men out [to Norway].' This scene is located in chronological sequence in *Hákonar saga hins gamla*, also probably composed by Sturla Þórðarson. See *MSE* 259–60, and for an analysis of this imperative in the light of the torture of Órækja discussed above, Gade, '1236: Órækja meiddr ok heill gorr,' 122–23.

again in Norway in 1246.⁸¹ It does, however, prefigure the *Gizurarsáttmáli* discussed previously.⁸²

The densely complex web of political, textual and historical references behind this single scene is illustrative of the complexity of *Íslendinga saga* as a text within its socio-historical context. But as a narrative in its own right, considered in the light of the ‘end’ of the story – Gizurr’s acquisition of a *jarldómr* – it demonstrates how linguistic labels, carrying connotations of communal identity, are woven into the narrative of the end of the *Þjóðveldi* in order to show that whilst Gizurr is an Icelander, he *chooses* to align himself with Norway. Thus the idea of capitulation is circumvented; returning to the *Gizurarsáttmáli* discussed above, the end of Icelandic independence is figured as a choice made in return for a benefit. *Íslenzka* thus appears in this scene only to provide the audience with a meaningful binary, and only to allow Gizurr to manifest his bilingualism. This bilingualism is not the ability to speak two languages in the common sense, but to operate effectively across borders, between two worlds – those of Norway and Iceland. As seen in the previous chapter, this was a skill presented as elusive, and certainly near impossible to perfect in much of the rest of the canon.

Gizurr’s arrangement with King Hákon is a stark de-centring of the idea of Iceland: the *Alþingi* is no longer at the apex of temporal power. But *Íslendinga saga* had already presented a de-centred society, long before the Norwegian king was brought into this void.⁸³ The motivation behind recording the chaos of the *Sturlungaöld* must be in part an assertion of order on fundamentally disordered times; as Richard Gaskins notes:

⁸¹ *Stur.* I: 476.

⁸² See p. 202 above.

⁸³ Note, for example, the collocation of peace and an *absence* of attendance at the assembly: ‘[þ]etta sumar var kyrrt ok friðr góðr á Íslandi. Lítil þingreið.’ *Stur.* I: 342. (‘That summer was quiet and there was a good peace in Iceland; few rode to the þing.’)

[T]he whole saga, taken as a humanistic project, is a contrasting source of conceptual stability.⁸⁴

This analogy could be extended to the compilation of *Sturlunga saga* as a whole, standing, as it does, in a reconstituted state: dismembered fragments of stories woven into a complete narrative, potentially, as Stephen Tranter has sought to argue, with a didactic purpose:

Thus by compiling *Sturlunga saga* in such a way that issues of conflict and reconciliation were seen to play the most important part our compiler sought to give the people of his own age a lesson from the past, in the hope that they would recognise the dangers, understand the remedies, and act accordingly.⁸⁵

The ultimate conclusion of this line of thought is to apply it to the saga-canon as a whole; to view the entire sweep of saga-literature as a reconstructed and reconstituted narrative of a people. The way in which Iceland is constructed by different authors quite naturally varies. To return to a textual example cited above, compared to the detailed but flawed depiction of Órækja's torture, Hrafnkell's seems simply confused and mechanically implausible. Both are attempts to realize in literature a scene that, as likely as not, never occurred in the way in which it is presented. But there may be no intrinsic difference in the way in which saga-authors dealt with their material; they were not simply imagining the past and recording the present. Instead, the nature of the saga-narrative *vis-à-vis* the past it treated existed on a continuum. The earlier the events were said to take place, the fewer individuals, if any, would have any clear first- or second-hand recollection of these events, and thus what memories of earlier times did exist would have passed through more mediators, with the inevitable potential for corruption, loss of detail, and creative elaboration. The consequences of

⁸⁴ Richard Gaskins, 'The Narrative of Social Order in Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga*,' *alvissmál* 4 (1994): 12.

