JÓHANN PÁLL ÁRNASON

A MUTATING PERIPHERY:
MEDIEVAL ENCOUNTERS
IN THE FAR NORTH

> Her gælder det i hvert fald, at vi ikke
> kan vide noget med sikkerhed... Det
> betyder ikke, at der ikke er plads for
> hypoteser eller fortolkning, men at
> disse er noget andet, der går videre
> end det objektive.
>
> (Meulengracht Sørensen 1991, 222, 226)

IN A PAPER on "Icelandic uniqueness or common European culture?", published a decade ago, Sverre Bagge suggested that a swing of the pendulum was apparent in recent scholarship on medieval Nordic culture in general and its Icelandic branch in particular: after a phase dominated by those who saw the region as "part of the common culture of Western Christendom", earlier views on the importance of pre-Christian traditions and on inventive uses of their legacy were back in favour (Bagge 1997, 418). Although it would be going too far to claim a new consensus on this point, the trend appears to have strengthened, and the following discussion will be based on that assumption. But the ongoing reappraisal of the pre-Christian background and its influence on cultural developments after conversion does not lead to a complete rehabilitation of the older approaches mentioned at the beginning of Bagge's paper; the formerly dominant paradigm was too obviously dependent on uncritical attitudes to sources to be reclaimable. The swing of the pendulum is, of necessity, accompanied by attempts to redefine the terms of reference for exploration of the pre-Christian past.

   This approach could begin with general considerations of plausibility. In view of what comparative history tells us about the dynamics and consequences of civilizational expansion into regions with distinctive traditions, the notion of a completely and unilaterally Christianized North

seems unconvincing. Adaptations, combinations and syncretisms are more likely. But this elementary observation does not help to clarify the particular patterns that crystallized on the northern periphery of Western Christendom. If we want to test the relevance of civilizational analysis to this issue, it would seem advisable to take note of earlier work in that vein. I will therefore discuss ideas put forward by authors who saw the medieval North from a civilizational angle, although they did not always use that language. The speculative character of their arguments should not deter us from closer examination: they may have asked questions that are still worth pursuing, even when the answers and the presuppositions reflected in them leave something to be desired, and undeveloped insights may be translatable into more adequate terms. This excursion through the history of ideas will be combined with a discussion of substantive issues. But to provide a background to both sides of the argument, a few introductory remarks on some key aspects of the civilizational frame of reference are in order.

The civilizational dimension: Definitions and examples

Civilizational analysis may now be seen as an established and thriving form of historical sociology, with links to classical sources and a formative phase beginning with a more recent revival. No comprehensive account can be attempted in this paper (for a more detailed discussion, see Arnason 2003). A few crucial points should, however, be noted; they will serve as signposts for closer engagement with the main theme.

1. Case studies and comparative analyses have shown that intertwined forms of religious and political life are the most central and revealing criteria for identifying civilizational patterns. Seen from a civilizational perspective, the religious and political spheres are not simply specific parts of a societal whole; rather, they are "meta-institutions" (to use a concept of Durkheimian origin), i.e. fundamental and interconnected components of the framework within which all domains of social life take shape, interact and develop along their own lines. On this level, religion and politics represent the core structures – structuring struc-

tures, to use the more technical language of sociological theory – of culture and power as elements of social life, whose mutually constitutive dynamics are perhaps most evident in processes of state formation.

2. Civilizational approaches have proved particularly instructive in regard to historical breakthroughs and turning-points, and the theoretical perspectives of scholars in the field have to some extent been influenced by their choice of paradigmatic cases. The historical watershed most important for our purposes is the transformation of the Roman world around the middle of the first millennium CE, resulting in the formation of three successor civilizations: Western Christendom, Byzantium and Islam. The post-Roman worlds represent unusually clear-cut cases of institutional cores crystallizing around interrelated religious and political patterns. Each of the three civilizations transformed the legacy of *sacrum imperium* in a distinctive way. The Western Christian separation of papal and imperial authority was crucial to the later course of European history. The Byzantine pattern was based on a much closer relationship between the two poles of authority and a more pre-eminent position of the imperial centre, although the traditional notion of caesaropapism is now rejected by the most knowledgeable historians. The Islamic variant seems to have begun with a vision of unified religious and political authority; a weaker version of this model – the caliphate – then gave way to more conjunctural coalitions of religious and political elites, but the civilizational utopia of a restored union survived as an intermittently active force.

   This tripartite post-Roman world was the historical environment of Nordic expansion in the late first millennium. That process brought societies of the Nordic region into contact with three types of more advanced civilizations, but in different ways and with different results. At the same time, the dynamics of expansion went beyond the post-Roman context on two fronts: through contacts with the Inner Eurasian world on the eastern side, through colonization in the North Atlantic on the western one.

3. The three civilizations that divided the Mediterranean world between them can also be seen as exemplary cases of a more general problematic. Sacral rulership (this category seems preferable to the more restrictive

concept of sacred kingship) is both a recurrent phenomenon in other-
wise different civilizational settings, and open to a wide range of varia-
tions in form as well as content that reflect and affect broader civiliza-
tional patterns. It is therefore a particularly promising – but so far not
thoroughly explored – topic for comparative civilizational analysis.
And there is another side to it: traditions of sacral rulership can func-
tion as bridges between different civilizational universes, and the result
may be a unilateral transfer or a creative refashioning of older models.
Not that the varieties of sacral rulership are uniformly adaptable: the
mutual exclusivity of the three post-Roman paradigms is a striking
counter-example. But the late Roman Empire, out of which the succes-
sor civilizations emerged, was the product of an intercivilizational
encounter which transformed both sides. The progressive sacralization
of the imperial institution paved the way for the Constantinian turn,
which imposed a Christian version of sacral rulership. There was no
pre-existing model of the latter, but the invention that began with
Constantine's conversion could draw on evolving conceptions of the
relationship between divine and human authority within the Christian
counterculture, and this emerging tradition was in turn rooted in the
civilizational innovation of Jewish monotheism. As has recently been
argued, this theme is of key importance for comparative studies of the
Nordic region as a civilizational area. Within the limits of this paper,
there is no space to discuss Gro Steinsland's work (2000); suffice it to
say that – in the present writer's opinion – the idea of sacred kingship
in pre-Christian Scandinavia has been successfully rehabilitated.
Steinsland's analyses of the specific Nordic version of this near-univer-
sal institution are sometimes convincing and always thought-provok-
ing.

4. I have already used the term "intercivilizational encounter"; but the
   variations and vicissitudes of sacral rulership are only a part of the vast
   spectrum of phenomena to which this category can be applied. This is
   a highly significant but relatively neglected topic of civilizational stud-
   ies. One of the most persistent weaknesses of traditional approaches to
   that field was a tendency to think of civilizations as mutually closed
   worlds. In fact, their interaction – at different levels, with more or less
   mutually formative results – is one of the most fundamental constitu-

tive features of world history. As for more specific forms, the dynamics and consequences of expansion are an especially rewarding theme for comparative studies. Military expansion is a recurrent and prominent aspect of the interaction between civilizations, but it often entails or facilitates intercivilizational encounters of a less coercive kind; in some cases, encounters of epoch-making significance occurred with little or no military involvement.

