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SOME TRAITS IN THE PATTERNS OF SOCIAL BALANCE IN THE  
LAXDÆLA SAGA.

1.

In the standing discussion about the historical contents of the Icelandic family sagas at least one thing has been beyond doubt: the sagas pretend to be history. And while their historical value has been questioned more and more, the problem of the Icelanders' view on history in the 12th and 13th centuries has turned up with increasing strength.

We are facing a problem which is something of a paradox. How can the family sagas handle the historical truth so freely as they seem to do and still deal with a historical past which chronologically, genealogically and topologically is so closely related to the age and surroundings of the writer and his audience. The radical answer to the question - that the sagas are fictitious novels, freely composed over a few central historical events and persons - makes it even more difficult to understand how and with what intentions the author diverged from a historical tradition as the one known from Landnámabók or Íslendingabók. And the less extreme position - that the different versions of the same story are built on different traditions, which the writer could choose among or combine - just brings about a new problem: what guided him, if not his source material did? Why did he prefer one tradition to another? Why did he diverge from the tradition or extend it with his own inventions?

I do not think it is a satisfactory answer to see the writer's purpose as one of making art or entertain-

ment. This solution still leaves unanswered the question about the basis and function of the saga in the contemporary public. On the whole it seems misleading to distinguish between the historical element in the saga and the author's invention. At any rate it manifests a coherent structure, and we shall have to take it seriously, when it claims to be history as a whole. We should leave to the historian to isolate the elements which are historical from his modern critical point of view and see it as one of our tasks as students of literature to understand how the saga has been acceptable as history in its original audience.

All historiography is an interpretation of some given facts, and the interpretation is made on the premises of the writer and his age. The contemporary age determines the conception of the past. This applies with special force to the mediaeval historian facing an incoherent, predominantly oral tradition, and the saga writer shares this situation with historians like Ari and the Landnáma compilers. They have worked on the basis of a tradition with great possibilities of interpretation, and their primary task has not been to write down an existing tradition or to make their choice between deviating traditions. They had to construct history and give it a structure capable of providing answers to their own and their public's questions about the past and of satisfying their conception of what the historical truth might or must have been.

The discrepancies between the sagas or between the sagas and other sources demonstrate that there has been more than one way of interpretation, and we may assume that they have all had equal rights as attempts to make an acceptable comprehension of the past, but also that the different interpretations are based on a common view on history, which is part of a shared ideology, specifying the Icelandic society in the 12th and 13th centuries.

One way to understand the sagas as a part of this society is the uncovering of the semantic structures underlying the texts. Primarily we shall have to elucidate the general mythical patterns used in organizing the components of the tradition and to understand the unknown and produce a self-knowledge. And first then the sagas may be analyzed as different manifestations of the same underlying structure, governed by different tendencies and purposes.

The following considerations are about a few traits in the structure of the Laxdœla saga, mainly on the social level. I shall not be occupied here with the whole saga, only with the first third of it, i.e. the parts determining the climax and aftermath of the plot. Further in these determining parts I shall concern myself with the differences or contrasts between pairs of close relatives; first in the generation of immigrants, and then in the three first generations born in Iceland. These changing relations between members of the same family are interpreted as the saga way of demonstrating social dynamics representative of the conception of Iceland's early history as a course of a changing social balance.

## 2.

As in the typical account of the settlement known from other family sagas and the Landnámabók, the Laxdœla saga explains the family group's departure from Norway as a consequence of the growth of the feudal kingdom. This leads to the foundation of a new society in Iceland, where the lost balance between equal groups is reestablished. But as we all know the account in the Laxdœla saga of the departure from Norway of Ketill flatnefr and his family deviates considerably from that of the Landnámabók and the Eyrbyggja saga.

We have here one of the classic examples of deviating

versions of the same story, where different explanations are given.<sup>1)</sup> But whether we consider them as oral deviation or as due to the writers' different interpretations of the sources they draw on, both the two versions have to be understood as acceptable historiography.

