

JOHN LINDOW

THE SAGAS AS ETHNOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTS

The proper study of all humanists is the cultural works of man. Since no single person can any longer hope or even dream of mastering all the facets of human culture, specialities or 'disciplines' have evolved. The study of the past we term history, while investigation of cultures in the present in time we call anthropology. One discipline, however, might be said to operate in a certain sense beyond temporal constraints; this is ethnography. The description of individual cultures, as ethnography has rightly been defined,<sup>1)</sup> need not concern itself with present or past, but only with an individual culture at a specific time and place. Medieval Icelandic society is as liable to ethnographic investigation as any so called primitive society of the twentieth century.

In the case of medieval Icelandic society, however, we must not lose sight of history and anthropology; these are ancillary but imperative disciplines. History lends the temporal perspective and the methodological framework for assessing this temporal viewpoint. Anthropology, particularly in its cultural side (ethnology), permits a fair judgement on a comparative basis of the value of individual cultural

---

1) Melville J. Herskovits, Cultural Anthropology (New York, 1960), 8.

traits which history has yielded us. Thus both history and anthropology are indispensable in ethnographic description of medieval Icelandic society.

Ethnography is an all encompassing discipline. It embraces a society's material culture, economy, social structure, religious beliefs and cult practice; all, indeed, that the society manifests. Some parts of this all inclusive whole are relatively accessible, others more difficult to get at. Artifacts may be collected, described, and catalogued, thus presenting a picture of material culture. A field worker, when he actually visits a given society, may be able to observe various social practices, although others, on the other hand, he may never see or understand. The problem is complicated, however, when the observer and the culture are separated. The shrinking of the world by the jet plane and generous university grants has all but eliminated this problem for the investigator of a modern culture. Separation imposed by time, however, is more serious. Archaeologists unearth a multitude of artifacts, but interpretation is often difficult, and even then it is the material culture which is primarily revealed. Description of beliefs, social customs, institutions and the like, is based on many subtle factors, but by far the most important is texts. Such texts may be termed ethnographic documents insofar as they elicit or permit description of a given culture or society.

Here, however, a distinction must be drawn. There exist, in effect, two kinds of ethnographic documents. Besides the sort mentioned in the above paragraph, ethnographic documents are also texts written by outside observers. The most obvious example of this sort of ethnographic document is the professional anthropologist's monograph, a concise scientific

description of a given culture, generally composed for an audience of other professional anthropologists. Another sort, however, is of notable importance, particularly in the case of describing medieval Icelandic society: this is the historiography of ancient and medieval Europe. Such writing makes its own demands on the modern investigator. Various layers of myth, legend, speculation, and literary convention must be stripped away before examination of the culture can even begin; but one is still left with the larger question, the question of time. Just what culture or society does a medieval historian depict? We can with allowances trust his description of his own era, but what of the past? This transcends the question of his sources; we must also attempt to determine to what extent his experience of the present colors his view of the past. This is of course a valid question for all written history, but it is of prime importance in ancient and medieval historiography since the practitioners of this craft were probably less aware of the problem than modern historians are today. Thus in dealing with ethnographic documents of this sort we must attempt to determine how far removed in time and sentiment the author was from his subject.

Such a problem, though less important, may still be valid for ethnographic documents generated within a culture. Here one may formally distinguish between oral literature, such as folktales, ballads, legends and the like, and written documents of both a literary and non-literary nature. Both of these sorts of internal ethnographic documents are subject to the question of the chronological layers they reveal. Non-literary written documents, such as catalogues, laundry lists, and so forth, may for the most part stand outside this problem, as may literary texts

which deal exclusively with the here and now, but literary texts with a historical perspective, and surely all oral literature, must be suspect. Indeed, oral literature compounds the problem since the date of composition of a given text is ordinarily unknown; at best we may know the date of a given performance, but even this is often lacking for 'oral' texts presented to us in written form, such as nineteenth century editions of the folklore of Europe.

