

Sturlunga Saga: an Essential Source for a Thanatological Approach to the Middle Ages.

Death is a most peculiar and elevated point of focus to analyse the history of man. Despite the vanity and mutability of history, death represents an “immobile mirror” and it is a kind of passage where the events of history and the fundamental phases of civilization appear most highly concentrated (Prosperi 1982: 392-393). At the moment of death the meaning of life increases and we are more sensitive to the highest values of existence, that is, those values which, in the light of death, remain meaningful.

It is because death was recognized to be the unifying factor of every culture in every epoch of human history, that historiographers and anthropologists started, around 1960, to extend Thanatology to their own fields of research.

But even if death belongs to everybody and for this reason represents a very sensitive litmus test of social and ethical changes, it can still be considered from a partial point of view. In this regard, Michel Vovelle (1983a: 9) underlines that:

Malgré ce qu'ont répété les vieux arts de mourir ou les danses macabres sur la mort nivelleuse, égalisatrice, qui réduit les hommes au même sort, il n'y a rien de plus inégal ou de plus inégalitaire que la mort. Des traces qu'elle laisse, il nous reste les preuves, les témoignages, les indices pour les riches, pour les puissants, mais point pour la masse anonyme des pauvres.

Indeed, it is true that we can reconstruct human belief about death, and life after death, by examining the customs related to the burial such as the orientation of the grave, the position of the cadaver and the choice of things put with it (s. Demoule 1982: 321-322). However, neither the Pyramids, the Etruscan sarcophagi, the ships of Gokstad and Oseberg, or graves full of treasures and weapons, were ever dedicated to a common farmer or fisherman. Furthermore, this archeological evidence does not indicate in which way the burial ceremony was practiced, who was leading it, or what followed. In the same way epigraphs, sermons, and notes on parish registers do not hide a kind of partiality towards death.

Vovelle (1983; 1986: X ff.) points out that only literature and art are capable of reporting the feelings of a collective sensibility. Thus it becomes a question of which literature is able to give an idea of what death meant to the ones who did not leave behind individual expressions.

Using the *Chansons de Geste* and the Arthurian tales the French historiographer Philippe Ariès (1977) for example, constructs his theory of medieval death as *apprivoisée*, i.e. tame and ruled by a customary ritual in which man was the master of his own death. Nevertheless, Norbert Elias (1982; 1985: 30-35) asserts that we can't define medieval attitude towards death as being spontaneous and resigned just by analysing chivalric poems. Even if they always follow through and describe carefully all the phases of death, which is never unexpected and casual, these poems are still dealing with the death of heroes, and often reflect what the poet and his audience thought the art of dying should be, and not what it actually was. So, if heroic poems are able to set forth the medieval conception of a "beautiful death", they cannot reveal the way of dying of those who were neither a knight or a hero.

In contrast to this exclusively heroic continental medieval literature, the Icelandic sagas can offer us a body of research material where the human being is not merely the expression of lofty ideals that are rarely, if ever, actually lived. The sagas feature, as protagonists, hundreds of characters who include not only heroes but also a large number of farmers, fishermen, common men and women. We are told of their origins, places of settlement, violent feuds, and last but not least, the circumstances of their deaths.

Old Icelandic prosaic literature can give, beyond its strictly poetic and literary merits, an extensive view of Nordic heathen society and culture which is perfectly recognizable despite its written elaboration occurring during the Christian epoch. Indeed, being the product of an oral tradition and of a culture unaffected, in its expressions, by centuries of philosophical, literary, and in particular christian thinking, the sagas show in a clearer and unmystified way human attitude in front of death. Moreover, death in the sagas is always in the foreground and unlike its perception in continental medieval literature, is often free from the hopes of redemption and of an eternal life which, in Germanic mythology, was denied even to the gods themselves.

The data on death as presented in the sagas, both copious and not lacking in originality, allow us to get closer to the extra-textual reality of the work especially if we take into account the collection of Sturlunga saga. Its stylistic and historical peculiarities in particular, offer exhaustive evidence of the ideals and thoughts concerning death, and of the act of dying when these ideals and thoughts come to the fore. Moreover, the Sturlunga saga offers both a diachronic perspective and a synchronic view of death throughout the period of Commonwealth, not only because the sagas concerning contemporary events and those dealing with events that occurred two hundreds years earlier were written at the same time, but also because it features and has instilled between the lines the culture and the ideals belonging both to the *söguðld* and to the heroic and christian

ethics. The rules that were active in ancient times for example, such as the discipline of killings, were still operative during the *Sturlungaöld* (Van Der Toorn 1955: 47), but they had to cope with a deeply changed political situation. Indeed, it is through the contrast between the two ages that the old ideals come dramatically to light, as in the poignant episode of the killing of Snorri Sturluson, described by Sturla Þórðarson in the *Íslendinga saga*: 151:

Siðmon knútr bað Árna höggva hann.
"Eigi skal höggva," sagði Snorri.
"Högg þú," sagði Siðmon.
"Eigi skal höggva," sagði Snorri.