Against the two other sources the Laxdœla saga displays a strong underrating of the contact between the Ketill-group and the Celtic areas. Only Ketill himself, his daughter Unnr, and her son Þorsteinn rauður leave for Scotland, while Ketill's sons, Björn austrœni and Helgi bjólan, and his son-in-law, Helgi magri, go the direct way from Norway to Iceland. In the other version the whole group moves to the British Isles where they live for some time, before Ketill's children and Helgi magri leave for Iceland. Correspondingly the Laxdœla saga has the marriages take place in Norway before the departure, while the Landnámabók and the Eyrbyggja saga look at them as means of communication when Ketill flatnefr settles in the Celtic territory. The Laxdœla saga is altogether silent about the family's kinship with the inhabitants of this territory, except where it mentions that Helgi magri's mother was the Irish princess Rafarta. But Helgi plays no part in the saga.

By this leaving out the relations to the Celtic territories, the Laxdœla saga emphasizes the continuity from Norway to Iceland, but at the same time it throws in relief the Unnr-group's detour via the British Isles. The two possibilities of settlement, Iceland and Scotland, are contrasted, and the latter is rejected. Their attempt to live in coexistence with the Scots fails and results

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1) Cf. in particular Björn M. Ólsen: "Landnáma og Laxdœla saga", Aarbøger for Nordisk Oldkyndighed, Kbh., 1908, pp. 151-232; Einar Ól. Sveinsson in Íslenzk fornrit V, 1934, pp. LXIII-LXVI; Jón Jóhannesson: "Gerðir Landnáma-bókar", Rvík, 1941, pp. 213 f. ; Theodore M. Andersson: "The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins", New Haven and London, 1964, pp. 86 f.

in Þorsteinn's death. Then, without further attempts to settle in this territory, Unnr follows her brother's example and sets out for Iceland.

The two branches of Ketill's house, with which the saga is dealing, are here initially contrasted. We may in the Unnr-family's contact with the Celtic territories see an unsuccessful effort to the communication with the strangers which the family later on realize by accident in their contact with the Irish princess Melkorka. Here in its prelude the saga just displays the possibility, and thus, by contrasting the two main routes to Iceland, creates three territories within the sphere of the saga, with significance on the social level. Opposite Iceland lie Norway as the country of origin, and the Celtic areas as the strange territory outside the Norse areas, with which the Northmen have no regular communication.

This structure on the territorial level corresponds with the general social discrimination between "we", "the others", and "the foreigners", which constitutes an important part of the mythical language the saga makes use of. The writer - or the tradition behind him - has had the task to give an explanation of events in the past, such as the Ósvífrs-sons' killing of Kjartan Óláfsson, a feud within the same family. He searches an explanation in a general mythical pattern that must have had a special relevance to the Icelandic people of emigrants, settled on the border of the human world and forced to attain an explanation of their relations to the surrounding world and their place in the history of mankind. We may call it the myth of the relations between the groups inside a certain social sphere and the others outside. In the sagas this pattern is used to clarify the relations between Iceland and the foreign areas, and one of the interpretations of history is seeing it as the dynamics generated by communication between members of different social spheres.

In his use of such elements of expression, the writer could draw on conventional conceptions and norms concerning the communication between Iceland and the surroundings. The rule, as it appears from the sagas, says that the departure from Norway implicates a breaking off of the exogamic communication with the Norwegian family groups. After the settlement Norway is a centralized kingdom and Iceland a separate nation, and as a natural consequence the exogamic communication with the Norwegians is never resumed.