Regarding oral literature, the standard view seems to be that both the past and present are usually reflected. This is quite logical, since the past is presumably represented, if not by the 'date of composition' of the text, then by the period when the tradition took form. The present is presumably represented both in any given performance of an oral tale as well as within certain motifs contained in the story. This leads, however, if not to a contradiction, at least to a knotty problem. What is implied, in effect, is that certain motifs represent the past, others the present. In fact, one might refine this statement to say that various motifs indicate various temporal or chronological levels. For 'the past' actually consists of many pasts, each at a different point in time. The problem facing the historian, anthropologist, or ethnographer is to separate the various chronological layers, or in other words to date the various motifs. This is of course a nearly insoluble problem, particularly as a given motif may function at various levels of significance, but it at least presents an aim, a goal.

The problem is compounded by the nature and intention of ethnographic investigation, especially when compared with historical investigation. In the latter one is dealing with more or less concrete

questions. When did an event occur? What actually happened? These are finite questions with finite, concrete answers. In the case of ethnographic investigation, on the other hand, one is often dealing with more intangible matters, such as social customs, beliefs, and so forth. The answers sought by ethnographers are thus far more complex and the problem of separating chronological layers far more involved, since a given belief, custom, or institution most likely existed in a chronological continuum, unlike the historical event which represents a single discrete point in time.

It is interesting to note in this light that texts generated within a given culture are generally not known as ethnographic documents, nor in fact are most works of historiography. But what is important in this case is the intention of the observer: whatever else it may be, a given document is 'ethnographic' if it may be used to illuminate a culture. In this way, the Icelandic sagas are as important as ethnographic documents as they are as works of art, literature, or monuments of national pride.

Indeed, in terms of the distinctions among ethnographic documents sketched above, it will be seen that the only category from which the sagas can immediately be eliminated is that of the professional anthropologist's monograph. Otherwise it is suitable to discuss the sagas in terms of medieval historiography and both written and oral literature. And this is directly associated with the complex problem of chronological layer characteristic of these genres.

In fact, the entire progression of saga scholarship<sup>(2)</sup>

---

2) Conveniently summarized by Theodore M. Andersson, The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins (New Haven, 1964).

may be regarded in this light. To the earliest students of the saga, like Arngrímur Jónsson and Thormod Torfaeus (þormóður Torfason), the sagas were a kind of verbatim history which illuminated the deeds and events of the saga period. Árni Magnússon was a refreshing exception to this rule; but in general the period of rediscovery of Icelandic antiquity was marked by political nationalism which regarded the sagas as proof of the fabled prehistory of whatever country one happened to have been born in,<sup>(3)</sup> and hence made up part of an all too uncritical historiography.

Although the nineteenth century opened with Bishop Müller's justly renowned critical studies of saga literature and saw the real birth of modern saga scholarship, it also witnessed the onset of a peculiar scholarly distortion which has lasted nearly to the present day. Comparative philology and the discovery of linguistic prehistory introduced the concept of a retrievable Germanic past. And the sagas were taken, somehow, as the literature of the Germanic period. The historical fallacy thus lived on, but in somewhat different guise. According to the prevailing view, the sagas told of the saga age but indirectly--or even directly!--illuminated the mores and social customs of the Germanic peoples during the common Germanic period. They could thus be regarded as useful historical documents for the saga age and ethnographic documents for the common Germanic period.

More recently, of course, it has been shown that the strict historical accuracy of the sagas, their faithfulness to the actual men and events of the saga age, is questionable indeed. The watershed probably

---

3) The culmination was of course provided by Olof Rudbeck's fantastic Atlantica.

came with E.V. Gordon's and particularly Sigurður Nordal's studies of *Hrafnkels saga*;<sup>4)</sup> since then the general trend has been to remove at least the family sagas altogether from the category of medieval history. The ethnographic fallacy, on the other hand, which assigns certain saga material to the common Germanic period, has unfortunately remained productive nearly to the present day.<sup>5)</sup> It is to be hoped that this regrettable period in the history of saga scholarship has now truly drawn to a close.