An Abortive Scandinavian Civilization?

Having noted some basic points about the civilizational frame of reference, let us now consider the case for a Nordic civilization, preceding Christianity or at least in the making when overtaken by Christianization, and begin with what seems to be (although often by hearsay only) the best-known discussion of this issue. Arnold Toynbee's account of "the abortive Scandinavian civilization" is perhaps most noteworthy for the discrepancy between questions and answers. Toynbee's way of posing the problem and defining its context is still instructive, but the conclusion – his attempt to identify the emerging distinctive features of a cultural world overwhelmed by Christianity – is unconvincing, and the main lesson to be learnt from it is negative: if the search for evidence of a Nordic or Scandinavian civilization is to make sense, it must take a different line.

Abortive civilizations – mature enough to leave a historical record, but thwarted by internal or external, natural as well as cultural forces – appear in various places and periods on Toynbee's map of world history, and two such cases are located in the medieval North: the Irish and the Scandinavian. The former was based on a local version of Christianity, and its fate was decided when the Roman Church triumphed in Anglo-Saxon England in the late seventh century. Here we are only concerned with the Scandinavian one. As Toynbee argues, its destinies can only be understood in the context of interaction with the Roman world and its subsequent transformation. This is a valid point, and still a useful reminder of the dimensions of the problem to be discussed; it remains to be seen how the successive phases of the story are treated. At the beginning, Scandinavia is a remote part of the northern periphery, open to some cultural influence (for one thing, the

runic alphabet was a reinvention of the Roman model), but much less affected than the neighbouring barbarians. At a later stage, after the tripartite division of the Roman realm, the relationship between central and peripheral regions was redefined: the barbarians most directly drawn into the Roman orbit became key players in the reconstruction of a post-Roman West, and the overall geopolitical reconfiguration shifted the power centre of the region towards the northwest. But it is of some importance for Toynbee's account that – as far as Scandinavia is concerned – this second phase is not a direct continuation of the first. As he sees it, there was a period of segregation before the "re-establishment of contact between the Scandinavians and Western Christendom" (Toynbee 1951, 343). He explains the temporary separation as a consequence of Slavic migration into the vacuum left by Teutonic barbarians gone south. This reflects an exaggerated view of the Slavic impact on Central Europe, and it is also hard to reconcile with Toynbee's own statements about Saxony as a buffer zone between Franks and Scandinavians, destroyed by Charlemagne's conquest. Nor is it clear what happened to Scandinavia during the interval, but Toynbee seems to agree with Axel Olrik's assessment of the isolated "Northman" (sic): "In certain respects he became a barbarian again" (Ibid., 343). There is both a parallel and a contrast to the Irish trajectory; Ireland was also segregated, because of the Roman withdrawal from Britain and the collapse of Romanized culture throughout the island; but in this case, the presence of Christianity provided a civilizing impulse that was lacking in Scandinavia.

It seems clear that developments in parts of the erstwhile northern periphery (the continental, the insular and the peninsular) diverged during the period in question, but Toynbee's account does not do much to clarify the picture. However, the oversimplified notion of a period of segregation is essential to his narrative: a new beginning was needed, and the character of that beginning left its mark on the course of later events. The next round of the interaction between southern civilization and North European barbarism was initiated by the Carolingian Empire. Toynbee judges this new actor on the scene very harshly: it was an "abortive evocation of a ghost" and "a fiasco because it was both grandiose and premature" (Toynbee 1951, 344). The result of its self-destructive *hubris* was to trigger a counter-offensive from the north. Toynbee seems to assume that the spectacle of a

richer civilization, represented by an aggressive but conspicuously fragile state, prompted the northerners to move into the European arena. But when he goes on to describe the Viking campaigns as "a supreme effort to overwhelm the civilizations of the South, which they encountered on their warpath, and to establish in their stead a new Scandinavian Civilization erected on barbarian foundations and unencumbered by reminiscences of a traditional style or by traces of a traditional ground-plan" (Ibid., 359), he is vastly overstating his case. There is nothing in his account – nor, for that matter, anywhere else – to support the idea of a civilizational mission inherent in the Viking expansion.

Toynbee does not think that the "new Scandinavian Civilization" ever stood a chance against Western Christendom. The civilizational resources of the adversary were superior and the response was overwhelming. But the North was conquered by the Church, not by the fraudulently restored empire that could never live up to its pretensions. As Toynbee sees it, the self-destructive dynamic of Carolingian imperialism left the field open for a more markedly civilizational – i.e., primarily religious – expansion, and he obviously does not believe that the German re-evocation of the imperial ghost changed this constellation in any basic way. His emphasis on the civilizational character of this final defeat inflicted on northern barbarism leads him to downgrade the role of converted kings and their violent assaults on paganism: the rulers traditionally credited with Christianizing their countries should be seen as figureheads of "a deep and gradual psychological mass-movement which statecraft might bring to a head, but which it could not have initiated and could not arrest" (Ibid., 353). Examples of rulers unsuccessfully using their power to enforce religious change are supposed to validate this claim. But the cases that Toynbee mentions are drawn from very disparate settings, and only a closer study of similarities and differences could justify any firm conclusions. More importantly, the dismissive view of individual monarchs implies a more fundamental disregard for kingship as an institution. It plays no role in Toynbee's discussion of the Scandinavian transformation.

If the outcome of the struggle was a complete absorption of the North into Western Christendom, where is the evidence for civilizational identity or aspirations on the losing side? Toynbee can only refer to reactive developments, temporary turns in a losing battle, and this part of his narrative

boils down to two episodes. The description of the first is taken from Axel Olrik's work on Viking civilization: the "spirit of militant reaction... embodied... in the heroic figure of Starkad the Old" (Ibid., 351) represents a civilization on the defensive, and the final betrayal committed by the protagonist symbolizes an inevitable failure. This is a very tenuous foundation for arguments about an intercivilizational encounter, and it tells us nothing about positive beliefs, virtues or achievements of the losers. The second episode – the Icelandic *Kulturkampf*, as Toynbee describes it – is more revealing. In AD 1000, the Icelanders "capitulated" to an "alien civilization" (358), but the conversion was followed by a long-drawn-out rearguard struggle, The main line of defence was "backward-looking scholarship" (358), an antiquarian effort to reconstruct a lost world with intellectual tools borrowed from Christian culture and turned against its spirit. In this context, Toynbee seems to regard saga writing as nothing more than an imaginary extension of scholarship and an integral part of the antiquarian project. It is, in his view, highly significant that the period portrayed by the sagas does not extend beyond the immediate aftermath of conversion. He shows no interest in the particular kind of narratives developed in medieval Iceland, nor in the different directions taken by stories about the Icelandic past and about the Scandinavian world.

