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NORDIC UNIQUENESS
IN THE MIDDLE AGES?
POLITICAL AND LITERARY ASPECTS

WAS THERE a particular Nordic civilisation in the Middle Ages? There are two possible candidates on which such a characterisation might be based: (1) The unique literary culture of Iceland and (2) “The Scandinavian model”, with egalitarianism, democracy, welfare and peace. This latter is a modern phenomenon but may possibly have its origins in earlier periods, even in the Middle Ages. From this point of view, discussion about the Scandinavian model may form part of a wider discussion about the uniqueness of Europe, which has also been traced back to the Middle Ages.

Of course, such claims cannot be based on any deep similarity between medieval and modern society. There is little to suggest that medieval Europe was a better place to live for the majority of its population than other, contemporary civilisations or that it was particularly peaceful, egalitarian or democratic. Claims for a medieval origin of modern, Western civilisation must therefore be based on marginal differences or “cracks” in the generally traditional surface that might eventually lead to major changes. Proto-capitalism, for example, which was stimulated by the existence of free cities, competition between a great number of moderately sized and relatively stable states might be seen as a stimulus to inventions (or at least the spread of them) and the need for the king or ruler to share his power with aristocrats and/or burghers might be seen as the origin of modern democratic theory and practice.¹ While Nordic civilisation can hardly claim to be in the forefront of the development of capitalism or industrialisation, it may have some claims in the field of state formation or possibly democracy.

¹ Sverre Bagge, “The Transformation of Europe: the Role of Scandinavia,” *Medieval Encounters*, eds. J. Arnason and B. Wittrock, (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 131–65.

Democracy

“Democracy” in a general sense is hardly uniquely European but rather, the normal way of organising small-scale societies; that is, the majority of societies that have existed in the world. “Democracy” in this context need not include formal institutions, elections and so forth, but decisions will often be taken after discussion at meetings of the members of society or a part of them.² Some people may emerge as leaders because of greater wealth, charisma or fighting skills (“big men”), but their power will depend on voluntary support from their followers.³ Formal election or deposition will not be necessary; the leaders may attract a number of adherents who desert them when they are dissatisfied with them. Leadership by big men is contrasted to that of “chiefs” who have a permanent leadership and are able to force people to obey them. However, there is a sliding transition between these kinds of leadership; the leaders may act as chiefs in relationship to some groups and as big men in relationship to others. This seems largely to be the case in medieval Europe, including the Nordic countries. Most people were subordinated to the aristocracy, whereas the relationship between leaders and followers within this group bears some resemblance to that of a big man and his followers.

Monarchy or despotism is a secondary development, the result of greater centralisation, larger political units, greater population density and more intense competition. “Big man” democracy works best in small scale, “face to face” societies. Nevertheless, even states and empires under absolute rule often have some kind of democracy at the local level, as for instance the Roman Empire. A claim for European or Scandinavian uniqueness must therefore be based on evidence that such a structure was preserved even in relatively large political units. This applies to many countries in the Middle Ages. The European state is often regarded as unique in a global context, both the system of independent, relatively stable states in mutual competition and the internal balance of power where the monarch had to rule in co-operation with the leading members of soci-

² F.G. Bailey, *Stratagems and Spoils. A Social Anthropology of Politics* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 35–71 etc.

³ Marshall Sahlins, “Poor Man, Rich Man, Big Man, Chief,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963), 285–303.

ety and in accordance with laws or agreements with his subjects. The constitutionalism that emerged in most European countries, particularly from the 13th century onwards, can be regarded partly as a continuation and partly as a modification of the “big man-like” or clientelistic aspects of the relationship between the king and individual aristocrats in the Early Middle Ages. Assemblies or other institutions emerged in order to force the king to share his power with his most prominent subjects and to respect their rights. There is clearly an ideological connection between this medieval constitutionalism and the rise of democracy from the late 18th century onwards,⁴ possibly also a practical one, although constitutionalism was replaced with absolutism in most countries of Europe in the Early Modern Period and largely for the same reason as big men succumbed to chiefs: absolute monarchies were more efficient in the fierce military competition between the European states.⁵ Only a few wealthy and sheltered states managed to combine efficiency and constitutionalism, the Dutch Republic, England and to some extent Sweden.

Scandinavia did play a part in the formation of the European state system. Although geography and ecology may, to a great extent, serve as the explanation behind this particular feature of European civilisation – the contrast to China is particularly striking – we are also dealing with a historical development. The formation of separate kingdoms on the northern and eastern border of Germany served to prevent a revival of the Carolingian Empire and to establish the multiple state system. The competition between the Scandinavian kingdoms in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period also serves as a good illustration of the effects of such a system. With some exceptions, Denmark was the leading country of Scandinavia until the 17th century. Undergoing a revival after a period of decline in the early 14th century, Denmark became the centre of a dynastic union of all three countries which lasted (albeit with intermissions) from 1397 until 1523, by which time Norway had lost its independence, whereas Sweden had broken out of the union. During the 17th century, Sweden

⁴ Ideologically, the clearest link is Montesquieu’s theory of the division of power, which partly has its background in his own experience as a member of the French aristocracy.

⁵ See e.g. Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975) and idem, *Coercion and Capital, and European States, A.D. 990–1990* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990); William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force and Society since A.D. 1000* (Oxford: Blackwell 1983).

overtook Denmark through a thorough modernisation of its military forces and emerged as a European great power, almost conquering Denmark which, however, survived through the introduction of absolutism and by imitating Sweden's military modernisation.