In the emigration-generation the isolation and unity of the group may be indicated by the daughters marrying within the group, which means that they are not being used in the usual way, i.e. as a means of communication externally. In this way, in the Laxdœla saga Ketill's daughter, Þórunn hýrna, is married to Helgi magri, and his grandson Þorsteinn rauðr marries Þuríðr, the same Helgi's sister. And Unnr marries her son's daughter Þorgerðr to her most prominent attendant, Kollr. After the settlement the exogamic communication among the Icelandic families is resumed. Thus the usual communication through the daughters takes place solely within the Icelandic society, while the relations to Norway are now being regulated as a communication between the Icelandic families separately and the Norwegian king, by the sons setting out to be members of his guard for a while. As I have already said, the Icelanders of the sagas have no regular communication with countries like Ireland and Scotland outside the northern area.

It follows from this system of norms that the sexual contacts across the borders between the social spheres are violations of the norms, and thus the sagas can use the norms and the violations of these norms as a language to indicate the right and the wrong, the safe and the dangerous. In the Laxdœla saga this language seems sometimes employed on a sheer symbolic level, as when in the

three balance-disturbing heroes, Hrútr, Óláfr pá, and Kjartan, the alien element is indicated by the suggestion of a love affair with a Norwegian queen or princess. Even the mere contact with a Norwegian family before visiting the king, may, as a deviation from the usual, be significant on the levels of symbols. Thus Hqskuldr, on his journey to Norway, where he buys Melkorka, begins with a winter's stay with his kinsmen there, and first after his intercourse with Melkorka, he goes to the king, who blames him for the delay. Similarly Óláfr pá later in the saga stays during the winter with Geirmundr gnýr, before he sets out to visit Earl Hákon. As a result of this Óláfr, against his will, has to bring Geirmundr with him to Iceland.

After the departure from Scotland Unnr carries through her landnám in the usual way. She divides her territory among the members of the group, and it begins to split up into new families. Unnr immediately contacts her brothers, and through her visit to Björn austrœni, which is being contrasted with her unsuccessful contact with the other brother, the initial balance between the two branches of the kin is demonstrated. In the central parts of the saga the families try to confirm this balance by marriage, and in the intermediate chapters is explained why the peaceful communication between the groups can be renewed only after a blood feud.

In this chain of events between the settlement and the catastrophe four generations later the saga demonstrates the continuing splitting up within the Unnr-branch of the family, in each generation concentrating on two new branches of relatives and demonstrating their efforts to regulate their mutual relations with regard to power and property.

The group is first divided through Þorgerðr's and Óláfr's marriages. And again the mutual social position of two family branches is indicated. Þorgerðr and Kollr receive Laxádalr from Unnr as her dowry, but Óláfr takes

over the landnáms-farm, Hvammr. Thus, as the only son of the house, Óláfr is Unnr's most important heir, and this is stressed again in the detailed account of his wedding feast, contrasted by the brief mentioning of the marriage between Kollr and Þorgerðr.

This picture of the social position of the two families has undoubtedly been in accordance with the common opinion of the early history of Iceland. Already in the Íslendingabók the descendants of Óláfr feilan get a very central position while Laxdælir play no major part outside the family sagas. Thus the Laxdæla saga makes a family branch on the outskirts of the historical scene the central one in its own story. In this way the author is, of course, in a freer position to work out the story according to his own purposes. But the descendants of Óláfr feilan and Þórðr gellir remain the protagonists in history, and this means that from a contemporary point of view the Laxdælir is the branch that under special circumstances got a special position, but had to have its wings clipped in order that the original balance could be reestablished.

Again a comparison with the Landnáma redactions discloses the efforts in the saga to stress a certain structure. Sturlubók (96) says about Dala-Kollr that he "hafði forráð með Auði" <sup>2)</sup>, while in the Laxdæla saga he is just mentioned as "einna... mest verðr af fǫruneyti Unnar" <sup>3)</sup>. Skarðsárabók (103) has that "Kollr nam Laxárdal allan" <sup>4)</sup> while, as said before, the saga lets him get his territory from Unnr. Sturlubók has a lacuna here. Contrary to the Landnáma redactions the saga underrates Kollr's position. It is made quite evident

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2) Íslenzk fornrit I, Rvík. 1968, p. 138.

3) Íslenzk fornrit V, p.7.