It thus appears that in ethnographic terms the sagas are best defined as texts produced within medieval Icelandic society. To obtain more accurate dating we must appeal to our view of the literary origins of the sagas; specifically we must contend with the controversy surrounding free prose and book prose.<sup>6)</sup> If family sagas are generally the products of authors who pieced together various bits of lore and written sources, we should expect that each saga reveals a good deal about the author and the culture in which he lived, but little about that culture at an earlier period. But if, on the other hand, oral sagas flourished as early as during the saga age and were only put to parchment, essentially unchanged

---

4) E.V. Gordon, "On *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða*," Medium Ævum 8 (1939), 1-32. Sigurður Nordal, "Hrafnkatla," Studia Islandica 7 (1940).

5) One example of this fallacious approach is discussed in the appendix to this paper entitled "Ethnographic Approaches to the Concept of Honor in the Sagas and Old Norse Society."

6) Andersson, Origins, 65-81. The latest work is found in Richard F. Allen, Fire and Iron: Critical Approaches to Njáls Saga (Pittsburg, 1971).

since composition, by faithful scribes of the late medieval period, then we are justified in seeking description of the saga age in our thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth century manuscripts. This is of course a simplistic way of stating a complex and subtle problem, but it will serve to draw the lines. Actually the so called book prose approach is far more flexible, since it encourages individual assessment of each saga and thus permits delineation of each saga's specific merits and drawbacks, including, if one were so disposed, its ethnographic impact and value. Those who lean toward a book prose approach to the family sagas, then, will see in them an ethnographic mirror primarily of the age of composition, the late medieval period. The problem of chronological layering, though of course present, will be somewhat reduced in scope and import; the 'present' and here and now presumably were, after all, of primary importance to the saga authors championed by the book prose theorists, whatever his literary intentions and whatever story he chose to recount.

If we accept the tenets of free prose, however--at least as they have been formulated--the situation is essentially the opposite. If the free prose theory is correct, then the family sagas reflect primarily the putative age of composition, the saga age. The sagas remained virtually unchanged until recorded by scribes faithful to the old traditions; it is only at this point that the 'present' or here and now, i.e. the late medieval period, can begin to exert ethnographic effect on the sagas, according to free prose theory as it seems to stand now.

It is of course recognized that the two theories are not so widely separated as I have indicated here and as other discussion has made it appear.



Furthermore, closer investigation of the actual functioning of an oral tradition makes it clear that the differences are small indeed. Free prose theory, as we have it now, suggests that oral sagas were composed shortly after the events they describe took place, and that these oral sagas existed virtually unchanged until they were put to parchment. It is in the second part of this assumption that the trouble lies; it calls for a fixed oral tradition, which is essentially a contradiction in terms. Recent research has shown that there is essentially no such thing as a fixed oral text.<sup>7)</sup> There is rather a finite series of performances, each unique, each representing, in effect, an act of creation, or perhaps re-creation, on the part of a narrator. The 'text' presented at each performance differs from every other performance, though of course it follows certain basic rules of composition and a basic plot which distinguishes it from other 'texts.' Folklorists and anthropologists have long recognized this and hence judge the ethnographic value of oral literature accordingly. In other words, the 'text' of an oral performance relates primarily to the time of the performance, the here and now, the circumstances of the narrator's personal life and culture, whatever the subject matter. As mentioned above, an oral text also can be expected to retain elements of the past, of course; in ethnographic terms, it also reflects the culture at various points in the past. However, it is in no way limited to the age of primary composition or first performance, as free prose theory suggests, but rather reflects the whole period of time when it has been

---

7) The most important work in this context is Albert B. Lord, The Singer of Tales (Cambridge, 1960).

performed, with any given performance reflecting primarily its own time and place within the culture.