Internally, the two strongest of the Scandinavian kingdoms, Denmark and Sweden, both developed constitutional barriers against the king's power, whereas Norway did not. Norway has been an extremely centralised country from the Middle Ages until the present. The monarchy was stronger and the aristocracy weaker than in the neighbouring countries, in a way that makes Scandinavia resemble two of the kingdoms on the Iberian peninsula: Castile with its strong monarchy and weak aristocracy, and Aragon-Catalonia with its weak monarchy and strong aristocracy.⁶ Which of these constitutions was the more democratic is a question that is open to discussion. A country with a strong aristocracy was more likely to develop institutions restricting the king's power but these institutions tended to be dominated by a small elite. The common people might have a greater influence in a country with a strong monarchy, like Norway. In any case, the Icelandic free state, which had no king at all and a relatively weak and divided aristocracy, was clearly the most democratic from this point of view. However, it was also weak and a typical example of a loosely organised small-scale society. It would hardly have survived for as long as it did if it had been located in a more competitive environment. Moreover, despite its distant location, it did succumb to the Norwegian king in 1262–64. The strongest candidate for continuity from medieval to modern democracy in Scandinavia is Sweden, where a constitutional assembly consisting of four estates developed during the Later Middle Ages and survived until it was replaced by a modern parliament in 1866. By contrast, Denmark (which included Norway) became the most absolutist country in Europe in 1660. Although it may still be possible to argue for the importance of the medieval past for the rise of democracy in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries, there is little to suggest that Scandinavia was very different from the rest of Europe in this respect.

⁶ Angus McKay, *Spain in the Middle Ages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2002 [orig. 1977]), 95–117.

Egalitarianism

A more promising idea seems to be that of Scandinavian egalitarianism: here, Iceland, Norway and Sweden are the candidates, whereas Denmark seems to conform more to the normal European pattern with a strong aristocracy dominating the peasantry. Nevertheless, the current trend is to emphasise the aristocratic character of Nordic society.⁷ The “farmers” (böendr) who play such an important role in the sagas are not the average members of the political community but aristocrats and leaders of local society. Most of the land in all of the Nordic countries (except Iceland) was owned by great lords or ecclesiastical institutions to whom the farmers paid rent, although they mostly had their own personal freedom. Relatively speaking, however, most of the Nordic countries differed from most of Western Europe in the egalitarian direction. The social and economic differences seem to have been less pronounced, although they were increasing during the Middle Ages, and the common people had to be taken into account to a greater extent than in many other countries. The importance of the farmers was reduced from the 12th and 13th century onwards with the development of a royal and ecclesiastical bureaucracy, for instance in Norway with the introduction of permanent royal judges and local officials, and in Iceland after the country submitted to the King of Norway in 1262–64, but the farmers were represented in the Swedish diet that developed during the Later Middle Ages. Moreover, the Swedish farmers played an important military role during the struggles against the Danish king in the 15th and early 16th century. In this respect, Sweden is not unique but conforms to other countries on the periphery, such as Scotland, Switzerland, and parts of Germany and East Central Europe. Furthermore, the farmers continued to play an important part in local government in Norway and Iceland, to some extent also in Denmark, at least until the 17th century.

Here, it may be objected that historians have a natural tendency to imagine the past in the light of the present and Scandinavian historians – particularly Norwegian ones – may well be suspected of making the Middle Ages too egalitarian and “Social Democratic”. Medieval society in Scandinavia was very hierarchical and aristocratic but probably less so than

⁷ Eljas Orrman, „Rural Conditions,” *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia I*, ed. Knut Helle, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 299–306 w. ref.

that of the central regions of Western Christendom. A certain amount of egalitarianism may therefore go back to the Middle Ages but we may also point to significant later changes, such as the reduced importance of the Scandinavian states from the 18th century onwards and their withdrawal from the great power struggles, as well as the growth of towns, trade and a middle class of burghers, wealthy farmers and bureaucrats in the service of the state.

A unique culture? The use of the vernacular

Let us then turn to the cultural aspect, where the strongest claims have been made for Scandinavian or rather Icelandic uniqueness. How unique was this culture? Can it be understood as the expression of a society different to that of the rest of Europe, thus confirming the claims for a greater amount of democracy or egalitarianism in Scandinavia?

One of the claims made for this kind of uniqueness is based on the early and extensive use of the vernacular. This applies only to Norway and Iceland, not to Denmark and Sweden. Moreover, it is less unique than often assumed. The rise of the vernacular was a general trend in most of Western Europe from the late 12th and early 13th century; in other words, from about the same time as the rise of the saga literature.⁸ This applies to France, Germany, Spain and Italy. England represents a similar trend, except that the literary language was French rather than English until the mid-14th century. However, this development came considerably later in the “new” countries of Western Christendom, i.e. those countries Christianised from the 9th–10th centuries onwards: Denmark, Sweden and the kingdoms of East Central Europe. Thus Norway and Iceland constitute the exceptions, not in the use of the vernacular as such, but in conforming to the pattern of the “old” rather than to the “new” countries of Western Christendom. This increased use of the vernacular is usually thought to reside in a more extensive degree of lay literacy, or the development of a literature intended for a lay audience, or both.