⁸⁵ Stephen Norman Tranter, *Sturlunga Saga: The Rôle of the Creative Compiler*, European University Studies Series I: German Language and Literature (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1987) 235.

this were surely greater reliance on stock characters, a greater potential for structured plotting (for only with time can one stand back from events and construct a literarily artful progression through them), and most importantly, a greater reliance on social mythology – the universally accepted truths about how society works – in order to reconstruct the half-forgotten. The closer the events described and the point of composition become, the less potential there is for structured plotting, the more redactors of events there are, and the better the overall details of an event may be. Social myth thus requires greater mediation with social actuality; *Íslendinga saga* can form the culmination of a long literary dialogue between ‘myth and reality’ whose point of origin is, arguably, *Íslendingabók*, even if its composition is contemporaneous with some of those texts expounding these myths.

The reasons for the collapse of the *Þjóðveldi* are manifold. Although conflicts between ecclesiastical and secular spheres are depicted at length in *Íslendinga saga*, the focus of this chapter’s discussion, they were certainly only symptoms of a wider and far more complex process of historical events. In concluding, the search for historical answers, which will not be forthcoming, must be separated from the literary role of *Íslendinga saga*. It is not the intention of this chapter to argue that the *Íslendingasögur* were somehow sanitized versions of history, deliberately stripped of the unpleasantness and savagery that could not be obfuscated in the *samtíðarsögur* because people would know them to be untrue; it is simply that what was important to the ‘national’ narrative about earlier times, what was reconstructed according to the social mythology, was the *success* of society and social institutions in maintaining an independent society. It may seem rather too convenient to analogize the dismemberment of individuals with the dismemberment of society, but this is what was happening to Iceland in the thirteenth century. It betrays the greater tension becoming evident between social myth and reality, as the continued independence of the polity at the heart of this

national narrative fell into doubt. However, it is the very existence of *Íslendinga saga* and all its contemporaries which vindicates the national myth, for Icelandic identity becomes encapsulated in literature, if not reality. This necessitates a reading of the *samtíðarsögur* as part of a wider tradition of which the *Íslendingasögur* are also a part; to read only the latter is not to read the whole story.

5. Conclusion

It is a contradiction inherent in identities, ethnicities and nationalities that they at once appeal to fixity whilst are themselves ever evolving and changing. The most straightforward conclusion one may draw from this analysis is that the social mythology of medieval Icelandic literature is one of variance and adaptation. This is a feature not only of the texts discussed in this thesis themselves but also, importantly, of their preservation. The reading and writing of all of the texts discussed here was in perpetual dialogue with Iceland's political situation – copying and compiling were themselves political acts.

Just over a hundred years after the 'end' of the *Pjóðveldi*, Margrét Valdimarsdóttir became a powerful force in the struggle for the Danish throne upon the death of her father in 1375. By 1398, having adopted her sister's grandson as her own, she installed him as king of Norway and Sweden, thus bringing about the Union of Kalmar, which would see Iceland become part of the Kingdom of Denmark until 1944. The centre of power thus shifted eastwards and southwards; no longer was Norway the principal source of royal power, patronage and validation.¹ For most of the time in which the sagas examined here have been received, therefore, the ideas of both Icelandic political independence and Norwegian hegemony have been but ever-more distant memories, periodically recalled for various different purposes, not least in the nineteenth century. It was then that reengagement with this social mythology became subordinated to demands for political

¹ Elizabeth Ashman Rowe observes that 'the Icelanders' anxiety about their origins led them to create a large body of texts establishing Iceland as the legitimate and even noble child of Norway. By the time *Flateyjarbók* was being written, however, the relationship between Iceland and Norway no longer seemed as natural or inalienable as it had in earlier centuries.' Rowe, *The Development of Flateyjarbók* 78. See also Rowe, 'Origin Legends and Foundation Myths in *Flateyjarbók*.'

independence once more. Eric Hobsbawm cites the nineteenth-century French theorist Ernest

Renan on a defining feature of the modern nation:

L'oubli et je dirai même l'erreur historique, sont un facteur essentiel de la formation d'une nation et c'est ainsi que le progrès des études historiques sont souvent pour la nationalité un danger.²

Renan explicitly acknowledges the danger that historical evidence may pose to the myths of the past that are brought together in the modern era to define the nation.³ The introduction to this thesis discussed the relevance of the term 'nation', and it is unnecessary to discuss the relevance or otherwise of this term to any semblance of actuality in medieval Iceland. But Renan's statement is quite applicable to medieval Icelandic literature. The intertextual narrative of Iceland is, as the analyses above have shown, a literary project that in its manifold variety is 'getting history wrong.' Of course, even the possibility of making *une erreur historique* suggests that there exists an absolute truth to which the modern reader of medieval Icelandic literature will never have access. This is why treating the representation of the Icelandic *Djóðveldi* in the literature of the medieval period as participating in the formation of a social mythology, rather than a social history, is liberating.

