

The political element in *Íslendingasaga*

A Summary

Sagas about indigenous Icelandic matter are notoriously difficult to categorize in generic terms. They can be related to such medieval narrative genres as history, epic, romance and *vita*, but rarely if ever, do they fit nicely into one of these categories. The modern concept of the novel has sometimes been referred to in the debate, but its usefulness is limited although some parallel features can be found. The difficulty is most obvious in the case of the Sagas of Icelanders, *Íslendingasögur*, but the contemporary sagas present several problems as well. Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendingasaga* can of course be classified as history, but as scholars have noted, many features of its narrative are of the same epic nature as the narrative of the *Íslendingasögur*.

In his brilliant survey of the distinction between epic and novel the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin makes this comment on the influence of epic on narrative of contemporary figures and events:

Contemporary reality as such does not figure in as an available object of representation in any of these high genres ... But the events, victors and heroes of "high" contemporary reality are, as it were, appropriated by the past as they enter into these high genres ... they are woven by various intermediate links and connective tissue into the unified fabric of the heroic past and tradition. These events and heroes receive their value and grandeur precisely through this association with the past, the source of all authentic reality and value. They withdraw themselves, so to speak, from the present day with all its inconclusiveness, its indecision, its openness, its potential for re-thinking and re-evaluating. They are raised to the valorized plane of the past, and assume there a finished quality. We must not forget that "absolute past" is not to be confused with time in our exact and limited sense of the word, it is rather a temporally valorized hierarchical category.¹

To a certain extent Bakhtin's description seems to fit *Íslendingasaga*, one can not deny that Sturla Sighvatsson or Oddr Þórarinnsson are described in

¹ M.M. Bakhtin: *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press. P. 18.

similar terms as Gunnarr or Kjartan, although they have the disadvantage that we (or the narrator) know too much about them, we get much information about Sturla or Oddr and those around them that does not give them grandeur nor are they placed in „an absolute past“. Forgetfulness has not finished tidying up, and much remains of the inconclusiveness and indecision of everyday life.

The ambivalent attitude to these heroes and their time raises some general questions: can *Sturlunga saga* be treated as tradition from a past which has already broken the ties to contemporaneity or does its contemporaneity disturb or even destroy the traditional epic quality of the text? What is the effect of the fact that the author/narrator himself witnessed some of the events, often as one of the main actors, and got his information about other events from eye witnesses?² It is impossible to give a reasoned answer to such questions in one paper, and they must be approached through the posing of more specific questions, but hopefully this whole conference will throw some light upon them.

However hard we may try to read *Íslendinga saga* as an epic, we can never get around its obvious features as a chronicle. And this implies among other things a much more obvious and important presence of a political element than we find in sagas of the past, the *Íslendingasögur*.³

It is difficult, and in the final analysis impossible, to find out to what degree the most important real actors in the political intrigues and skirmishes of *Sturlungaöld* were conscious of a political significance of the events. It is highly unlikely that they were not aware that they were really fighting about wealth, power and social status, and the conflicts between the chieftains and bishop Guðmundr Arason shows an unusual consensus among the chieftains regarding the necessity of maintaining the power balance between the church and lay power. It is much more uncertain how they evaluated the political importance of their dealings with the king of Norway. Irrespective of the political awareness of the

² The question of time is obviously important here. Most narration sticks to the past tense, and in this *Íslendingasaga* is no exception. As a matter of fact it uses the historical *praesens* much more sparsely than is common in the *Íslendingasögur*. Paradoxically, this follows from the proximity of the events. They have such a firm place in the collective memory that their historicity, their past-ness, is indisputable.