Whereas the literary use of the vernacular had become quite wide-

⁸ Erich Auerbach, *Literatursprache und Publikum in der lateinischen Spätantike und Mittelalter* (Bern: Francke, 1958), 205–59.

spread in the central parts of Western Christendom from around 1200, its use for administrative purposes in Norway and Iceland was more exceptional. In Norway, the royal chancery confined its use of Latin almost exclusively to letters to other countries and in a few cases to the Church; ecclesiastical institutions also made extensive use of the vernacular, although less than the royal chancery.⁹ This differs clearly from Danish and Swedish practice where Latin was used almost exclusively until the second half of the 14th century, and also from most other European chanceries. The only parallel – except for Iceland which, of course, had no royal chancery – is Anglo-Saxon England which is likely to have influenced Norwegian practice, as Christianity and thereby writing was introduced to Norway mainly from England. Early Norwegian letters seem to have been modelled on the Anglo-Saxon writ.¹⁰ The Anglo-Saxon practice in issuing writs in the vernacular continued for some generations after the Norman Conquest which makes it more likely that it could have influenced the Norwegian one. While in England, a change to Latin took place gradually in the period after the Conquest, the use of the vernacular continued in Norway where there was no comparable revolution. A further reason for the continued use of the vernacular in Norway may be that the less wealthy and exclusive Norwegian aristocrats might not have been as well equipped with clerical expertise as their European counterparts; the importance of propaganda during the troubled period in the second half of the 12th century, which may have stimulated writing in the vernacular, might also be taken into consideration. The extant *Speech against the Bishops* is one example of this and there may have been others, although we have no evidence. Finally, the existence of written laws in the vernacular may have been of some importance as a stimulus to issue the amendments, of which we have some examples from the 12th century, in the same language.

The link to Anglo-Saxon England may possibly explain other aspects of Norwegian-Icelandic culture. Directly or indirectly, Norway and Iceland

⁹ See the list in Johan Agerholt, *Gamal breviskipnad. Etterrøkjingar og utgreidingar i norsk diplomatik*, (Oslo: Gundersen, 1929–32), 648–57, which includes twenty five letters from the king in Old Norse before 1280. By contrast, there are only four in Latin to Norwegian recipients, all ecclesiastical institutions. During the same period, the bishops are known to have issued eighteen letters in Latin and twenty-seven in Old Norse to Norwegian recipients.

¹⁰ Agerholt, *Breviskipnad*, 646, with reference to Bresslau.

received Christianity from Anglo-Saxon England. The significance of this is not confined to the impulses coming from the English Church but also consists in the fact that Anglo-Saxon rulers, in contrast to their Carolingian and Ottonian counterparts, were not able to introduce Christianity through force or the threat of force. In so far as military or political pressure was used, it came from indigenous kings or magnates who thus played a crucial role in the conversion. This may also serve to explain how so much of the pre-Christian traditions survived in Norway and Iceland, as they also did in Anglo-Saxon England.¹¹

A unique culture? The saga literature

The main claim for a unique Icelandic culture is based on the existence of the family sagas, but the kings' sagas show largely the same features and can, in addition, be directly compared with Latin prose. The story of St Óláfr taking the young Hákon Jarl captive may serve as an example; any reader familiar with the sagas may easily find others. The story is told in several sources, the oldest of which is Theodoricus Monachus's work from around 1180.¹² Theodoricus tells how Óláfr, having arrived in Norway, sailed to a place called Saudungsund (in Sunnfjord in Western Norway), where he learned that the young earl was on his way. Óláfr laid a trap for the earl by placing his ships on each side of the narrow sound with a rope between them, lifting the rope at the right moment so that the earl's ship capsized. Hákon was captured, gave up his lordship in Norway and left for England.

Theodoricus writes a simple, matter-of-fact Latin without rhetorical embroidery – Saxo would have made much more out of this passage, had he included it in his work. Theodoricus's account is also relatively detailed. He notes that both Óláfr and Hákon had two ships and even bothers to inform his readers of the size of Hákon's ships, despite the fact that this is of no importance for the message Theodoricus wants to convey. He also adds that the larger of Hákon's ships corresponded to the type the ancients

¹¹ Sverre Bagge, "Christianization and State Formation in Early Medieval Norway," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 30 (2005), 113–16, 123 f.

¹² Theodoricus Monachus, *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium, Monumenta Historica Norvegiae*, ed. Gustav Storm (Christiania: A.W. Brøgger, 1880), ch. 15, 26 f.

called *liburna* and which Horace mentions in one of his epodes – from which Theodoricus quotes, in accordance with his general tendency to refer to the classics as often as possible, no doubt with the aim of integrating his history of Norway into the mainstream of universal history.¹³ Although his exact account of the ruse is not very detailed, he makes it perfectly clear to the reader how the earl was captured. The most characteristic feature in Theodoricus compared to the later sagas is the lack of drama; there is no attempt to describe what happened when the ships capsized or when the earl was brought aboard Óláfr's ship. More important to Theodoricus than such details is the moral aspect. From his point of view, the episode does not portray the saintly king in a very favourable light: Óláfr has attacked the earl without any declaration of war or feud and given him no chance to defend himself. Óláfr may clearly be accused of unchivalrous behaviour but Theodoricus has an excuse ready for him: he wanted to avoid bloodshed.

The two "classical" sagas, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*,¹⁴ which have almost exactly the same text, tell essentially the same story as Theodoricus, but in a different way. In the first part, they are somewhat more detailed in explaining exactly how the earl's ship capsized. They also add a sentence about how the earl's men dropped into the water, some drowning and some being killed by Óláfr's men. They thus make no point of Óláfr's alleged wish to avoid bloodshed. The main difference comes in the next part. The earl is taken captive and led on board Óláfr's ship. He is seventeen years old and very handsome, with long, beautiful hair like silk, tied up with a golden string:

He sat down by the mast. Then said King Ólaf, "It is certainly true what is said about your kin, that you are of handsome appearance. But luck has deserted you now."