This is not to claim that historical, ethnographic and anthropological approaches to medieval Icelandic literature have nothing to offer; indeed they have often illuminated the very texts examined here. But Renan hints at something very important by talking of the danger the study of

² 'Forgetting, and I would even say getting history wrong are essential factors in the formation of a nation, and thus progress in historical studies is often a danger to nationality.' E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 12. This is taken from Renan's lecture 'Qu'est-ce que'une nation?' delivered at the Sorbonne in 1882.

³ Famously, the most pertinent example of this here is the recent genetic analyses of the modern Icelandic population which have revealed that a majority of the female settlers, and up to about a quarter of the males, were of Celtic, rather than Norse, background. See, for example, Agnar Helgason et al., 'Estimating Scandinavian and Gaelic Ancestry in the Male Settlers of Iceland,' *American Journal of Human Genetics* 67.3 (2000).

history poses to the idea of ‘nationalité’. Whilst he may have been referring to the risk that the mythos advanced by the romantic nationalists would be exposed as fraudulent by dispassionate historical analysis, this risk is transferable to the interpretation of social mythology more generally. The danger the exclusive use of ‘les études historiques’ can pose to a social mythology such as that of medieval Icelandic literature is that it reduces the semantic scope of the texts themselves, and analyses them more in terms of their relationship to history than their relationship to each other and to the ahistorical mythological narrative these texts together create.

In the introduction to this thesis it was observed that one of the most important elements of mythology was the narrative form; that myths frame the search for origins and answers to fundamental questions through structured stories of beginnings, middles and ends. Having now come to the ‘end’ of the narrative of the *Djóðveldi*, reliving the moment when Gizurr Þorvaldsson accepted the title of *jarl* and so pledged Iceland’s allegiance to Norway, it is impossible not to experience a sense of loss. Gunnar Karlsson, concluding his survey of the *Djóðveldi* period, has argued:

Yet, while it is safest not to make too many assertions, it ought to be permissible to think that Icelandic culture lost something valuable when the Norwegian Crown relieved it of the challenge of maintaining law and order in the country without a pyramidal system of government.⁴

It is, indeed, undeniable that given the inevitability of hindsight a sense of loss permeates a reading of the literature of medieval Iceland, not just because the world it evokes is lost to us; but also

⁴ Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland’s 1100 Years: The History of a Marginal Society* 86. Gunnar believes that Iceland’s ‘history’ was the primary motor behind the rise of Icelandic nationalism in the nineteenth century, not grievances against Danish rule or economic dissatisfaction. See Gunnar Karlsson, ‘The Emergence of Nationalism in Iceland,’ *Ethnicity and Nation Building in the Nordic World*, ed. Sven Tägil (London: Hurst & Company, 1995) 88.

because *within* the mythology itself the sense of the loss of ‘something’ is prevalent. Recalling the comparison of *Njáll* and *Gunnarr* in chapter 2.ii, the desire to see a structure, to glimpse the workings beneath the apparently arbitrary, and indeed to understand the causes of events generally is a human universal. The corpus of Icelandic literature, especially that pertaining to Iceland, comprises multiple attempts at uncovering meaning through reimagining origins, in order to fill a void of understanding. It is this void from which this sense of loss stems, not from the transfer of allegiance of a handful of *goðar* to the king of Norway. It is a loss brought about by the idea that a disconnection has emerged between the social mythology and the social actuality; but, crucially, it was and ever is thus.