The *Kulturkampf* ended with an utter and irreversible defeat. In the fourteenth century, "the paralysis of the Icelandic genius is complete" (Ibid., 358). In fact, Toynbee seems to think that the Icelanders simply went bananas. His quotation from Olrik is worth reproducing *in extenso*: "The nation that once had so sharp an eye for the world of reality falls into slumber – politically, aesthetically, economically – and sleeps its sleep of centuries, full of disturbing dreams, while the elves shriek their shrill laughter from all the cliffs and the giants from all the rocky caves, while the earth quakes, and the fire-mountains shine, and souls fly about the crater of Hekla like black birds" (Ibid. 358, quoting Olrik 1939, 192). The finale, then, was not only a cultural annihilation, but also a "stupefyingly outlandish" (Ibid., 358) mental regression.[1]

1 Follwing Olrik, but with added emphasis, Hauksbók is singled out as an exemplary cultural disaster. In his brief discussion of Toynbee, Sigurður Nordal (1993, II, 65–68) rightly takes him to task for this complete misjudgment. But some other points seem less obvious. Toynbee's view on the relative superiority of Scandinavian civilization (compared to ninth- and tenth-century Christianity) is more nuanced than Nordal appears to have thought.

What was the distinctive spirit of the civilization that lost its bearings so completely? What can justify the reference to twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland as attaining the "highest tension and finest harmony" of the "original Scandinavian ethos"? Antiquarianism alone cannot answer the question. When Toynbee finally tackles the issue, his view turns out to be a variation on a very widely shared *topos*: the secular rationalism and unsentimental realism of medieval Icelandic literature. But he introduces this theme through a very wide detour. The supposedly obvious affinities between medieval Icelandic prose and poetry on the one hand, Homeric epic on the other, are taken to reflect a similar civilizational condition; but it is an in-between situation, a mindset characteristic of cultures that have moved out of one world without as yet fully settling into another one: "Both these young civilizations are distinguished by a freedom from the incubus of tradition, which gives them a precocious freshness and original-ity, and by a freedom from the incubus of superstition, which gives them a precocious clarity and rationalism. Their members are fully aware both of the extent of their human powers, and of these powers' limitations..." (Toynbee 1951, 356). As used here, "tradition" and "superstition" are rub-bery notions, but the context helps to clarify Toynbee's point: he is com-paring societies that were no longer primitive but not yet at the level of full-fledged civilizations. In the Greek case, the ethos of the transitional phase was incorporated into an exceptionally productive and powerful civilizational pattern (Toynbee suggests as much when he links Herodotus's conception of history to the Homeric epics); in the Icelandic case, it was

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In an appendix on what might have happened if the Vikings had won (one of the wildest speculations to be found in A Study of History), Toynbee suggests that Icelandic culture might have become the centre of a much larger world, and that "its aesthetic sensibility and intellectual penetration would have been of a rare quality", but he adds the very significant caveat that "its religious temperature would have been sub-normal" (441). Given the increas-ing importance of religion to Toynbee (it caused his project to explode in midstream), this must have appeared as a disqualifying handicap in a world that already knew universal religions. Toynbee is not as dependent on assumptions about oral tradition as Nordal claims (antiquarian scholarship is not synonymous with unbroken links to orality), and his chronology, although objectionable by today's standards, is not wildly off the mark: he refers to the period between 1150 and 1250 as the heyday of Icelandic culture, and does not propose a more detailed dating for the sagas. That said, Nordal's main objection to Toynbee is convincing: the whole scenario is simply incoherent. If the Icelanders capitulated to an alien civilization 1000 AD, where did the resources for a century-long *Kulturkampf* come from, one hundred and fifty years later?

obliterated after a foredoomed but articulate rearguard struggle; in many
other cases, it must have come and gone too quickly to leave a significant
record. We are, in other words, dealing with a recurrent phenomenon,
inherent in the general dynamics of civilizing processes, but more mark-
edly present in some cases than others. It does not take us very far when it
is a question of defining the spirit of a specific civilization.

The Nordic episode in the making of Europe

The above discussion of Toynbee's views on the medieval North led to
unequivocal conclusions: his answers do not match his questions. The evi-
dence cited does not confirm speculation about a distinctive civilization in
the making and a conceivable rival to the Christian constitution of Europe.
This shortcoming becomes even more obvious when considered in light of
more recent advances in civilizational analysis. Toynbee made no attempt
to identify a configuration of religious and political patterns that would
justify a claim to civilizational status.

In view of these unsatisfactory results, another look at Toynbee's back-
ground assumptions may be useful. As we have seen, his emphasis on
Nordic expansion, its broad geopolitical scope and its interaction with the
richer and ultimately more powerful societies of the South was a promis-
ing start; but there are some understated aspects that merit more attention.
To reiterate a point made in another context: in Toynbee's presentation,
the encounter with Western and Eastern Christendom (Islam plays a more
shadowy role) overshadows two other arenas of expansion. On the one
hand, the eastern flank entered into contact with a vast intercivilizational
zone (the future Russia) and its adjacent cultures. On the other hand,
expansion into the northwest Atlantic created new societies in previously
uninhabited areas, and thus enlarged the Nordic region on an uncontested
but challenging frontier. In both cases, broader geohistorical horizons are
connected to the internal dynamics of Nordic societies during the period in
question. On this latter issue, Toynbee has very little to say: apart from the
re-barbarization supposed to have taken place between the *Völkerwanderung*
and the Viking Age, there is next to no reference to transformations inside
the region. In particular, the question of state formation is left out of

account (this is, more generally speaking, a major blank spot in Toynbee's *Study of History,* whereas recent versions of civilizational analysis have taken it more and more seriously). A brief overview of basic facts will highlight the importance of this factor. Patterns and processes of state formation were involved in the changing relationship between Scandinavia and Western Christendom. The conquering and colonizing forays of the Viking Age culminated in a more constructive contribution to state building in different parts of Europe (the Norman inputs have been extensively described and sometimes exaggerated by historians of medieval Europe). As for the ultimately more decisive reverse movement, notions and visions of statehood were crucial to the integration of Scandinavia into Western Christendom; the imported models, grafted onto indigenous trends, were in part directly linked to the Church as a core civilizational institution, in part embedded in the broader civilizational patterns that accompanied Christianization.

State formation was, in short, an eminently significant field of interaction between North and South. But its ramifications also went beyond that context on the two frontiers mentioned above. In the east, the directions and outcomes of state formation were shaped by a very different environment; new approaches to the origins of Russia have highlighted the complexity of this background. It is beyond the scope of the present paper (for a very wide-ranging and rather speculative discussion, see Pritsak 1981). My main concern will be with developments on the other frontier. Questions about the conditions, varieties and limits of state formation also arise in connection with the colonization of the Northwest Atlantic, and here the main case in point is – to anticipate later arguments – the trajectory of the Icelandic Freestate (I follow Borgolte (2002), Byock (2000) and Hastrup (1985) in using this term; it seems more adequate than other labels on offer).