Applied to the family sagas, this doctrine approaches the book prose and free prose theories, since the modified version of the latter would regard the sagas as written versions of late medieval performances of late medieval oral sagas; thus both book prose and free prose theory would call for the sagas to mirror most strongly the age when they were set down on parchment, though older ethnographic material might be present as well. The family sagas, then, reflect primarily the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This conclusion agrees with that of Walter Baetke, who arrives at the same result by minimizing the role of oral traditions and emphasizing the late, literary origins of the saga.<sup>8)</sup>

Throughout this discussion I have for the most part limited myself to the basic ethnographic value of the family sagas. No consideration of the sagas as ethnographic documents, however, could pretend to completeness without some reference to the relationship between the various saga genres and their potential ethnographic importance.

Although the problem of saga genre is as yet still essentially unresolved, we can proceed from the ordinary areas of agreement. However, we must first consider a classification system clearly relevant to this discussion, that proposed by Sigurður Nordal.<sup>9)</sup> At face value it would appear that his tripartite

---

8) Walter Baetke, "Über die Entstehung der Isländersagas," Berichte über die Verhandl. der Sächs. Akademie der Wiss. zu Leipzig, Philol.-Hist. Klasse, 102:5 (1956), 1-108.

9) Sigurður Nordal, "Sagalitteraturen," Nordisk kultur 8B (1953), 181.

distinction between sagas of the present age, former age, and ancient age (samtids-, fortids-, and oldtidssagaer) bears obvious ethnographic weight. The problem of chronological layering is emphasized as the distance between datable events, and hence the culture involved, and their recording increases. But, except in the case of contemporary sagas, we are naturally unjustified in seeking a one-to-one correlation between the extent of this distance and the ethnographic value of a given text or even genre group. A useful example is provided by Yngvars saga víðförla,<sup>10)</sup> only one example among many. Purportedly dealing with events which may be dated by Swedish runic evidence to the mid-eleventh century,<sup>11)</sup> this saga would presumably fall into Nordal's category of sagas of the former age (fortidssagaer). Since the distance between occurrence and recording is relatively small, one might reasonably infer that this saga provides much useful ethnographic information, perhaps even from East Scandinavia, an area comparatively poor in texts. The situation is, however, far more complicated. Yngvars saga víðförla belongs all too clearly to the literary genre of the mythical-heroic sagas (fornaldarsögur). These, according to Nordal and indeed based on the Icelandic name of the genre, should all be assigned to Nordal's category of sagas of the ancient age (oldtidssagaer), those sagas whose action is thought to take place prior to ca. 850. Herein there lies of course a contradiction,

---

10) Conveniently printed in Guðni Jónsson, ed. Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda (Reykjavík, 1959), 2:423-459.

11) See Elias Wessén, "Historiska runinskrifter," Kungl. vitterhets historie och antikvitets akademien handlingar, filologisk-filosofiska serien 6 (Stockholm, 1960).

since the events recounted in Yngvars saga víðförla transpired in the eleventh century, toward the end of the viking period. Still Yngvars saga víðförla is a mythical-heroic saga, since it fulfills the basic requirements of this genre; it contains a slightly fantastic description of an ultimately tragic but heroic viking expedition, lacking the ordered rationality and apparent impartiality of the family sagas or even the later kings' sagas.<sup>12)</sup> And insofar as it conforms to the characteristics of this genre, Yngvars saga víðförla decreases in value as an ethnographic source. The problem is simply that the literary--or oral--genre makes its own demands on the material, causing certain points to be amplified, others weakened or eliminated, still others added only because the genre calls for them. Here I have been speaking of genre, but the correct term might well be tradition. The mythical-heroic saga, or more accurately, sagas which basically fall into this category, may definitely be said to follow certain traditions which may or may not be based in ultimate ethnographic reality. The same may be said of other

---

12) Yngvars saga víðförla is a 'viking saga,' like many other fornaldarsögur. Nordal's assignment of all fornaldarsögur to the category of oldtidssagaer of course fails with regard to many of these viking sagas, unless we assume that the narrator and audience had lost sight of the true dating and assumed the events recounted in these sagas belonged to the period prior to 850. But Yngvars saga víðförla is clearly dated to 1141 on the basis of the saga itself: En þá er Yngvar andaðist, var liðit frá burð Jesú Kristi MXL ok einn vetr....þat var ellefu vetrum eftir fall Ólafs konungs ins hælga Haraldssonar (Yngvars saga, 447-448).