Snorri's reaction against the king's killers is not, as Erling Monsen asserts (1932: XIII), a pathetic attempt to confirm his by this time declined authority, but instead an appeal to those rules which he himself had solemnised in his works (in this case the one which considered *nīðingsverk* a killing perpetrated during the night).

But the Icelanders of the *Sturlungaöld* were by now entering a mechanism, known for centuries in Europe, where violence was just a prerogative and monopoly of the state. As a consequence death was losing its human aspect, i.e. the semblance of the enemy and, moreover, of an enemy respecting those rules which honoured both the killer and the killed. Nevertheless, it was the *Sturlungaöld* that preserved and eternalized, through the writing of sagas of ancient and contemporary events, the attitude towards death which is characteristic to the whole period of Icelandic Commonwealth, and extremely meaningful for the Middle Ages.

Nordic sensibility regarding death, even if deeper and more hopeless, is still bound to that medieval atmosphere which, elsewhere, originated the images of suffering damnation, atrocious pain and macabre dances. However, this medieval interest in death, should not be regarded as morbid. In order to better understand it one must, as Norbert Elias points out, distance our stage of civilization and recognize how much our limit of revulsion is historically determined (Elias 1982; 1985: 39). And besides, the crudity of these images only express the eternal and universal anxiety of man, conscious of his own transitoriness and anguished by the obscurity of his destiny.

Within the narratological tissue of the sagas, it is possible to identify numerous elements which emphasize the gravity of death. The circumstances of the moment in which it happens, for example, are never neglected, and it is always specified if they are to be attributed to natural or accidental causes, such as disease or shipwreck.

Because death always reveals its face, man is able to give it a name,

and to subdue and possess it with his knowledge. Furthermore, to discover the cause of death means to exalt the dignity of the human being, who is not conquered by something unknown and too far from his understanding, but instead lives the last moments of his history with the awareness that they are the most important and the worthiest to deserve recollection.

It is for this reason that not only the saga-writer, but also the characters themselves, feel the necessity to tell of their death:

Skip þeira kom í óbyggir á Grænlandi, ok týndust menn allir. En þess varð svá víst, at fjórtán vetrum síðan fannst skip þeira, ok þá fundust sjau menn í hellisskúta einum. Þar var Ingimundr prestr. (...). Vax var ok þar hjá honum ok rúnar, er sögðu atburð um líflát þeira. (*Prestssaga Guðmundar Arasonar*, 13)

It is interesting to note that Ingimundr, in spite of being a priest, in the moment of his death seems to identify with the heathen rather than the christian tradition. In the first place he writes using the runic alphabet, and secondly he does not seem to view his death as a passage to a better life. Ingimundr did not carve in the wax board a prayer for the salvation of their souls, but instead preferred to convey that experience, distinguishing the human being, as the major experience in which man is a protagonist of his own history.

It is important to stress, however, that this interest about the circumstances of death is not merely belonging to the saga-writer, but is part of a whole oral culture with its variations and discrepancies:

Hann fekk líflát á Grænlandi í óbyggðum, ok eru tvennar frásagnir.
(*Prestssaga Guðmundar Arasonar*, 1)

In the sagas no event concerning death is omitted. When death is caused by man, for example, the name of the killer is always emphasized, even if he seems to play no other role within the story:

Var þá tekin af honum stálhúfan. Sá maðr hjó í höfuð Eyjólfí með öxi, er Kimbi hét. Var þat banasár. (*Íslendinga saga*, 189)
Var hann dreppinn suðr frá bænum á Möðruvöllum. Prest-Jóan vá at honum. (*Íslendinga saga*, 175)

The name of the slayer is never neglected even when the killing has an abettor:

Kom þá Órækja til ok bað drepa hann.
Guðmundr kvíagymbill vá at honum. (*Íslendinga saga*, 94)

And when a man is repeatedly wounded, the name of the one who inflicted the mortal blow is often specified:

Þórðr Guðmundarson varðist ór húsdurum á Miklabæ, þar til er leitat var til laundura á bak honum. Þá hopaði hann í stofu ok varðist þar lengi vel ok drengiliga, fórr hann yrði sótr. Gizurr glaði hjó báðar hendr af honum. Þar var banasár. (*Íslendinga saga*, 138)

This attention is particularly due to the fact that the real killer was directly involved in the vengeance or in the process of compensation, therefore there were no anonymous and unpersonified executioners, no mercenaries, but warriors, men whose names were known and who were perfectly responsible for their actions. Indeed, the experience of death not only involves those characters who die, but also all those characters who witness or perpetrate it. All these characters are closely in touch with death because they meet it every day, risk it every time there is tension between families, and face it on every expedition across the ocean or during the terrible plagues. No character then is unacquainted with the meaning of dying, even if this awareness very seldom corresponds to solidarity. However, the characters feel a strong opposition to those who kill without a specific personal motivation, and they usually arrange matters so as to know who they are going to execute in the event of an assault (v. *Guðmundar saga dýra*, 14).