One cannot but feel that the world of the *Þjóðveldi* was lost to those who recorded it, beyond merely a historical or political sense, and for all the genealogical claims to authority that are made. This is perhaps unsurprising, for this conforms to the expectations discussed in the introduction regarding the tendency of a social mythology to recall a ‘golden age’. The loss of the *Þjóðveldi* is a necessity within the mythic schema of medieval Icelandic identity. Many have sought to define what this loss involved, and thus what cause existed behind the impulse towards literary creativity. For example, Kathryn Hume has argued:

[T]he sagas are an affirmation of national heroic identity in a time of pressure and crisis. Men wanted to be reminded that theirs was a country deserving respect, capable of governing itself. Anxieties about the future and nostalgic longing for those times which had been free of Norwegian and ecclesiastical influence seem to me important in the sagas.⁵

⁵ Kathryn Hume, ‘Beginnings and Endings in the Icelandic Family Sagas,’ *Modern Language Review* 68.3 (1973): 602.

However, this common critical position simplifies the meaning of a mythic golden age to the community whose cultural products recall one, for it implies that this golden age was at some point a reality. It also presumes that the only cultural reaction people may have towards a myth of a glorious past is to lament its passing. But this is far from the only way of understanding the creative use of the idea of the past.

At the end of the nineteenth century Henrik Ibsen⁶ interrogated the relationship between the Norway of his time and its antiquity. In many respects the Norway of Ibsen's era is an inverse reflection of Iceland in 1264; in 1814 Norway was ceded to Sweden by Denmark, but effectively gained home rule over all but foreign affairs. The union with Sweden ended in 1905. Around 1865, Ibsen struggled with the unfinished poem termed the 'epic' *Brand*, which he later completed as the dramatic poem of the same title. His approach to the weight of an ancient social mythology is very different to Hume's, and indeed far subtler:

Thi vi har leflet med en udbrændt Slægt,
og sminket Liget af de stærke Tider,
og festklædt alle Mindehallens Sider,
till Dverges Fryd, med Kæmpevaabens Vægt.
Om Fortids Dag vi sang i Nuets Natt;
men et, det store, glemte vi at drøfte:
kan den med Rette tage Arvens Skatt,
som fattes Haanden, der skal Arven løfte?⁷

⁶ 1828-1906.

⁷ Henrik Ibsen, *Henrik Ibsens Episke Brand*, ed. Karl Larsen (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1907) 49. 'For we have conjured up a burnt-out race, painted the corpse in the colours of past glory, and hung the walls of memory's hall with the weight of a warrior's weapons – for a dwarf's delight. In the night of the present we sang of ancient day; but one great thing we forgot to consider: can he rightfully accept his inheritance whose hands are too weak to raise the treasure?' Translation from Henrik Ibsen, *Brand, Peer Gynt*, The Oxford Ibsen 3, ed. James Walter McFarlane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972) 37.

This piercing cry for modernity in the face of the dead weight of a cultural hinterland so vast and all-consuming as to suffocate the present generation appears irreconcilable with the nostalgia evident in both Gunnar Karlsson's and Hume's conclusions. But Ibsen couches this defiance in the very idiom of the mythology he professes to despise. The past is inescapable. Instead, the point he is making may be figured thus: that the relationship with the past is an awkward one. The temptation is ever to follow Ibsen's modern Norwegians, who 'sminket Liget af de stærke Tider' (literally, 'rouged the corpse with the mighty past'), to bring a semblance of life back to the dead on one's own terms. There is a sense of true disgust in this, but, in the very form of the poem, an acknowledgment that this is what it is to depict one's forebears in literature. The authors of the literature examined here surely struggled with this same ambivalence. It is, therefore, too simplistic to attribute the obsession of a portion of the Old Norse-Icelandic canon with the social mythology of Icelandic literature to nostalgia, or to a desire to recapture lost glory. These factors may well have played their role, but so, one might argue, did the profound ambivalence Ibsen captures. At the heart of this problem is the question of how one approaches the past – for comfort, for justification, for pleasure, or even for catharsis? 'Om Fortids Dag vi sang i Nuets Natt' could encapsulate the argument that the social mythology examined herein was constructed as a comfort, as a way of making life in one's present circumstances bearable, by shedding ancient light on a dark present. But day follows night follows day; it is the human condition to return to that moment just gone, to seek to re-experience the alterity of the past. For it is night and day that allow time to be measurable; and it is the idea of the past that precludes an eternal present. The sagas sang of ancient day, but they did so because that ancient day was, and is, part of what it is to read. To read is to reimagine, and to reify: it is this potential of reading that permitted the reification of a country of the mind then, and now.

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