Hákon replied, "It is not that luck has deserted us. It has long been the case that now the one, now the other of two parties have lost out... It may be that we are more successful another time."

¹³ Sverre Bagge, "Theodoricus Monachus – Clerical Historiography in Twelfth-century Norway," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 14 (1989), 115–17.

¹⁴ *Fagrskinna. Nóregs kononga tal*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: S.L. Møller, 1902–03), (=Fsk.) ch. 26, and *Heimskringla*, ed. F. Jónsson (Copenhagen: S.L. Møller, 1893–1900), II, 38–40.

Then King Ólaf replied, “Has it not entered your mind, earl, that events have taken such a turn that in the future you may have neither victory nor defeat?”

The earl said, “This is in your power, sire, to decide this time.”¹⁵

Suddenly understanding his predicament, the earl asks what he has to do to escape and accepts Ólaf’s condition, to leave the country and promise never to return.

W.P. Ker has characterised the difference between Latin and Old Norse historiography in the following way:

“These two books [Theodoricus and *Historia Norwegie*] might be picked out of the Middle Ages on purpose to make a contrast of their style with the Icelandic saga. Th[eodoricus]. ... indulges in all the favourite medieval irrelevances, drags in the Roman historians and the Platonic year, digresses from Charybdis to the Huns, and embroiders his texts with quotations from the Latin poets.”¹⁶

A more charitable – and adequate – description is that Theodoricus had a different aim, regarding the external events as signs of some deeper historical meaning which he found in typological parallels to events that had taken place elsewhere.¹⁷ The earl’s beauty, the drama of his meeting with Ólaf and the exchange between the two protagonists were of no importance to him, whereas the allusion to Horace links the episode in this distant country to the civilised world, and the statement that Ólaf wanted to avoid bloodshed gives a moral interpretation and serves to protect the saintly king from the accusation that he broke the rules of chivalry by attacking without a formal declaration of war or feud.

¹⁵ “settisk hann i fyrrúmit. Þá mælti Ólafur konungur: “eigi er þat logit af yðr frændum, hversu fríðir menn þér eruð sýnum, en farnir eruð þér nú at hamingju.” Þá segir Hákon: “ekki er þetta óhamingja, er oss hefir hent; hefir þat lengi verit, at ýmsir hafa sigraðir verit ... kann vera, at oss takisk annat sinn betr til en nú.” Þá svarar Ólafur konungur: “grunar þik ekki þat, jarl, at hér hafi svá til borit, at þú mynir hvárki fá heðan í frá sigr né ósigr?” Jarl segir: “þér munuð ráða, konungur, at sinni””, *Heimskringla* II, 39; *Heimskringla. History of the Kings of Norway*, transl. Lee M. Hollander (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1964), 266.

¹⁶ William Paton Ker, “The Early Historians of Norway,” *Collected Essays* II (London: Macmillan, 1925), 141 f.

¹⁷ Bagge, “Theodoricus,” 113–33.

Fagrskinna's and *Heimskringla's* version represents classical saga narrative. The accounts are objective, in the sense that the author remains neutral and abstains from comment; visual, in their vivid description of persons and events; and dramatic, in letting the persons confront one another with brief, succinct, intensely meaningful sentences, delivered in a calm tone and often with understatement in a way that heightens the drama, as in Óláfr's words to Hákon. The sagas generally prefer direct speech, in contrast to classical Latin prose, which prefers indirect. In this way, the actors in the drama are presented on the stage without interference from the author. Irony is often used. King Sverrir's speeches and sayings are particularly famous for this,¹⁸ but irony is also found in other sagas, as in Heimskringla's story of Ásbjörn selsbani's fatal expedition from Northern Norway to Sola in the south to buy grain from his uncle Erlingr Skjalgsson. When Ásbjörn returns empty-handed, having been humiliated by King Óláfr's armaðr Selþórir, and declines his other uncle Þórir hundr's invitation to spend Christmas with him, Þórir comments:

There is ... a great difference between us kinsmen of Ásbjörn in the honor he does us ... seeing the effort he put forth this summer to visit Erling and his kin; whereas now he disdains to come to me who lives next door to him! I don't know but he fears that Seal-Thórir be there on every islet.¹⁹

The saga style also seems to suggest a closer connection to the material, visible world, than the learned, Latin tradition. Not that the sagas excel in description for its own sake; there are few descriptions of nature, and when descriptions do occur, there is always a practical reason, depicting a battleground or showing the difficulty in crossing a certain area, for example. When necessary, however, such descriptions can be very precise, as for instance Snorri's description of how Þórir hundr and the brothers Karli

¹⁸ Sverre Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed. Kingship in Sverris saga and Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*. The Viking Collection 8 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1996), 27–29.