But before moving in this direction, it may be useful to take a look at another interpretation of the medieval North, obsolete in some ways but still of interest because of its attempt to bring the Northwest Atlantic into focus as a historical region. Christopher Dawson's work on the making of Europe can, to some extent, be read as an alternative to Toynbee's project, albeit on a much smaller scale. It is still one of the most articulate Catholic readings of European history. A chapter on "The age of the Vikings and

the conversion of the north" (Dawson 1974 [1934], 202–217) deals with the place and role of the Nordic region in the making of a Christian Europe, and it is an outstanding example of a detour made to fit into an orthodox order of things. The framework for Dawson's analysis is a story of two barbarian assaults on Roman-Christian Europe, the *Völkerwanderung* and the Viking raids. As he sees it, the second came closer to destroying the heartland from which a mature Europe was to emerge ("Western civilization was reduced to the verge of dissolution" – 209), but ended with a more definitive victory of Christian faith and its ideas of order. Dawson's description of the background to the second assault still seems instructive: "... an old and in some respects highly developed culture which yet possessed few possibilities for peaceful expansion. During its centuries of isolation, it had carried the art and ethics of war to a unique pitch of development. War was not only the source of power and wealth and social prestige, it was also the dominant preoccupation of literature and religion and art" (Ibid., 203). Nordic ideas of kingship were cast in this cultural mould, and so were the power structures of the kingdoms taking shape on the eve of expansion.

But taken as a whole, Dawson's view of late antique and early medieval history is no longer a serious proposition. New approaches to the *Völkerwanderung*, now seen as an aspect of the transformation of the Roman world, have demolished the original model of the barbarian assault, and *eo ipso* its derivative versions; medievalists now seem to agree that traditional accounts of the ninth- and tenth-century invasions (Viking, Muslim and Magyar), and especially the estimates of their impact, were vastly exaggerated; last but not least, a better understanding of the early medieval "economy of plunder" has somewhat attenuated the contrast between the Vikings and the power elites of the societies which they attacked.

For present purposes, the obsolete framework is less important than a particular twist in Dawson's use of it. He reconstructs the story of the showdown between Christian Europe and its northern barbarians in a way that allows for a very noteworthy sideshow in the Northwest. Nordic – i.e. mainly Norwegian – colonization of the Northwest Atlantic created a "maritime empire" that ultimately extended from Greenland and Iceland to footholds in Ireland, Scotland and England. More importantly, conquest paved the way for cultural transfer and innovation: "In this way, there

arose in the ninth century a mixed Celtic-Nordic culture which reacted upon the parent cultures, both in Ireland and in Scandinavia" (Ibid., 211). At first sight, the cultural growth that took place in this part of the northern periphery seems marked by a paradox: on the one hand, the contact with Christian Ireland appears as an essential precondition, but on the other hand, the signal achievement of the Northwest was the sublimation of the traditional Viking spirit into an original culture.

Before considering the transfiguration of this paradox in Icelandic literature (as interpreted by Dawson), let us note that this line of argument focuses attention on two issues that still haunt discussions about the Viking Age and its sequel, but have proved very difficult to tackle in precise terms, let alone to resolve. First, Dawson stresses the emergence of a new *Geschichtsregion* (to use the term favoured by German historians, who have done most to develop comparative approaches to this problematic) in the Northwest Atlantic; it included newly settled territories as well as zones of contact (both through more peaceful exchange) with Anglo-Saxon and Celtic societies. There can be no doubt about the significance of this regional configuration, but sources are so fragmentary that attempts to trace its internal connections can easily take a speculative turn (for an intriguing recent contribution, see Helgi Guðmundsson 1997). The second issue is best seen as a particular aspect of the first, but has had a life of its own. The question of Gaelic and more specifically Irish influence on Nordic culture in general and Icelandic literature in particular is notoriously intractable (for a recent, comprehensive and cautious discussion, see Gísli Sigurðsson 1988). Dawson's statements on this are not as clear as we might desire, but may be worth closer scrutiny. He begins with a very general claim about the influence of the Irish literary tradition on the younger Icelandic one, but cites no concrete examples, and goes on to contrast the "fantastic rhetoric" of Irish narratives with the sobriety and "psychological truth of the Icelandic saga" (Dawson 1974, 212). The former is, in a sense, pre-medieval, whereas the latter is proto-modern. The underlying suggestion is – although Dawson never says it in so many words – that Irish literary culture acted as a catalyst rather than a model: the contact triggered the crystallization of a very different imaginary. A second and much closer encounter with Christianity then led to the introduction of literacy, and in this case, a much more far-reaching adaptation to new modes of thought

was inevitable (but it should not be mistaken for a complete substitution). It is not obvious, at least not to the present writer, that later scholarship has come up with a better answer to the Irish question.

To conclude, Dawson's interpretation of the Icelandic sequel to the Celtic-Nordic encounter is best summarized in his own words. It places a stronger emphasis on Eddic poetry than on the sagas (the unstated premise is that oral traditions behind the Older Edda underwent a fundamental reinterpretation in Iceland), and the main thesis has to do with paradigms of the human condition. For Dawson, the Eddic spirit transfigures the heroic ideal and brings the tragic vision of life to unequalled perfection: "The Eddic conception of life is no doubt harsh and barbaric, but it is also heroic in the fullest sense of the word. Indeed, it is something more than heroic, for the noble viragos and bloodthirsty heroes of the Edda possess a spiritual quality that is lacking in the Homeric world. The Eddic poems have more in common with the spirit of Aeschylus than with that of Homer, though there is a characteristic difference in their religious attitude. Their heroes do not, like the Greeks, pursue victory or prosperity as ends in themselves. They look beyond the immediate issue to an ultimate test to which success is irrelevant. Defeat, not victory, is the mark of the hero... There is no attempt, as in the Greek way of life, to justify the ways of gods to man, and to see in their acts the vindication of eternal justice. For the gods are caught in the same toils of fate as men... they have become themselves the participants in the heroic drama. They carry on a perpetual warfare with the powers of chaos, in which they are not destined to conquer" (Ibid., 213).

The *Völuspá* is, unsurprisingly, cited as a prime source. But Dawson seems puzzled by some of its themes and inclined to argue that they are neither Celtic nor Nordic, neither Scandinavian nor Christian. "Above all, it is strange to find in the *Volospa* (sic) an idea which seems to us so difficult and recondite as that of the Eternal Return" (Ibid., 213). Be that as it may, the poem is for him the apogee of pre-Christian Nordic spirituality. At this point, however, the latent thrust of Dawson's analysis comes to the fore: the perfection of Celtic-Nordic culture turns out to be a prelude to Christianity, and a proper understanding of its message makes it possible to grasp the conversion of Iceland as "not merely a matter of political expediency; it was the acceptance of a higher spiritual ideal" (Ibid., 216).

Dawson's Iceland is, in short, the place where the internal evolution of paganism made it most ready for Christianization. In this scenario, there is – in contrast to Toynbee – no *Kulturkampf* and no capitulation, only a mature surrender to superior truth. But Dawson's claim that the conversion was in the spirit of *Völuspá* can also be contrasted with Halldór Laxness's observation that it reflected the spirit of *Hávamál* (Laxness 1946, 34). Of the three, Laxness was probably closest to the view that seems most compatible with contemporary scholarship: that the Icelandic way of embracing Christianity was a judiciously balanced compromise with a changed environment. As such, it obviously did not preclude further acculturation.