³ It may sometimes be tempting to interpret *Íslendingasögur* in political terms. I have myself argued for the presence of a political element in *Eyrbyggja saga* (1971a and b), an element I saw as having its roots in the political development of the time of writing. William Ian Miller has presented an interpretation of Skarphéðinn's actions in his dealings with Höskuldr Hvítansessgoði in terms of the political situation of the saga's own time (1983). Irrespective of the validity or success of these interpretations, the political element plays a less obvious part, if any, in the discourse of the *Íslendingasögur* than it does in *Íslendinga saga*.

chieftains it is only natural to assume that the general public at the time, including the followers of the chieftains, tended to interpret their actions in epic and heroic terms, and the retelling of the tales about conflicts certainly has reinforced this tendency. It must however have been counterbalanced by the memory of those who had witnessed the events and wanted, not so much an alternative interpretation as a fullness of detail that did not allow epic contours to emerge but preserved the information necessary for a political interpretation. A constant alternative must have been an interpretation of events in the light of a Christian morality and world view, which to a person like Sturla Þórðarson would have offered an alternative view of events from the one he had in the heat of the struggle, a view that in his years of remembrance and reconsideration while he was writing *Íslendingasaga*, in the last ten years of his life or so, may have become more convincing than it was during the time of action.

To sum up what I have said so far: already at the time of writing we can establish at least three modes of interpretation in conflict with each other within the text of *Íslendingasaga*: an epic or heroic mode of interpretation inherent in the narrative tradition of the community, a Christian mode of interpretation referring to the myth or the master narrative of the Fall and Redemption of Man, and finally, a political mode of interpretation which is called forth by the text's status as history.

Until recently the political and historical mode of interpretation has dominated the study of *Íslendingasaga* with few exceptions. In that context another master narrative has constantly been referred to: The story of the Rise and Fall of the Icelandic „Freestate“, a story which has its obvious parallels with the Christian master narrative, especially when it is prolonged through the „Dark Ages“ to the Rebirth of the “Freestate“ in this century.

From the point of view of nationalistic ideology and historiography the importance of the events described in *Íslendingasaga* is obvious: they are the dramatic chain of events leading to the Fall. The part of Satan is played by the Norwegian king Hákon the Old (the devil is often jokingly referred to as „sá gamli“, that is “the Old one“ in Icelandic), dutifully assisted by Norwegian bishops and emissaries in Iceland. The Icelandic chieftains represent sinful mankind, and the placing of the blame on certain individuals (especially Sturla Sighvatsson and Gissur Þorvaldsson)

as well as attempts to whitewash others (Kolbeinn ungi, Þórður kakali, Sturla Þórðarson), has been popular.

In recent scholarship this approach has been gradually abandoned: the historians have tried to rid themselves of the nationalistic bias of previous generations and have aimed at finding out the objective role of the class of chieftains and the political development that led to the inclusion of Iceland in the realm of the king of Norway, while literary historians have studied the poetics of Sturlunga saga in the light of heroic tradition (Úlfar Bragason) and the anti-heroic attitude to fighting and manslaughter that Sturla's text frequently demonstrates (Guðrún Nordal, Gunnar Karlsson, Úlfar Bragason). It seems to me that one of the challenges facing us now is to supplement these approaches with a new political interpretation of Sturlunga saga that tries to approach, not the reality behind the texts but the political element in the text. It is not very likely that Sturla Þórðarson saw the chain of events he describes in Íslendingasaga as leading to a Fall, but did he see them as Chaos preceding New Order? These questions can hardly be answered although it looks as if he remembered the whole period with mixed feelings.

The question I am asking in this paper is: how does Sturla - or if you like - how does Íslendingasaga evaluate the political significance of the power play it describes? In such an investigation it is necessary at all times to take into account the interplay between the different modes of interpretation described above. An analysis of the political element in Íslendingasaga ought to contribute to our understanding of the genre as well as assisting the historians in their assessment of the source value of the text.

This paper will concentrate on a few episodes from Íslendingasaga from the time of the fathers and uncles (Þórðr, Sighvatr, Snorri), which Sturla reports from hearsay, from the dealings of the older cousins (Sturla, Kolbeinn, Gissur) where Sturla is a witness or a minor actor, and the last phase, where Sturla himself has become one of the main actors on the political scene. I shall try to evaluate the political implications of the events from the point of view of the actors and narrator bearing in mind the different meaning 'political' must have had in the „pre-state common law“ of Iceland and the new addition to the Norwegian state that was taking shape in Sturla's time with his active cooperation while he was writing Íslendingasaga, both meanings of course very different from modern ones.