saga genres. The point is that each so called genre has its own traditions and thus reorders the subject matter according to its own requirements. We cannot ascribe much of the ethnographic data in Yngvars saga víðförla to eleventh century Sweden, since the material has been cast--or recast--in the form of a rather late, specifically Icelandic genre which ordinarily recounts events purportedly from the pre-850 period. This holds true for most of the mythical-heroic sagas, though in several cases we do find clear traces of, for example, pagan mythology or religion. The mythical-heroic sagas are thus a curious mixture of old and new, usually of lesser ethnographic value.

The interference of genre affects all sagas to a greater or lesser extent. It would seem to be heaviest on mythical-heroic sagas and family sagas, least on contemporary sagas, with kings sagas generally falling somewhere in between, and translated sagas falling outside this system.<sup>13)</sup>

For ethnographic purposes, then, both Nordal's system and the ordinarily accepted genre distinctions are valuable. Consider the case of kings sagas. Insofar as notions of traditional genre have affected these texts, we must beware that their ethnographic value has decreased, as discussed above for

---

13) Translated romances are however of ethnographic importance since they present the linguist with context defined translational equivalents, an important tool in unlocking the semantic structures of a given language and hence its culture. Although such an approach has not been considered in this paper, it is of course implicit that all sagas are valuable as source material to the linguist who seeks to apply ethnographic analysis to the language they employ.

the case of the mythical-heroic sagas. But applying Nordal's distinctions we still may draw certain conclusions. When the period and culture being described are contemporary, as in Sverris saga, we may assume that ethnographic information is fairly accurate. The problem of traditional genre interference is of course still present, but not that of chronological layering, mentioned so frequently above. Most kings sagas, on the other hand, fall into Nordal's second category, sagas of the former age (fortidssagaer), and here we must deal with both traditional genre and chronological layering; in the case of the latter we may be aided by the apparent precision with which we can date and localize the material in such kings sagas,-- but the homogeneity of some of the larger manuscript collections of kings sagas--Heimskringla would be the most obvious example--should warn against overemphasis on the ethnographic utility of our dating and localizing of the actual events described in the sagas. Again we face the problem of traditional genre.

Heimskringla also provides an example of ethnographically useful data which may be neither dated nor localized. Ynglingasaga, particularly in its earlier chapters, is without question one of Nordal's sagas of the ancient age (oldtidssagaer). As a historical source it is nearly useless, and the problems of both chronological layering and traditional genre constraints are extreme, but still it is of great ethnographic value. As Georges Dumézil has probably shown best,<sup>14)</sup> Ynglingasaga is a veritable gold mine for information about early Germanic, pre-Germanic,

---

14) Among Dumézil's imposing corpus, the most important in this context is probably Les Dieux des Germains, 2nd. ed. (Paris, 1959).

and Indo-European religion and ideology. This emphasizes again that no simple correspondences exist between either Nordal's or the standard genre divisions and ethnographic usefulness. Such distinctions provide only guidelines. We must be aware of the problems posed by genre distinctions within the sagas, but must still proceed in each case individually.

What this illustrates, in effect, is that generalizations about the ethnographic value of the sagas are difficult to formulate and imprecise, as the above discussion has indicated. As a tentative conclusion we may note that the sagas do have value as ethnographic documents, but this value is severely limited by larger problems concerning interpretation of the sagas, and particularly by gaps in our knowledge about the sagas. One example among many of such a gap is the question of audience. Without certainty about the audience for whom sagas in general, or certain saga genres, or individual sagas, were composed, we cannot accurately judge ethnographic value, since we are uncertain about whose culture is being reflected. The problem is indeed circular: certainty about the audience would help illuminate the sagas, and more understanding of the sagas could help illuminate the audience. If other gaps were filled, the same salubrious effect would result.