The view from Thule: Re-formative dynamics in Iceland

So far, I have discussed interpretations that began with a focus on the Nordic region as a whole and its interaction with the European world into which it was in the end integrated. From such points of view, Iceland appears as the periphery of a periphery, but not only in the sense that it was located on the outer fringe: its history and culture brought the peripheral condition of a much larger area to more articulate expression than elsewhere. At this point, it seems appropriate to turn the perspective around and consider Iceland as a starting-point for reflections that may then throw light on the problematic of a larger historical region. This approach will be explored through a brief and very selective reflection on Sigurður Nordal's *Íslenzk menning,* which has – to the best of my knowledge – never been subjected to the close reading that it merits (I intend to continue that part of the discussion in another paper).

But before tackling interpretive problems, a few words should be said about the historical setting. The patterns of continuity and discontinuity in Icelandic history – from the settlement to the acceptance of Norwegian sovereignty – differ from those of the Nordic kingdoms during the same period, and this point is crucial to the following discussion. There were no less than five major landmarks or turning-points in the history of the Icelandic Freestate. The first was the settlement itself: a fragment of Nordic society, or perhaps more precisely several Nordic societies, as they had developed during the Viking Age, was transplanted to a new environ-

ment where both different living conditions and the experience of migra-
tion – as well as, to some extent the different cultural backgrounds of the
settlers – were bound to affect the directions of social and cultural develop-
ment in several significant ways. The second, most decisive but also most
difficult to grasp and most irresistibly conducive to speculation, was the
tenth-century turn to state formation on a geopolitical, social and cultural
basis that set the beginnings as well as the long-term dynamics apart from
comparable processes in Scandinavia. The third was the conversion to
Christianity; in one sense this is the most visible landmark, but there is
still room for a good deal of controversy on the meaning of the *siðaskipti*, as
well as on the distinction between conversion date and conversion period
(proposed by Peter Foote 2004). The fourth shift is more difficult to date,
but it was clearly under way in the late twelfth century: a new twist to state
formation, in much less regulated and more internecine ways than before,
led to the emergence of a few family and territory-based blocs, whose
rivalry destroyed the framework of the Freestate. Sigurður Nordal refers
to this phase as a "revolutionary time" (Sigurður Nordal 1942, 351, repr.
1993 I, 412). The final episode was the incorporation into an ascendant and
expanding Norwegian kingdom; this was a rapid transition, but it is best
understood as a process that includes events before and after 1262–1264.

   All these discontinuities have been emphasized in recent scholarship on
medieval Iceland. They are doubly important for our present concerns. On
the one hand, questions about civilizational commonalities and differences
between Iceland and the rest of the Nordic world must be posed with due
regard to the historical context of ruptures and reorientations. To antici-
pate a point that will only be adumbrated in this paper, the above picture of
Icelandic history casts doubt on the idea of a Scandinavian civilization sur-
viving for some four centuries after the settlement. Rather, the Icelandic
experience appears as a very distinctive episode within Western Chris-
tendom, turning a peripheral location to political as well as cultural advan-
tage and combining the resources borrowed from more developed civiliza-
tional centres with elements of pre-Christian traditions. It is, in other
words, better understood as a highly specific and background-dependent
variant of the civilization then entering its flourishing phase in Western
Europe, rather than the last stand of another civilization on the wane. On
the other hand, the representative – and that means, to all intents and pur-

poses, literary – products of Icelandic culture, and especially those to which we may want to attribute a civilizational meaning, must also be understood as attempts to cope with discontinuity and maintain an over-arching tradition. This latter point has been stressed in recent scholarship on the sagas (e.g. Vésteinn Ólason 1998, Meulengracht Sørensen 1993).

From settlement to state formation

The third of the abovementioned turning-points is the most crucial. More precisely, the Icelandic mode of conversion explains both sides of the con-stellation that prevailed during the first quarter of the second millennium CE: a unique situation within Western Christendom and an ability to relate to the pre-Christian past in unorthodox ways. As Gunnar Karlsson (2004) has emphasized, the distinctive historical phenomenon of Christianity without monarchy is the key to the cultural achievements of medieval Iceland. But it was the peculiar structure of the pre-Christian pol-ity that made the Icelandic separation of Christ and king possible, and this will be the main theme of the following discussion. As for the first land-mark, there has been much speculation about the characteristics and conse-quences of the settlement, but for present purposes, the main point is that the settlers took a particularly circuitous road back to the long-term pat-tern of European state formation. The first step was, as Meulengracht Sørensen (2000, 21) put it, a "re-formation, which took a different direc-tion from the evolution of society in Scandinavian and British lands." The resultant socio-political regime was, as he adds, "both more innovative and more archaic than those of the old countries."

In what sense was the re-formation a new beginning of state forma-tion? Rather than taking that for granted, we should pause to consider the problems involved. Can we speak of a state where there is no governmen-tal apparatus, no executive authority backed up my means of coercion, and no central taxation? The difficulty with labelling the Icelandic regime a state is not unlike the more frequently cited case of the ancient city-states (although the latter were mostly endowed with more salient attributes of statehood); and the problem can, in my opinion, be solved in the same way: through a flexible use of Max Weber's political sociology. As the very

extensive discussion of this subject has shown, Weber's unfinished work uses two concepts of the state, and the relationship between them was never clarified. The rational-bureaucratic model of the state, which Weber had in mind when he argued that the state had only existed in the Occident, is still used by historians who claim that Europe – more precisely late medieval and early modern Europe – invented the state and spread it to the rest of the world. It is even less applicable to medieval Iceland than to the Greek *polis.* The much more general definition of the state in terms of a monopoly of legitimate violence within a certain territory can be extended to a much broader spectrum of societies, modern and premodern. But it does not solve our problem: there was, notoriously, no monopoly of violence. At this point, however, we can turn to Weber's complementary concept of political community. It is defined as a community whose collective action consists in imposing an orderly domination by the participants on a territorial domain (which can be more or less clearly demarcated), by means of a readiness for physical violence.

We can take this sketch one step further. If order and violence revolve around a centre endowed with eminent authority (and it has been plausibly argued that human societies cannot do without some kind of such a centre), that centre can be more or less separate from the community, and approximate more or less closely to the criteria already noted as defining features of statehood in the more general sense. It can, in particular, move towards a monopoly of violence; but violence can also be regulated rather than monopolized (even through the incorporation of institutions as centrifugal as the feud). To put it another way, the political centre is an intermediate category between the political community and the state. Explicit construction of a centre comes closer to state formation than the ongoing functioning of a centre embedded in ancestral custom. On the other hand, the explicit project can aim at minimizing the distance between the centre and the political community, and in the process, functions previously or elsewhere identified with state structures may be shifted to other institutions – invented, inherited, or readjusted.

The Icelandic Freestate is best understood in terms of such a self-limiting process of state formation. So are the Greek *polis* and the Roman republic, albeit in very different ways. Such processes are reflexive in a double sense: they involve an explicit project of institution building (the

level of articulation and the scope of construction vary widely), and they
relate to a world of other states. Both points are relevant to the Icelandic
"re-formation." To quote Jesse Byock (2000, 66): "Although it would be
going too far to assume that the settlers and their descendants knew exact-
ly what they wanted, available evidence does suggest that the early
Icelanders knew quite well what they did not want." What they did not
want was what they saw happening to others, and the desire to avoid it led
to a limited but operative consensus on what should be done. Comparative
reflections will help to clarify what this mix of negative and positive goals
amounted to. But to begin with, let us return to Nordal's reflections on the
origins of the Icelandic polity. What remains important and merits closer
examination is a very distinctive analysis of the relationship between
Viking ethos and Icelandic culture, Viking expansion and Icelandic state-
building. Nordal begins by noting that Viking assaults and conquests
lacked the religious (and, as we might now say, civilizational) dimensions
characteristic of Islamic expansion as well as of the crusades (Sigurður
Nordal 1942, 76). Nor were they backed up by centralized power struc-
tures of the kind that sustained nomad expansion across Eurasia. The
Viking pattern enabled an exceptionally large number of people to "exer-
cise independent leadership, assuming responsibility at their own risk"
(Ibid., 76).