Death then is never anonymous, and it does not need to be hidden. The more it is unmasks, the more human dignity increases, being defended not only by the slayed, but also by the slayer, who are united against the common enemy. Indeed, the murderer shows respect for his victim's death by killing with noble and manly blows. Every wound is accurately and carefully described, and clear is the aversion to the ones who strike in a despicable way:

Björn hjó til hans í annat sinn, ok kom höggit fyrir ofan eyra á hálsinn, ok varð þat mikit sár ok banvænt. Eftir þat tók Björn í fær honum ok sneri honum í loft upp ok lagði sverði til hans, ok varð þat lílit sár. Í því kom Ásbjörn at ok spurði, hví hann dræpi hann eigi. Hann kvaðst at hafa gert þat, er hann myndi. Ásbjörn gekk þá at honum ok hjó af honum höfuðit. (*Pórðar saga kakala*, 21)

The deference that Ásbjörn shows to Magni by striking a decisive and immediately fatal blow, emphasizes his will to deprive death of its power to prostrate and humiliate man not only physically but also, and in particular, in his dignity. To kill by one single blow therefore, is not only a demonstration of strength, but a duty and a reply to death, as is the recognition of the valour of the enemy:

Hjó Þormóðr um þverar herðar honum, ok varð þat mikit sár.

Sturla mælti: "Högg þú annat."

Hann gerði svá, ok kom þat utan á hálsinn.

Sturla mælti: "Högg þú þriðja, ok er illa unnit at góðum dreng. (*Íslendinga saga*, 85)

It is clearly visible then, how Nordic man desires to be, as far as possible,

master of death in order not to succumb to its will which has all too often expressed through the terrible epidemics, natural catastrophes, and the harsh conditions he had to endure.

The varied attitudes that existed towards death in the sagas and the interrogatives that they proposed appear from the array of responses from the characters who experience death in different ways. Among the variety of examples offered by this literature, it is possible to isolate distinctive *tótoir* which, although sometimes they coincide with those of continental medieval culture, they are more often different and confirm, once again, the particularity and richness of the culture of which they are an expression.

First of all and as illustrated in the majority of medieval literature, death often assumes exemplifying characteristics and expresses, through the proposed models, a noble and heroic ideal of life.

For the saga men the so called “beautiful death” was interpreted as being a violent death. Whether met in the battle field or during a duel, it represented the supreme expression of a life lived for the assertion and the defence of personal and family honour. This ideal of death mostly manifests itself through the ability of enduring physical suffering and of maintaining a virile and cool posture at the moment of death.

Numerous examples on this topic are those related to in the sagas, which also share the same stylistic characteristics, i.e. their being free from redundancies and useless comments:

Þórarinn vá at Birni, ok varð hann vel ok mælti fátt. (*Íslendinga saga*, 107)

Lét Oddr þar líf sitt við mikla hreysti ok drengskap. (*Íslendinga saga*, 188)

Ok lézt hann þar ok varð drengiliga við. (*Íslendinga saga*, 153)

There even are characters who ask to be allowed to lie on the back during execution in order to show their courage, as in the case of Þórðr:

Lagðist Þórðr þá niðr opinn ok bað þá hyggja at, hvárt honum blöskraði nökkr. Ormr fekk þá mann til að höggva hann. Sá hét Einarr Munkr. (*Þórdar saga kakala*, 20)

Furthermore, this coolness towards death comes also to the fore for reasons much more frivolous, as in the tale of the execution of Hermundr:

Þá var til höggs leiddr Hermundr Hermundarson. Hann var manna bezt hærðr ok mælti, at hann vildi kneppa hári sín, svá at þat yrði eigi blöðugt. Ok svá gerði hann. Hann horfði í loft upp, er Geirmundr þjófr vá hann. (*Íslendinga saga*, 138)

The immediate advantage to be gained from a “beautiful death” is to rouse admiration and, in particular, to compel man to commemorate such heroism. It is indeed the search for glory and for the possibility of being

immortal, at least in men's recollection, that in the sagas moves characters to face dangerous deeds in order to prove, by risking life, one's courage. Furthermore, there are many characters who risk their life for an exclusively "literal" aim. With respect to this it is very interesting to underline an extract from *Íslendinga saga* in which the brothers Snorri and Þórðr Þorvaldsson, aware of their status as characters, want to give an heroic turn to the narration:

Pá er þeir braðr vissu, at eigi var friðar ván ok þeir váru allir skriftaðir, skipuðust þeir til vanar, því at þeir vildu með engu móti upp gefast, sögðu, at þá væri líti til frásagnar. (*Íslendinga saga*, 85)

This meta-dramatic element reveals how important the ostentation of their death could be for a certain category of person. In particular, it shows man's awareness of the role he has to play in order to gain immortality.