The two primary problems associated with an assessment of the sagas as ethnographic documents are those of chronological layering and traditional genre constraints. The effects of these are varied.

The problem of chronological layering has one very obvious implication: the period most liable to yield ethnographic data from the sagas is, without question, the time when they were composed in the form we now have them, in other words when they were first set down

in the manuscripts; this is primarily the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. With more knowledge of the sagas more ethnographic interpretation would be possible and more information about older periods as well would be forthcoming.

The same may be said of traditional genre constraints. As we learn more about saga traditions, as we are able to define traditional genres more accurately, so will our judgements of the sagas as ethnographic documents become more complete. We will then be able to separate traditional unconscious data from motivated, inspired material.

In short, any ethnographic assessment of the sagas will depend, as such judgement always has, on the careful spadework of the literary historian.

## APPENDIX

### ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES TO THE CONCEPT OF HONOR IN THE SAGAS AND OLD NORSE SOCIETY

Although the historical fallacy concerning the historicity of the sagas has laudably been put aside, the nineteenth century ethnographic fallacy still lives on: the sagas are still sometimes regarded as mirrors of the beliefs, social customs, world view, and so forth, of the common Germanic period. It is evident, however, that a much later period provided the sagas with most of their ethnographic data. As an example of an internal, intangible aspect of Norse culture, let us consider the concept of honor, a



subject of frequent speculation by various scholars over the years. A fairly clear picture of honor seems to be presented in the sagas; the problem is one of interpretation.

Anyone familiar with the sagas knows that honor is a primary working force in them, a major source of motivation within the standard saga plot.<sup>15)</sup> Retention of one's honor, or the honor of one's family, often leads to bloody vengeance and long enduring feuds between differing clans. This emphasis on individual pride and family honor might indeed be termed the cause of much of the action in family sagas.

The notion of honor is thus an important literary motif in the sagas. But how does this relate to society? Certain scholars, with a sometimes amazing disregard for ethnographic reality, have assumed a one-to-one relationship between honor as a literary concept in the sagas and honor as a prevailing factor in Icelandic, Norse, or even Germanic society. As great a scholar as Jan de Vries has fallen into this pitfall, albeit in a popular treatment of Germanic society. In his Die Geistige Welt der Germanen,<sup>16)</sup> de Vries 'reconstructed' the notion of honor among the Germanic peoples, using primarily the sagas as well as North and West Germanic poetry as his primary sources. This is of course pointless. The common Germanic period was separated from the era when the sagas--and all other North Germanic literature--were

---

15) I assume that most readers of the sagas have at least an intuitive idea of a standard saga plot. A common structure for the family sagas has been suggested by Theodore M. Andersson, The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading (Cambridge, 1967).

16) (Halle a.S., 1943).

recorded, by a good millenium. Six centuries divide the onset of the proto-Scandinavian period from the time the sagas were set to parchment; yet de Vries was writing about the Germanic peoples. It would strain the credulity of even the laxest of historians or ethnographers to accept that the concept of honor existed virtually unchanged throughout those many years, especially when we know that so much else changed. A small band of apparently migrant hunters and gatherers with certain military skills split into several tribes which migrated throughout all Europe, sometimes conquering, sometimes settling, mingling with other groups, adopting progressive changes in agriculture, developing increasingly sophisticated shipping and sailing techniques, meeting other religious and social systems and gradually changing their own. Consider one specific example. We may be quite sure that at around 100 A.D., at approximately the end of the common Germanic period, the Germanic chieftain was essentially a great warrior, a leader of men in battle. His closest followers were those who pledged allegiance to him in war and peace, making up his \*druhtiz or comitatus, as Tacitus calls it.<sup>17)</sup> We also may safely assert that West Scandinavian kingship in the thirteenth century was rather like its European model; the king was a grand figure who ruled over virtually every aspect of human life. His closest followers made up a corporation called the hirð, which itself was only one part of the complex court.<sup>18)</sup> This wide and far reaching change characterizes the differences

---

17) Tacitus, Germania, ch. 13-15.