¹⁹ “bæði er ... at mikill er virðinga-munr vár frænda Ásbjarnar, enda gerir hann svá, slíkt starf sem hann lagði á í sumar, at sökja kynnit til Erlings á Jaðar, en hann vill eigi hér fara í næsta hús til mín; veit ek eigi, hvárt hann hygg, at Selþórir myni í hverjum hólma fyrir vera” (*Heimskringla* II, 249; Hollander, 381).

and Gunnsteinn raided a burial site and destroyed a statue of the pagan god Jómali in Bjarmaland.²⁰ The story has a vividness that might suggest that Snorri had been an eyewitness to the episode or at least had visited the site, which of course was not the case. Nor are the details so specific that it is necessary to assume any local knowledge; most probably, Snorri has invented them himself. Nevertheless, his need for visualising is striking. We are presented almost with a map of the site and are told details such as that Þórir used his axe to climb the wall and that mud stuck to the gold and silver taken out of the burial mound, which seems obvious enough but which increases the vividness of the story. The attack on the statue plays a major part in the story and is also described in dramatic detail. Snorri does not confine himself to merely noting that its head dropped off, but describes exactly where Karli aimed his axe so as to loosen the costly necklace the statue was wearing in the easiest way possible. The detailed description of this attack, from Þórir's warning against touching the statue to Karli's chopping off its head, might look like a story of greed leading to disaster. Admittedly, the sound of the dropping head alerts the guards that are on their way – Snorri tells us that the raiders exploited an interval during the change of guards – but Þórir's magic saves the Norwegians. Instead, the attack on the god serves as an anticipation of the later conflict between Þórir and the brothers. Þórir's warning seems to have served as a pretext to keep the others away from the main booty, as he fails to heed it himself, snatching a bowl full of silver from the statue, which results in Karli's attack on the statue. On their return from the expedition, Þórir and Karli quarrel about the booty and Þórir kills Karli, partly because of this and partly as revenge for Karli's having killed Þórir's nephew Ásbjörn; he pierces him with the spear with which Ásbjörn had been killed, which he had received from Ásbjörn's mother and with which he later pierced King Óláfr. In this way, the raiding expedition in Bjarmaland enters into the main story of Óláfs saga (below p. 61).

Representation and argument

The visual character of the sagas and the contrast here between the sagas and classical and medieval Latin prose is reminiscent of Auerbach's com-

²⁰ *Heimskringla* II, 292–99.

parison between the latter and Gregory of Tours's "barbarous" prose – a contrast that Mark Phillips has characterised with the terms "representation" and "argument". According to Auerbach, Gregory's Latin is primitive and unclassical; he has no idea of composition and his detailed narrative is so obscure as to be almost incomprehensible. On the other hand, Gregory's prose has a freshness and immediacy, derived from popular narrative, which represent a renewal of the ancient tradition. In a similar way, Phillips distinguishes between the vivid but chaotic Italian chronicles of the 14th century and the classicising, abstract, well-ordered and intellectual histories in Latin from the Renaissance of the 15th century, which aimed at reviving the classical tradition.²¹

This contrast catches an important feature of the Old Norse sagas but does not give a complete picture. The sagas are not chaotic; the visual details serve to underline important points in the narrative. Nor is there a necessary conflict between representation and argument. Some of the classical sagas, notably *Heimskringla* and *Sverris saga*, contain argument as well as representation; visualisation is not *l'art pour l'art*, but has an intellectual purpose. In *Heimskringla*, the story of Óláfr and Hákon is followed by a series of others which explain how Óláfr managed to defeat his enemies and become king of Norway in half a year.²² By capturing Hákon, Óláfr eliminates an important rival, while at the same time demonstrating his luck, which – together with the wealth he has brought from England – gains him the support of his relatives, the petty kings of Eastern Norway. This in turn enables him to defeat his other rival, Sveinn jarl, in the battle of Nesjar. After this victory, the rest of his enemies, including Einarr Þambarskelfir in Trøndelag and Erlingr Skjalgsson in Sola, find it necessary to come to terms.

The story of Óláfr and Hákon also plays a crucial role in the saga of Óláfr as a whole. Readers of the saga can hardly avoid comparing this episode with another episode towards the end, namely the last meeting between Óláfr and Erlingr Skjalgsson which takes place at a time when Óláfr is about to lose the country. Starting with the story of Ásbjörn

²¹ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Bern: Francke, 1946), 81–97; Mark Phillips, "Representation and Argument in Florentine Historiography," *Storia della storiografia*, 10 (1986), 48–63.

²² Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (Berkeley etc.: University of California Press, 1991), 90–92.

selsbani's fatal expedition to the south, Snorri has described how Óláfr runs into conflict with one after another of the mightiest men in the country, a narrative in which the Bjarmaland episode also plays a part (above p. 60). Óláfr's adversaries rally around King Cnut the Great who arrives in Norway and is accepted as king over most of the country. After Cnut's return, Óláfr, who has remained passive in his stronghold in the east during Cnut's expedition, tries a raid along the coast of Western Norway. He is pursued by Erlingr, who has a largely superior force, but Óláfr nonetheless manages to lay an ambush for Erlingr's ship which is much faster than the rest of his fleet. Erlingr fights until all his men have been killed, after which Óláfr offers him quarter. Erlingr lays down his arms but is killed by one of Óláfr's men, to whom Óláfr says: "With that blow you struck Norway out of my hands".²³ Shortly afterwards, Óláfr is forced to leave the country and finds refuge in Russia.