That is the motivation by which Porgils chooses to revenge an offence:

"Ek hugsa þat," segir Porgils, "hvé illt mér þykkir, ef engi skal saga ganga frá mér, áðr en þrýtr líf mitt, svá at ek geta ekki á hefnileið róit um svfirðing þá, er mér er nú ger." (*Porgils saga skarða*, 17)

although in this instance Porgils is not yet aware of already playing a role in the saga, and chooses his destiny not to change the narration but to become a "character", and come to life again every time the attention of the reader is renewed. From this point of view, as Sverre Bagge asserts, the sagas had a very important social and moral function because "how could a man be expected to perform heroic deeds if there was no one to tell about them?" (Bagge 1991: 202).

Following the same interpretative mode the sagas emphasize that dying due to disease, or at least far from the battle field, diminishes man's value and deprives him of the possibility of gaining fame. This is, for example, the case of Guðmundr who, after having lived an adventurous and risky life, becomes a monk and dies in a monastery. With regard to this the saga writer expresses a clear and unequivocal judgement:

... ok lagði svá metorð sín. (*Guðmundar saga dýra*, 26)

But in the sagas, not every character is a hero. Indeed, most of them are not concerned with saving their honour if they can save their lives. Contrary to the chivalric poems and the poetic tradition, where the protagonists always prefer death to dishonour and cowardice, the sagas often display a prudence much closer to the genuine human nature:

Tók Þórðr til orða: "Pat er tillag mitt, Porgils, at þú vinnir hvatvetna til lífs þér. Allt er annat auðkeyptara en lífist". (*Porgils saga skarða*, 18)

And most of them choose life even if they have to experience heavy humiliations. Significantly one of these is Hrafnkell goði, a man belonging to the *söguöld*. He conveys us a sentence that shows how medieval men, despite the various "Cid" and "Roland", were also the ones who were afraid to die, as was to be expected:

Hrafnkell mælti: "Mörgum mundi betr pykkja skjótr dauði en slískar hrakningar, en mér mun fara sem mörgum öðrum, at lifit mun ek kjósa, ef kostr er."
(*Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, 13)

Actually, even if they are aware of what is the "better considered" choice (*betr pykkja*), most of the people behave in a way contrary to it. Similar is also the case of those who, disregarding oaths of allegiance and family duties, form an alliance with the enemy if their life is menaced:

Bauð hann heim tvá kosti, at þeir skyldi vinna honum trúnaðareiða, hinn annarr, at hann myndi taka fé þeira eða límar. En þeim sýmdist at vinna honum.
(*Svínfellinga saga*, 6)

It is interesting to stress that in the quoted passage, as in many others which are found in the sagas, there is no blame for such cowardly behaviour. Despite the fact that in Commonwealth Iceland treason was not considered "socially destructive" (Byock 1982: 199) because there was no state that needed to maintain a strong military union, these examples show that the choice of life is obvious as soon as the two alternatives are proposed. This choice was probably considered, if not the worthiest, certainly the most judicious, and therefore it was generally the most common. Therefore, despite the heroes fight to attest their honour in the scorn of death and in so doing gain fame and glory in risking their life in dangerous enterprises, the general atmosphere of the sagas and the message that they want to convey is that of "good sense". And as Ruggerini specifies (Ruggerini 1990: 25), in medieval Iceland good sense (*mannvit*) always coincided with *media virtus*,¹ and moderation was considered the principal way to follow in any circumstance. Much more than the heroic and the christian ideals then, the saga men seem to follow the genuine prudence and the sane ideals of *Hávamál*, as those expressed, for example, in stanza 71:

Haltr ríðr hrossi, hjörð recr handarvanr
dausr vegr oc dugir;
blindr er betri, enn brendr sé:
nýtr manngi nás.

As we have seen so far then, the Sturlunga saga, regarded as the expression of the whole Icelandic Commonwealth, witnesses the

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v. *Hávamál* 6, 7-9; 10, 1-3; 11, 1-3; 79; 54, 1-2; 55, 1-2; 56, 1-2.

importance, unknown in other literatures, attributed to death, whichever were its forms and its victims.

Moreover, it assumes such a multiplicity of information about death, that it can be of fundamental importance to contemporary Thanatology: it is the only literature that gives a chance of expression, in perhaps the most important and solemn moment of life, to that mass of people which in other literature remain "silent".

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