4) Íslenzk fornrit I, p. 143.



that his social position is weaker than that of Óláfr feilan, and in this way the shifting of the balance in the following generations is being stressed. This shifting takes place in the relations between the three pairs of brothers which in the following chapters play the predominant part, the halfbrothers Høskuldr and Hrútr and Þorleikr and Óláfr pá, and the foster brothers Bolli and Kjartan. Through these three generations the conflicts are summed up, released in the third and settled in the fourth. Explaining these conflicts the saga makes use of the mythical language I mentioned earlier. Three times it displays the myth about the contact with the strange sphere, manifested in a marriage or a sexual affair between a member of the group and an individual outside the Icelandic society, and thus alien elements are three times incorporated in the family.

The first marriage takes place, when Þorgerðr after Kollr's death goes back to Norway against the will of her son, and marries for the second time. The result is the halfbrothers Høskuldr and Hrútr, and the following conflicts about the inheritance. It is settled, but Hrútr's settlement in a territory where there is in fact no room for him, has consequences in the following generations. The conflict about the land breaks out again. Þorleikr, Høskuld's legal heir, has to leave Iceland, and this in turn contributes to the fatal conflict between Kjartan and Bolli. On the mythical level Þorgerðr's second marriage is a breach of the norm providing that a woman does not go back to Norway and that the exogamic communication with the Norwegian groups are not to be renewed.

But this story is only a prelude to the triangle in the following generation, Høskuld's affair with the Irish Melkorka after his marriage to the Icelandic Jórunn. On the concrete level this extreme exogamic affair is illegitimate and likely to cause troubles. In the mythical pattern it functions as a dangerous communication with

a woman outside the social sphere. Such intercourse across the social border always has exceptional consequences - in the sagas as well as in folktales and ballads.

Whatever the historical element in this story may be,<sup>5)</sup> it is at least a wellknown folktale,<sup>6)</sup> and here a folktale with a function in a historical context. On his journey far away from home and outside his normal social connections the hero meets a mysterious woman. The meeting takes place in strange surroundings, outside normal human residences, and the woman is alone, has no relatives and no home. She is either a bewitched princess or an elf girl. Melkorka is both. In the historical context she has of course got realistic features, but the main elements of the underlying myth are manifested, and not just for entertainment, but to make the meaning of the Melkorka story and its function in the saga clear. Høskuld's encounter with Melkorka takes place in the booth of a russian merchant on an island on the border between the three Scandinavian kingdoms. She is a bond-woman poorly dressed in rags, and she is dumb. Thus she is outside every human connection, but like all abducted and disguised princesses she has the traits of her real self too. After Høskuldr has taken her with him, she gets back her identity through sexual intercourse like the princess in the fairy tale (where it might be just a kiss), and the next morning he gives her some fine clothes, and everybody says that they suit her very well. Later she begins to talk, and her real social status is discovered. But at this point the saga breaks with the general folktale

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5) Cf. in particular Rolf Heller: "Literarisches Schaffen in der Laxdœla saga. Die Entstehung der Berichte über Olaf Pfaus Herkunft und Jugend", Saga, Heft 3, Halle 1960.

6) Cf. Helga Reuschel: "Melkorka". In Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur 75, Berlin 1938, pp. 297-304.

pattern to use it for its own purpose. Melkorka's displacement is not entirely lifted. Hǫskuldr does not bring the princess home to her father to receive her and half the kingdom; and more important: his son Óláfr actually being offered this kingdom, does not accept it. His journey to Ireland later in the saga has the double function of confirming his royal descent and rejecting a lasting communication with his maternal family. The same rejection is displayed when the king does not want Óláfr to take Melkorka's foster mother with him to Iceland. On the other hand Melkorka cannot be integrated in the Icelandic family. Hǫskuldr has no sexual intercourse with her after the return, and after her descent has been revealed she moves away from the farm. The point on the mythical level as well as on the concrete in the whole story is, that the group cannot fuse with individuals outside the group, and when all the same the attempt is done, the consequences for the kin are both glorious and dangerous. Thus in the Laxdœla saga the encounter with the strange bondwoman shall give an explanation of exceptionally gifted men like Óláfr pá and his son, but also of the alien elements disturbing the social balance to such a degree that it leads to a catastrophe.