Thus, the lesson is that clemency brings Óláfr success, whereas killing an enemy who surrenders leads to disaster. In accordance with what seems to be Snorri's general way of thinking, this conclusion is based on political rather than moral considerations. On both occasions, Óláfr is in a weak position; he is in desperate need of friends. In a society of feuds and revenge, killing an enemy makes it more difficult to come to terms with his clients and relatives. Killing Hákon might easily have led to a dangerous alliance of his friends and relatives against Óláfr. Killing Erlingr did lead to Erlingr's whole network uniting against Óláfr and chasing him out of the country. Admittedly, Óláfr is not responsible for Erlingr's death in Snorri's account, although he most probably is in the stanza by Sighvatr, which Snorri quotes.²⁴ Snorri's conclusion therefore may be that Óláfr wanted to do the same to Erlingr as to Hákon, but that luck, which had so emphatically favoured him in his early career, had now deserted him. More generally, however, both episodes show the importance of support. No king can rule only by force; he needs the support of the majority of the leading men in the country. Towards the end of his reign, Óláfr loses this support, largely through his own fault, in antagonising a number of the

²³ "nú hjóttu Nóreg ór hendi mér" (*Heimskringla* II, 406; Hollander, 467).

²⁴ "Erlingr fell, en olli/ allríkr skipat sliku/ ...bragna konr með gagni"/ "Erling fell; that outcome/ Ólaf caused ... and gained the victory", *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1908–14), B I, 230; cf. Hollander, 468.

greatest magnates by insisting on his rights down to the smallest detail.²⁵ Had Óláfr succeeded in reaching a settlement with Erlingr, he might possibly have turned the tables. However, a detail in Snorri's account might suggest that Óláfr would have been unlikely to achieve this. After Erlingr's surrender, Óláfr gives him a wound on his cheek, saying: "A mark he shall bear, the betrayer of his king".²⁶ This remark may actually have provoked Áslákr, Erlingr's second cousin and enemy, to kill Óláfr; Áslákr would hardly have dared if Óláfr instead had embraced Erlingr or in some other ways expressed his wish for Erlingr's friendship.

More importantly, Óláfr's act shows that he would never have gained Erlingr's friendship which was what he needed to be able to remain in the country. In the long run, Óláfr needed Erlingr more than Erlingr needed Óláfr, despite the situation at the time. Forcing Erlingr to a similar agreement as Hákon's would hardly help Óláfr; his other enemies were too strong and numerous. What Óláfr needed was Erlingr's genuine friendship, which would make him and his network Óláfr's allies. In order to achieve this, Óláfr had to show more generosity than marking Erlingr as a traitor. It would therefore seem that Snorri, despite acquitting Óláfr of Erlingr's death, does use this scene as a contrast to the one between Óláfr and Hákon and intends it as another example of Óláfr's political blunders towards the end of his reign.

Icelandic and European narrative

Snorri's combination of representation and argument thus shows a clear difference from the dominating Latin-clerical culture of contemporary Europe. On the other hand, we are not dealing with two diametrically opposed traditions; there are individual variations within both as well as similarities between the two, and influence from one tradition to the other. Stylistically, there is a considerable difference between the two Norwegian examples of historical narrative in Latin, Theodoricus Monachus and *Historia Norwegie*. While the narrative in the former is simple and direct, the latter contains more rhetorical embroidery, particularly through a rich

²⁵ Bagge, *Society and Politics*, 66–70.

²⁶ "merkja skal dróttinsvikann" (*Heimskringla* II, 406; Hollander, 467).

and varied vocabulary and extensive use of synonyms.²⁷ Moreover, although both authors have a religious attitude, theological thought is more explicit in Theodoricus, whose digressions serve to relate the history of Norway to the universal history of salvation.²⁸ Theodoricus also includes considerably more factual information, whereas the author of *Historia Norwegie* shows a greater interest in political explanation,²⁹ and seems to have used classical Latin historiography as his model to a greater extent. In this respect, he resembles the greatest Latin writer in Scandinavia, Saxo Grammaticus, who was one of the most accomplished Latin writers of the Middle Ages, and who developed a highly complex and rhetorical style modelled particularly on Valerius Maximus. Comparable differences can also be found throughout the rest of Europe, for instance in Germany, where Widukind of Corvey (c. 960) and Lampert of Hersfeld (c. 1080) represent the classical style, with a greater emphasis on secular matters, whereas Wipo (c. 1040) and above all Otto of Freising (1140s, 1157/58) are more explicitly theological.³⁰ However, there is no exact correspondence between style and contents: there are many intermediate forms and it is probably too early to attempt a complete categorisation of twelfth-century Latin historiography.³¹ If we compare the sagas to the two Norwegian representatives of Latin historiography, they are closer in style to Theodoricus and closer in content to *Historia Norwegie*. Of the German authors, Widukind is the one who has most in common with Snorri, in his occasionally very vivid accounts of individual episodes, his understanding of political conflicts as mainly the result of individuals competing for power and defending their own interests, and in his depictions of leadership as based on charismatic qualities rather than a holding of office on

²⁷ Eiliv Skard, *Målet i Historia Norwegiae, Skrifter utgitt av Det Norske Videnskapsakademi i Oslo, Hist.-fil. klasse 1930.5* (Oslo: J. Dybwad, 1930); Lars Boje Mortensen, "Introduction," *Historia Norwegie*, 24–28.

²⁸ Bagge, "Theodoricus Monachus", 117–23.

²⁹ Thus, the author explains why the Danish King Sveinn attacked Óláfr Tryggvason, whereas Theodoricus only mentions the fact (Mortensen, "Introduction," *Historia Norwegie*, eds. Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2003), 27 f.).

³⁰ Sverre Bagge, *Kings, Politics, and the Right Order of the World in German Historiography c. 950–1150. Studies in the History of Christian Thought 103* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 88–94, 98–107, 215–30, 277–96, 376–88.