There was, in short, no civilizational or imperial dynamic at work in
Viking expansion.[2] But in Nordal's view, this does not mean that it had no
cultural meaning or potential. He argues that visions of a "more aristo-
cratic (*höfðinglegra)* life" than the Vikings could lead at home went beyond
mere plundering and could translate into more lasting achievements (Ibid.,
76). Obviously, this meant – in the first instance – a quest for more stable
forms of power and wealth. But further aspirations, which Nordal links to
his key philosophical concept of *þroski* (I will, for present purposes, leave it
untranslated), led to efforts to gain access to a more advanced civilization,
including its intellectual and aesthetic spheres. The question to be raised at
this point is whether such ambitions could, in another context, become a

[2]   The only exception (a very inconsequential one) is Canute's shortlived early eleventh-cent-
      ury attempt to build a North Sea empire. "Viking empire" is therefore strictly speaking a
      misnomer; and if it can now be used as a book title (Forte et al. 2006), that says more about
      the current marketability of empires and Vikings than about anything else.

source of significant variations to the cultural and institutional patterns that prevailed in the surrounding European world. At that level, we would be dealing with civilizational results and ramifications of a process that originally seemed to have no such significance. As I will try to show, this is precisely Nordal's line of argument. In Iceland, the ethos of Viking expansion was transfigured into a spirit of state formation (this term is used by analogy with the "spirit of capitalism", as defined by Weber and others, i.e. to denote inbuilt cultural orientations of institutional dynamics); this set the scene for further combinations of innovation and archaism, including an exceptionally long-drawn encounter between paganism and Christianity.

The Viking ethos, as described by Nordal, was doubly resistant to central authority: the principal actors were small units, rather than expanding states in pursuit of more power, and these units were organized in a relatively egalitarian way. When the conquerors and colonizers came into closer contact with established power structures, these habits gave way to more hierarchical patterns on both levels. But where a shared order had to be created anew, the de-centralized, individualistic and egalitarian trends could remain strong enough to leave their mark on the emerging regime. It is not being suggested that the Icelandic mode of state formation was wholly unique; Nordal notes the beginnings of a similar political culture in the Isle of Man and the Faroe Islands (Ibid., 105). But there were several factors that set Iceland apart. It was not only virgin territory; it was also big enough to make it possible for the project to unfold on an incomparably larger scale than elsewhere; and it was remote enough for external threats to be minimal. Aspirations to autonomy came naturally to the settler community. It should, however, be noted that Nordal is not talking about national independence or sovereignty. As he sees it (Ibid., 98), the awareness of a separate Icelandic identity was comparable to regional identities within the emerging Norwegian, Swedish and Danish kingdoms. But the fact that a comparable collective identity was linked to a higher level of political autonomy made the Icelandic constellation, in the long run, more conducive to nation formation.

So far, I have discussed the cultural matrix of state formation. It is time to consider the formative events as such, i.e. the decisive moves towards common statehood. Nordal's analysis of them is worth reconstructing in

some detail; it is a largely and explicitly conjectural account, but to my mind a very plausible one. The story begins with a strong emphasis on the ambitious, deliberate and artificial character of the project that was implemented in the first half of the tenth century (Ibid., 102–108). A common state, however minimal in terms of central authority and coercive machinery, was neither necessitated by external threats nor imposed by internal problems. The settlement was not a collective enterprise; the living conditions of a small community scattered throughout a large island were not conducive to massive conflicts, and there is no obvious reason why the settlers could not have muddled through without a constitutional order – perhaps with local assemblies on a smaller scale – for a much longer time. In Weberian terms, the creation of this order was a rationalizing breakthrough; Toynbee's model of challenge and response is applicable, but it must be added that the response took shape through inventive interpretation of traditions and circumstances. There was, however, another side to the state-building project. Nordal discusses it twice (Ibid., 107 and 123–124), briefly in both cases but with a clear focus on the essentials. Political innovation must, as he sees it, have been backed up by religious authority. To him it seems clear that laws were given a sacral status through a connection to pagan religion (in a broad, quasi-Durkheimian sense), probable that various kinds of belief ("*ýmiss konar átrúnaður*") entered into the details of lawmaking, and possible that the institutional terms *goði* and *goðorð* had an old religious content. This was not a sufficient basis for a hierocracy (this Weberian term seems the most adequate translation of Nordal's *prestaveldi)*, and what we know about paganism in Iceland indicates that it was too unstructured (or de-structured) to sustain a model of divine legislation. On the other hand, Nordal suggests (this is the most conjectural part of the argument) that beliefs relating to *landvættir* and other numinous beings (*goðmögn)* may have motivated efforts to consolidate the relationship to a new country, and that a certain reordering of religious life may therefore have accompanied the foundation of a political order.

This description of a constitutive but flexible relationship between religion and politics is obviously to the taste of civilizational analysts. It may be useful to underline the point through a brief comparative excursus. Recent debates on the origins of the Greek *polis* seem to have highlighted two themes. On the one hand, even the early *poleis* were "cities of reason"

(Murray 1990), i.e. political communities shaped by extensive rational reconstruction, and this is particularly evident in the subordination of kinship to principles of a constructed order. On the other had, historians dealing with this period have also found the concept of *polis* religion useful: it stresses the pervasive role of religion in the institutions and practices of the *polis,* without returning to the discredited interpretation of the "ancient city" as a wholly and immutably religious community. Taken together, the two perspectives reveal a constitutive but flexible relationship between religion and politics, comparable – *mutatis mutandis* – to the one suggested above. A religious framework was essential to the continuity and demarcation of the collectivity, but the particular characteristics of this religion gave a very large scope to political action, construction and reasoning. The sources do not allow for more than a highly tentative account of the early *polis,* and that applies even more to the Icelandic Freestate; but with that proviso, and with due regard to the very different circumstances and outcomes, the two historical situations seem comparable. It may be added that in both cases, we seem to be dealing with religious universes in a somewhat de-structured state: they had to a certain extent decomposed under the impact of geopolitical and civilizational upheavals. That said, subsequent developments could not have differed more starkly: *polis* religion was reintegrated and went on to enjoy a very long life, whereas the recomposition that might have accompanied early state formation in Iceland and elsewhere in the North was cut short by the triumph of Christianity.