The saga makes quite clear, how Óláfr pá upsets the balance in the Laxádalr. From his halfbrother Þorleikr's point of view he is a cuckoo in the nest. But his achieving the social and economic status corresponding to his descent and his personal qualities takes place not only at the expense of the brother. After the Melkorka story follows the conflict round Þórðr goddi and his wife Vigdís, Þórðr gellir's niece. This conflict leads to a transferring of land from the Óláfr feilan branch of the Unnr-family to Óláfr pá. The saga tells, that Vigdís was married off to the childless Þórðr goddi with the intention of taking over his farm. Now it is passed over to Óláfr. This does not lead to an open conflict, but the

saga remarks, that Þórðr gellir and Høskuldr had become estranged after that - "ok var þetta kyrrt síðan ok um nokkuru færa en áðr"<sup>7)</sup>. The antagonism and the cause of it are stressed some chapters later, when Høskuldr is warned by his wife against an open conflict with Hrútr, because Hrútr is allied with Þórðr gellir. "Hygg ek ok þat, Høskuldr", she says, "at þeim þykkir þú raunmjök sitja yfir sínum hlut og sonr þinn, Óláfr"<sup>8)</sup>. - Once more, towards the end of the saga, this strife about Þórðr goddi's farm is touched on, when Þórðr gellir's son, Þorkell kuggi, and his grandson, Þorkell Eyjólfsson, try without success to force Halldórr Óláfsson to hand over his paternal estate to them. If they had succeeded the ring had been closed. Like Hrútr, Óláfr is placed in surroundings, where there is really no room for him, but as everyone will see the saga does not intend to describe him as an upstart, who by chance obtains a position he has no legal right to. On the contrary it is made quite plain that Óláfr is the chosen hero, with a natural right to take up the leading position. As a consequence of this Høskuldr on his death-bed transfers to him and not to the legitimate sons the symbols of the kinsmen's luck; and in the following account of the funeral feast we see Óláfr as the foremost of not only the brothers but of the whole kin descended from Unnr, and thus the centre of gravity has shifted from the Óláfr feilan branch to the descendants of Þorgerðr and Dala-Kollr, and from Høskulds legitimate heirs to the son of a foreign bondwoman and princess. The saga demonstrates this in the parallel between the funeral feast for Høskuldr and the above-mentioned wedding

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7) Íslenzk fornrit V, p. 38.

8) Ibid., p. 47.

feast for Óláfr feilan. Óláfr pá's feast is much greater than that of the ancestress, Unnr, both because he invites more guests, and because a greater number of them came. About Unnr's feast it is said that not nearly as many came as she had invited, but of Óláfr's feast that it was the largest but one ever held in Iceland.

Óláfr pá is - though the saga does not use the word - gæfumaðr. He realizes in his own life the power and honour he was born to, and as long as he lives he succeeds in hindering the inner strife that threatens the family. But he is not able to hinder the disaster in the following generation. He overcomes the bad terms between himself and Þorleikr by fostering his son, Bolli, and he settles the strife between Þorleikr and Hrótr, persuading Þorleikr to leave the country. But by these very actions he lays the groundwork for the fatal strife between his sons and Bolli.

As regards luck, gæfa, Kjartan is his father's contrast, as it appears from Óláfr Tryggvason's words when he leaves Norway: "Mikit er at Kjartani kveðit ok kyni hans, ok mun óhægt vera atgørða við forlögum þeira"<sup>9)</sup> Kjartan is the foremost among the entire kin. In the swimming match he is described as the king's equal, and he is offered marriage with the king's sister. But in the inner logic of the saga these unusual personal and social qualities explain his fall. Not only all the qualities of his lineage, but also all its suppressed material of conflict get an outlet through him. And now the balance cannot be anymore upset. The efforts to a peaceful communication are replaced by feud.