³¹ Mortensen, *Historia Norwegie*, 27.

God's behalf. There is thus not a total gap between the sagas and European historiography but nevertheless, there is quite a strong difference in emphasis.³²

Secular literature and secular audiences were also to be found in other countries at the same time; vernacular literature that developed from the 12th century onwards was largely intended for the laity and dealt with war, heroic deeds and love. This literature demonstrates some of the same features as the Old Norse sagas but also some differences. Descriptions of kings, heroes and beautiful women are panegyric in tone in both genres, but those in the sagas are closer to descriptions of missing persons in police announcements, to draw a modern analogy: height, colours, special characteristics.³³ In contrast, European chivalric literature shows greater subtlety in the rendering of emotions, particularly when dealing with love.³⁴ Characteristically, such passages are omitted or abbreviated in the Old Norse translations. Is this because of less understanding for such phenomena or because of the tendency, very pronounced in the mature sagas, to describe emotions through external signs ("red like blood" etc.) and to leave the interpretation to the reader? Secondly, this European vernacular literature is more concerned with norms, chivalry and so forth, although it also contains strategic-political features similar to those in the saga literature. William Brandt's characterisation, that this literature "seeks to celebrate, not to explain",³⁵ catches a characteristic difference compared to the saga literature, but is not entirely just. There is a considerable amount of strat-

³² Sverre Bagge, "Icelandic Uniqueness or a Common European Culture. The Case of the Kings' Sagas," *Scandinavian Studies* 69,4 (1997), 418–42 and "Medieval Societies and Historiography," in Michael Borgolte, ed., *Das europäische Mittelalter im Spannungsbogen des Vergleichs. Zwanzig internationale Beiträge zu Praxis, Problemen und Perspektiven der historischen Komparatistik* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001), 223–47.

³³ Lars Lönnroth, "Det litterära porträttet i latinsk historiografi och isländsk sagaskrivning. En komparativ studie," *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 27 (1965), 85 ff. and Bagge, *Society and Politics*, 146–48. Cf. also the comparison between chivalric and a saga description in Bjarne Fidjestøl, *Selected Papers* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1997), 363 f.

³⁴ See e.g. Jonna Kjær, "Censure Morale et Transformations Idéologiques dans Deux Traductions de Chrétien de Troyes: *Ívens saga* et *Erex saga*," *The Eighth International Saga Conference. The Audience of the Sagas* (Gothenburg 1991), 287–96; Lilliane Reynaud, "Når en roman av Chrétien de Troyes blir til en norrøn saga. Fra Yvain ou Le Chevalier au Lion til *Ívens saga*," *Historisk tidsskrift* 83 (2004), 245–59.

³⁵ William J. Brandt, *The Shape of Medieval History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 88.

egy and political manoeuvring in works like *L'Histoire du Guillaume le Maréchal* and *Froissart's Chroniques*.³⁶ The actual “game of politics” need not have been fundamentally different; similar conflicts and manoeuvring can be detected in European vernacular as well as Latin historiography, although it is less prominent there.

Narrative and society

The saga style has been increasingly admired in modern times and has made a great impact on European literature from the mid-19th century onwards. There is no doubt about its difference to the style current in intellectual circles in most of Europe in the Middle Ages, but its origin and development are open to discussion³⁷ and deserve further examination. Are we dealing with a genuinely popular style, based on oral narrative, or with some kind of development from Latin prose?

We are certainly not dealing with a culture completely isolated from the rest of Europe, a kind of medieval Galapagos.³⁸ Both Iceland and Norway had early and regular contact with the rest of Europe, and some of the earliest texts, such as Sæmundr's lost history of the Norwegian kings and Oddr Snorrason's life of Óláfr Tryggvason, were in Latin. The Latin *sermo humilis*, as used in the Bible, in saints' lives and other religious texts,³⁹ is also a possible model for saga prose. Writing was, after all, introduced from abroad through the conversion, and it seems likely that imported texts may have had some influence on what was eventually written down. Moreover, the classical saga style seems to be a late development,⁴⁰ which

³⁶ John Gillingham, *Richard Coeur de Lion. Kingship, Chivalry and War in the Twelfth Century* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1994), 227–41, with criticism of Georges Duby, *Guillaume le Maréchal ou Le meilleur chevalier du monde* (Paris: Fayard, 1984); Kristel Skorge, *Ideals and values in Jean Froissart's Chroniques* (Doctoral thesis, Bergen, 2006), 68–123.

³⁷ Frederic Amory, “Saga Style in some Kings' Sagas, and Early Medieval Latin Narrative,” *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 32 (1979), 67–86; Þórir Óskarsson, „Rhetoric and Style,” *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 354–71.

³⁸ Gunnar Karlsson, “Was Iceland the Galapagos of Germanic Political Culture,” here, 77.

³⁹ Auerbach, *Literatursprache und Publikum*, 25–53.