18) The linguistic aspects of this change have been treated in my 1972 Harvard University doctoral dissertation Comitatus Individual and Collective Honor.

between common Germanic and medieval Scandinavian society, and it is pointless to assume that any Germanic ethical concept or institution, like honor, could have survived so long virtually unchanged.

More important than de Vries' little book, and hence more dangerous, is Walter Gehl's monograph Ruhm und Ehre bei den Nordgermanen,<sup>19)</sup> something of a 'standard work' on the subject. Gehl is ostensibly writing about honor among the North Germanic peoples, but again he goes no further than an analysis of the function of this concept in Old Icelandic literature, principally the sagas. Here the time problem is less acute than in de Vries' case, but it still as much as cripples the argument. For how do we know that honor in the sagas is the same as honor among, say, eighth century Scandinavians? The answer is simply that we do not and cannot know this to be so. If anything, however, caution and common sense would argue against it.

Furthermore, the situation is far more complex than earlier students had thought. Honor in the sagas is more than personal pride and uncompromising adherence to family reputation. As Theodore M. Andersson has recently illustrated,<sup>20)</sup> the wise man willing to compromise for the good of all concerned is also a highly honored man in the family sagas. The etymologies of the honor words themselves suggest that two principles of honor may have been available, during the Proto-Scandinavian period at least, one

---

19) "Walter Gehl, "Ruhm und Ehre bei den Nordgermanen. Studien zum Lebensgefühl der isländischen Saga," Neue deutsche Forschungen, Abt. dt. Philologie, 3 (Berlin, 1937).

20) "The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas," Speculum 45 (1970), 575-593.

based on glory, apparently shining glory (heiðr, tign, etc., and note tírr) and the other on social utility (sómi, sæmðr, etc.).<sup>21)</sup> Indeed, the basic family saga plot may in one sense be regarded as an interplay between these two apparently conflicting notions of honor. Rigid adherence to the honor of personal or martial glory creates the dramatic tension of the narrative; release occurs when compromise is reached and the honor of social utility gains the upper hand.

All this is of extreme interest when the sagas are considered as ethnographic documents. Judging from the etymologies, we may assume that there indeed were two opposing kinds of honor in proto-Norse society; judging from the sagas, both sorts still existed later, though with little terminological correspondence. It is probably impossible to sort out the chronological implications of honor in the sagas, to determine whether honor as it is portrayed in the sagas agrees more closely with the saga age, the period when the sagas were recorded, or somewhere in between, but it seems perhaps most likely that the honor of personal or martial glory may be older than the honor of social utility, which may have been more the rule during the age of recording.

Whatever the exact chronological particulars, the sagas have much to reveal about the concept of honor from the saga age onward. The honor of social utility accompanies the release of narrative tension brought on by seeking the honor of personal or martial glory. This may suggest that the former was an operant ethical norm and the latter a departure from this norm. It is accepted by anthropologists and folklorists that much

---

21) Lindow, Comitatus, ch. 5, considers these etymologies and their institutional impact in some detail.

behavior exhibited in 'primitive,' non- or preliterate narratives deliberately violates important taboos within the society which the story teller and his audience could never think to transgress. Such antisocial behavior in narrative probably functions as some sort of wish fulfillment; as Herskovits has written of the folktale: "we derive powerful satisfactions from identifying ourselves, all unconsciously, with characters who transgress the codes we ourselves may not violate."<sup>22</sup> It thus appears that the emphasis on the honor of personal or martial glory in the family sagas helps mediate an important cultural opposition between two apparently conflicting codes of personal behavior. The point is that adherence to the honor of the family, in other words of personal or martial glory, including the subsequent bloodbaths, was socially unproductive and theoretically unacceptable behavior. But knowledge of this code persisted and found expression in the family sagas. Only characters in these sagas could adhere to the unyielding heroic ideal.

---

<sup>22</sup> Cultural Anthropology, 271.