On the concrete level this is motivated first by Bolli's jealousy and later by that of Guðrún - a jealousy as much about social prestige as about love. But on the mythical level Kjartan and Bolli are victims of the

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9) Ibid., p. 132.

disturbances in the preceding generations.

Immediately after the grand funeral feast for Hǫskuldr follow a number of dire portents. Among them the story about the marriage between Óláfr pá's daughter and the Norwegian Geirmundr is interesting as the third manifestation of the myth that in the preceding generations served as an explanation of the course of the story - and of history. But contrary to the stories about the Icelandic-Norwegian marriage between Þorgerðr and Herjólfur and about the Irish Melkorka, both affairs resulting in children, the Geirmundr episode has no concrete consequences. Like the story of Óláfr pá's fight with Hrapp's ghost or the episode about the ox Harri, it has no place in the causality of the saga plot. In a purely symbolic way it repeats the theme of the anomalous marriage. To interpret the story fully we will have to understand the significance of a man's breaking up from his homestead to marry a woman and stay with her family, before leaving her again, and of a sword stolen from this man by his deserted wife. - I am not going to try that here, but it is quite clear that the sword Fótbitr - like a couple of similar swords in other sources - is the symbolic bearer of the disaster, which befalls the kin, and it is obvious that the way, it is introduced by the writer, is not incidental.

### 3.

It is a characteristic feature of the family sagas that they let their heroes die a violent death. From a 13th century point of view this is not necessarily a demonstration of a solely tragic or disastrous conception of life. The central point in the conception of the Icelandic identity as a nation lies in its being a commonwealth of equal family groups in a state of equilibrium, exposed to disturbances. In some sagas it seems as if these groups should have been able to regulate their

mutual relationships peacefully, had they not been disturbed by alien elements. But when the society is affected by communication with foreign groups or individuals, whether by marrying or just by travelling, there is a risk that one family grows stronger than the others and thus upsets the balance.

From this point of view the death of heroes like Kjartan may be necessary in order to reestablish the lost balance. They are too big for the society; but after the death of Kjartan and Bolli and the revenge, the two main branches of Ketill flatnef's house, set up in the first chapters, are joined again through the marriages between Guðrún and Þorkell Eyjólfsson and Bolli Bollason and Snorri's daughter, Þórdís, and in the last chapter the line of their descendants is brought up to the contemporary time, and the saga is thus connected with the reality of the writer's audience. Maybe a good deal of concrete experience underlies this sort of explanation of the course of life. But the experiences and the facts of the tradition are modelled on general semantic patterns, and by manifesting these patterns in the historical and realistic material the sagas provide their view on history and life.

It goes without saying, that my interpretation of the Laxdœlasaga is tentative and highly incomplete. Actually I have just outlined a few main traits in the first parts of the saga. But to conclude I shall allow myself to underline three principal points.

1. The family sagas are to be taken seriously as history. Not in the modern sense of the word, but as an interpretation of the past, acceptable and satisfactory in the contemporary audience.

2. In providing this interpretation of history, the sagas display shared semantic patterns, which are part of the contemporary ideology.

3. As an example I have pointed out some traits in

these patterns, manifested in the Laxdœla saga, but in other texts as well. I have called it the myth about the intercourse with what is outside a certain social sphere.

I have put beyond the limits of the present paper the questions about the relations between the saga and the actual social and political conditions and events in the last period of the mediaeval Icelandic commonwealth.

I do not think the correspondance between these conditions and events and the semantic patterns of the sagas is a straightforward one; but at least it is tempting to see, in the desperate efforts of the Sturlunga-age to reestablish a lost social balance within the Icelandic society and towards Norway, an analogy with the course in the Laxdœla saga and other family sagas.



Appendix

The dividings and marriages within Ketill flatnef's house.