It would, of course, be very misleading to think of state formation as a spontaneous outgrowth of the changing relationship between religion and politics. No account of the process would make sense without assumptions about agency and strategy, and Nordal is very clear on this point. As he argues, the only plausible explanation of the very big step towards statehood is that "a solid and suitably large coalition of chieftains who already had extensive power" (Ibid., 107) set out to consolidate and coordinate their positions. There must, in other words, have been a bid for more – and more structured – power. This claim is backed up by a detailed attempt to show that one particular family was the core of the coalition. To the best of my knowledge, later scholars have neither refuted the hypothesis nor taken it further. Be that as it may, the result was, and could only be, "an oligarchy, an aristocracy" (Ibid., 108 – "*fámennisveldi, höfðingja-*

veldi"). But it was an oligarchy with a difference. Its architects had to come to terms with the fact that the settler community was a "bad material for an obedient underclass" (Ibid., 120). If the project had aimed at containing the ethos of individualism and equality within a power elite, the result showed that it had to be accommodated on a much larger scale. Nordal argues that the chieftains who embarked on state building must have expected their power to grow, and to translate into effective taxation (Ibid., 120). That did not happen; they had to settle for a *modus vivendi* that may be described as an "aristo-democracy" (Ibid, 120), and for a leadership role built on very fragile foundations.

If this interpretation is accepted, it seems compatible with Jesse Byock's analysis of "proto-democratic tendencies" at work in Icelandic society (Byock 2000, 65). But his claim that "farmers collectively retained control over coercive power" (25) seems to go too far, and so does the reference to a "prototype democracy in action" on the back cover of the book (I do not know whether the latter formulation fully reflects Byock's views). In Nordal's view, the Freestate was not a democracy: it was a half-thwarted oligarchy, a historical stalemate that perpetuated itself for a remarkably long span of time (if it was a "masterpiece" (Ibid., 120), it was an unintentional one). The uneasy combination of typological labels – aristocracy, oligarchy, democracy – reflects the complexity of the phenomenon in question, rather than any inconsistency of the argument. Nordal's difficulties are comparable to those of historians dealing with the early *polis*: its oligarchic character is undeniable, but so is the presence of aristocratic ambitions and networks that often clashed with oligarchic institutions, and it is still a hotly debated issue whether – or to what extent – the early *polis* prefigured democracy. But whatever view we take of parallels and differences at the beginning, there is a massive contrast between later developments of the two political formations. The democratizing dynamic that unfolded in some of the Greek *poleis* – and triumphed in the most important one – has no parallel in the history of the Freestate. Its key institutions underwent some reforms, but there seems to be no reason at all to link them to democratizing trends or pressures. The changes that – in the end – damaged the Freestate beyond repair began much later and were of a very different kind: a new oligarchic offensive upset the institutional balance and created new realities on the ground.

The Althing was the political centre that gave the whole regime the charac-ter of a state, albeit a very inchoate one. Nordal analyzes its multiple roles at some length (1942, 142–152, 1993 I, 177–187). But although he does not explicitly dwell on the point, the most telling way to sum up his argument is to stress that the Freestate was an anti-monarchic polity. To grasp the implications of this description, a brief comparative *tour d'horizon* is need-ed. Monarchy – the embodiment of the separate centre in a single ruler – emerges as the characteristic form of statehood in early civilizations and remains, for a very long time, the dominant type in more advanced ones; sacral rulership – open to structural variations and historical changes form the outset – was, as noted above, the primary pattern of monarchy. On the other hand, the monarchic principle was in practice subject to limitations (social, political and cultural), and its institutional forms incorporated the limiting forces in more or less explicit ways. In some historical situations, the counterweights can develop into alternative models, and state forma-tion then takes an anti-monarchic turn. The legacies of such transforma-tions – and of the cultural developments which they made possible – became key components of the European tradition. As Jan Assmann (2000) has convincingly argued, the invention of monotheism in Ancient Israel belongs in this context, but in a very paradoxical way: the idea of a divine legislator de-values the institution of sacred kingship and changes the relationship between state and community, but does not – apart from a brief phase of hierocracy – translate into a new kind of political order. At the same time, monotheism paves the way for new and more transcendent interpretations of monarchy, but they did not crystallize until after further detours. An epoch-making anti-monarchic turn occurred in the Greek *polis,* and then – in very different circumstances – in the Roman republic. In the long run (i.e. beginning with late antiquity), the legacies of Greek and Roman deviations from monarchy were absorbed into civilizational pat-terns centring on a new alliance of monotheism and monarchy. From this final synthesis of several traditions, medieval Western Christendom inher-ited ideas and images of monarchy that in due course developed along three main lines: through efforts to restore imperial authority, evolving models of kingship linked to other cultural backgrounds but adapted to the domi-nant framework, and the consolidation of the Church as a papal monarchy. Within this unfolding historical context, new anti-monarchic turns could

occur, and the Icelandic Freestate may be compared to other cases (see e.g. Borgolte 2002, ch. 2.2: "Freistaaten unter Monarchien: Was Island von den italienischen Kommunen unterscheidet").

There is, however, another side to the question. As the record shows, the rejection of monarchy went hand in hand with continuing concern with it, efforts to make sense of it and evaluate its different forms, and even elaborations of new models for monarchic rule. In this fundamental sense, anti-monarchic turns were ambiguous, sometimes to the point of imaginary self-cancellation. Some recurrent historical reasons for this ambiguity may be noted. There was, in the first place, a general social rationale for strong monarchic rule, never easy to dismiss: the ruler was envisioned as "one before whom the rich and the well-born were as vulnerable as the little man" (Hodgson 1974, I, 282). To put it another way, visions of strong monarchy lent themselves to association with social justice. But they also served to focus the pursuit of power for its own sake. Monarchy represented an eminent, inherently expansive and particularly meaning-laden form of power. Although only a few monarchies could realize imperial ambitions, it can be argued that there is an elective affinity between the ideas of monarchy and empire: "Dans la domination..., il y a, latente, la perspective d'une domination universelle" (Gauchet 1985, 38). At a more modest level, aspirants to power in non-monarchic regimes were prone to monarchic temptations. Finally, the court societies that crystallized around monarchic rulers became cultural centres of a very distinctive kind and with considerable radiating power. Norbert Elias's classic analysis of early modern court society opened up a vast field for comparative study of such cases (Elias 1983).

For all these reasons, the spectre of monarchy haunts the political life and the social imaginary of non-monarchic regimes. The richest evidence for this comes from Ancient Greece (see especially Carlier 1984). To cut a very long story short, the Greeks engaged with monarchy on four different levels. Marginal or strangely transmuted forms of monarchic institutions survived within the context of a political culture centred on non-monarchic patterns. A fundamentally illegitimate form of monarchy, striving for more stable authority, emerged as a response to crises of the *polis*; the Greeks called it tyranny. Efforts to make sense of monarchic orders in the neighbouring Near East brought new perspectives to bear on the indigenous

traditions of these civilizations. Finally, and in close connection with the last-mentioned aspect, we can – following Carlier – distinguish between the institution of monarchy and the imaginary signification of kingship; Greek elaborations of the latter, articulated through a variety of cultural genres, had a lasting impact on later ways of theorizing and justifying monarchy.

After this brief comparative excursus, let us return to the Icelandic Freestate. Its deviation from the monarchic mainstream was muted by several factors. The settlers, or at least the most significant part of them, came from a country on which they remained dependent in various respects and with which they continued to identify, in a way that seems to have been compatible with a sense of being a separate community (cf. Kirsten Hastrup's model of a multi-layered Icelandic identity). They had migrated overseas, removed themselves from the orbit of monarchies competing for territorial possessions, and military conflict with a monarchic enemy was never a likely possibility. On the other hand, the resistance to monarchic aspects of the civilizational current coming in from Western Europe was remarkably stubborn. As noted above, the power elite of the Freestate engineered a conversion to Christianity without submission to monarchy. After conversion, the Church was organized in a way that set strict limits to the influence of the rising papal monarchy. Descriptions of the first bishops as kinglike figures should not be taken at face value: they reflect the official self-image of a Church that had more control over textual pro-duction in the first stage of literacy than in the closing decades of the Freestate. In this respect Sigurður Nordal's analysis of the early bishops as partners in an oligarchic coalition seems realistic.

If the institutional resistance to monarchy is beyond doubt, what about the cultural and ideological domains? Did the culture of the Freestate articulate the complex attitudes to monarchy mentioned above in connec-tion with other cases? The problem must be posed with proper regard to the cultural genres that come into question. Medieval Icelanders did not theorize about monarchy; they wrote sagas about kings. Images of king-ship, including contrasting models of an ideal ruler, figure prominently in these narratives. A certain optical illusion seems inherent in the genre: when kings take centre stage in a story, their presence and their preten-sions tend to overshadow other sides of the picture. And in light of the

above analysis, the positive aspects and connotations of kingship, as portrayed in the sagas, are unsurprising. There is, nevertheless, solid evidence of a distinctive, detached and to some extent de-mystifying attitude to the ascendant monarchies of the Nordic world. Sverre Bagge argues, to my mind convincingly, that there was a "greater emphasis on politics and explanation in Old Norse historiography" than in the dominant European traditions (Bagge 1997, 428; see also Bagge 1991). The shift towards intelligible political meanings and motives was a major innovation – not a leap beyond the medieval universe of discourse, but a new opening within it. And if *Heimskringla* appears as the paradigmatic example of the political turn, that is also because it tells us more about what Canetti called the "entrails of power" (see the chapter "*Eingeweide der Macht*" in Canetti 1996, 237–263) than did the mainstream Christian historiography of the times. This is particularly clear when it deals with the violent progress of Christianization: the underside of a story that already existed in more hagiographic versions is brought to light (see also von See 1999, 311–344).

Another aspect of Bagge's analysis is worth mentioning; as he sees it, Snorri perceived and portrayed the Norwegian political scene in light of his own political lifeworld, i.e. the conflict-ridden and collapsing Icelandic Freestate (Bagge 1991, 237–240). This approach stands in marked contrast to the emerging self-representation of the Norwegian monarchy, systematized in the *Speculum regale*, and may be seen as a way of cutting the mystique of king, court and sacred order down to size. There are other clues that point to similar conclusions. In recent scholarship (e.g. Sverrir Jakobsson 2005), attention has been drawn to the uniquely eminent position of the Byzantine emperor – not only in the kings' sagas, but also in narratives whose main action takes place in Iceland. It would not seem far-fetched to understand this continuing reverence – *prima facie* surprising in the Western Christian context – as a way to downgrade closer neighbours. The Byzantine summit of kingship was prestigious enough to overshadow lesser figures and remote enough to pose no threat.

There is, of course, still room for controversy on Icelandic visions of and attitudes to monarchy. Ármann Jakobsson's recent works on this subject (Ármann Jakobsson 1997, 2002) contain an unequalled wealth of information drawn from the whole range of the sources, but his conclusion that the kings' sagas "all show kingship in a favourable light" (Ármann

Jakobsson 1997, 318), and that none of them can therefore be regarded as more or less royalist than the others, seems one-sided. In the first place, the abovementioned distinction between kingship as an imaginary signification and monarchy as a historical institution may be relevant to this issue. A cluster of values and virtues associated with kingship represents the enduringly attractive side of monarchy, but the record as a whole does not suggest that its appeal – due to the reasons noted above – led to an unreserved embrace of the monarchic alternative. Moreover, the ability to distinguish between different "images of sovereignty" (Richard Gaskins) and contrasting ideals of rulership reflects a detachment that precluded identification with a given order. The very fact that it has proved difficult to identify clear preferences for one model as against another (does *Heimskringla* favour peasant or warrior kings?) indicates an ongoing confrontation that could only be sustained at a distance from monarchic rule. Last but not least, I find Theodore Andersson's argument about the shift from kings' sagas to Icelanders' sagas persuasive. It was precisely at the moment when absorption into the Norwegian monarchy became an increasingly likely possibility that the Icelanders turned to "a belated redefinition of their own traditions in their native sagas" (Andersson 1999, 934). The same author notes "a vein of anti-monarchism in the sagas of this period, and a will to identify what is peculiar to Icelandic institutions, Icelandic law, and Icelandic character" (Ibid., 933).[3]

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[3]   The interpretation of *Morkinskinna* has emerged as a major issue in the debate on Icelandic attitudes to monarchy. Ármann Jakobsson argues that this text "fuses the loyalty to tradition with the ideal of a new society" (2002, 286; my translation, J.P.A.). The claim could not be phrased more strongly: this "didactic history with an ideological purpose" (337; author's English summary) proposes a return to the monarchic fold, and more precisely to the court society of the Norwegian kingdom at its most ambitious and expansionist. Theodore Andersson reads *Morkinskinna* as a "condemnation of Norwegian expansionism on the part of an Icelandic writer and a forceful recommendation that Norwegian kings should devote themselves to social progress within Norway" (1994, 58). By comparison, Heimskringla can, for all its ambivalence, be seen as a royalist readjustment, and Egils saga as a reminder that one should try to see both sides of the argument. When two uncontested experts disagree in this massive way, a non-expert can only conclude that the message of the text must be very ambiguous indeed. The present writer feels tempted to add that the most accessible sections of *Morkinskinna* (the þættir, which both interpreters see as integral parts of the work) do not – to put it mildly – read like monarchist sermons.

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SUMMARY

This essay discusses the question of civilizational approaches to the medieval Nordic world, and in particular to Icelandic history between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. Attempts to reconstruct the cultural profile of a pre-Christian Scandinavian civilization, achieving its last flowering in Iceland (as argued most forcefully by Arnold Toynbee), have proved unconvincing. But there are also weighty arguments against the "pan-Christian" view that portrays the medieval North as a wholly assimilated part of Western Christendom. The most plausible interpretation stresses the dynamics of marginal regions marked by more or less resilient pre-Christian cultures and integrated into Western Christendom during its expansionist phase. As the case of the Nordic region shows, this process could involve an intercivilizational encounter with a pre-Christian world and an intra-civilizational differentiation within the framework of Western Christendom. The result was, particularly in Iceland, a very distinctive variant of Western Christian civilization. This general interpretation must, however, be combined with an account of the main landmarks in medieval Icelandic history: the tenth-century foundation of a non-monarchic political order, Christianization, the thirteenth-century political breakdown, and integration into the Norwegian kingdom.

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