⁴⁰ On the development of the saga literature, see most recently Theodore M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180–1280)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 1–101.

can also be illustrated by the story of Óláfr taking Hákon captive. The description of the earl as well as the dialogue between him and Óláfr is also found in the *Legendary Saga* from around 1200 but with a number of additions that are omitted in the two later sagas.⁴¹ The earl's vanity is emphasised; he wants to sail between Óláfr's two ships – which he believes are merchant ships – in order to impress the spectators as much as possible, and he and his men drink heavily while sailing. Both pieces of information serve to place the earl in bad light and may thus have a moralistic aim similar to Theodericus's comment about Óláfr's wish to avoid bloodshed. Most importantly, after his words to the earl that he may have neither victory nor defeat any more, Óláfr goes on to tell the earl that he may be killed and gives him an alternative option that the earl turns down. Finally, the two agree on the same solution as in the two later sagas. To modern readers, these additions weaken the drama of the story. The two later authors seem to have thought in the same way and omitted them.⁴² Thus, whatever the origin of the story, its classical version appears as a late and refined product of various versions produced over a period of around forty years. Nor does Snorri confine himself just to narrating good stories; he combines them in a way that gives them considerable explanatory force. His departure from the Latin intellectual and rhetorical tradition is the result of deliberate choice.

Nevertheless, the saga style probably has some basis in popular narrative or is at least closer to such narrative than classical Latin prose. Some of its features, such as irony, understatement, silence and acute observation of the external world, fit well in with a relatively egalitarian or at least non-hierarchical society of farmers, and resemble the culture of rural society many places in contemporary Scandinavia.⁴³ Moreover, there is some resemblance between the saga style and the so-called *prófbref* in Norway,

41 *Leg. saga* ch. 19–21.

42 This of course implies that the two authors knew the *Legendary saga*, which is by no means certain. However, the two sagas show enough similarities with the *Legendary saga* that we can conclude that they must either have used the saga itself or some of its sources, such as *The Oldest Saga*. Only fragments survive of this saga, none of which deal with the early part of Óláfr's reign. See Theodore M. Andersson, "Kings' Sagas," in Carol Clover and John Lindow, eds., *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature. A Critical Guide*. *Islandica 45* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), pp. 204 f., 212 f.

43 Eva Österberg, *Mentalities and Other Realities. Essays in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian History* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1991), 9–30.

testimony about the circumstances around cases of homicide, recorded by local officials and sent to the king: the exact description of details, the paratactic style and the frequent use of direct speech, often with striking formulations, invite direct comparison.⁴⁴ As these letters primarily contain the testimony of witnesses, often apparently directly quoted, they are likely to stand relatively close to oral discourse.

Although, as we have seen, the egalitarian character of medieval Icelandic society should not be exaggerated, it was certainly more pronounced than in most other places at the same time. As Icelandic society was without a clear hierarchy, status depended more on personal qualities than on inherited or bureaucratic positions, with intense competition and with a great risk for the loser to be the subject of ridicule. It was also a society where a man's success depended more on his ability to form alliances, persuade people to join him and to outmanoeuvre his opponents than on courage and skills at arms. Above all, the saga literature differs from contemporary European historiography in the less exclusively aristocratic character of the players which made the chieftains more dependent on broader support and increased the importance of the personal qualities of the players, in the form of intelligence, eloquence, generosity and the ability to handle various kinds of people. *Heimskringla* consistently points out that the farmers are helpless without their leaders and generally attributes most important decisions to the latter. The farmers are thus in a subordinate position, but they are always there, in contrast to what is found in European historiography.⁴⁵ The importance of oratory in the sagas serves to illustrate this point. The frequent references to regal eloquence in the characterisations of kings, as well as the many speeches attributed to them, notably in *Sverris saga* and *Heimskringla*, show the importance of persuading people to do what the leader wants.⁴⁶

Might some of the features of the saga literature also be explained by

⁴⁴ Trygve Knudsen, *Skrift, tradisjon og litteraturmål* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1967), 81–83; cf. Olav Solberg, *Forteljingar om drap: kriminalhistorier frå seinmellomalderen* (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2003), 40–64 etc.

⁴⁵ Bagge, *Society and Politics*, 138 f.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 149, and Sverre Bagge, "Oratory and Politics in the Sagas," *L'Histoire et les nouveaux publics dans l'Europe médiévale (XIIIe–XVe siècles)*, Actes du colloque international organisé par la Fondation Européenne de la Science à la Casa de Velásquez, Madrid, 23–24 Avril 1993, ed. Jean-Philippe Genet, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris 1997, 215–28.

the more secular character of Nordic and particularly Icelandic society? It seems at least that the laity – in Iceland the chieftains and their followers, in Norway the royal court – was a very important literary audience. Nor is there any doubt that the Icelandic church was weaker than its counterparts in most other areas of Europe. The episcopal sees were poor, there were no cathedral chapters and the church was largely under the control of lay chieftains until the end of the 13th century. By contrast, the Norwegian church seems to have been relatively – but of course not absolutely – wealthier than the European average and had a considerable amount of independence from the king.⁴⁷ In accordance with this, Norwegian literature is also less secular than the Icelandic one. Nevertheless, the distinctly secular character of the Old Norse literature should not be exaggerated. The great majority of texts in Old Norse are actually religious: sermons, saints' lives and other devotional literature, and there was also a considerable secular literature in other countries at the time. The most characteristic feature of the literature of Iceland and Norway – as far as we can judge from what is extant – is the absence of scholasticism and theological – as opposed to devotional – writing. From this point of view, the main weakness of the Icelandic and Norwegian churches, in contrast to their Danish and Swedish counterparts, was that they had very limited contact with the expanding European universities and thus only developed a specifically clerical elite culture to a limited extent.

The classical saga is, to a considerable extent, the product of the pre-state Icelandic society and expresses this society's values. The writing of the kings' saga reached its peak during the intense struggles in Iceland in the 1220s and -30s and declined with the formation of a strong monarchy in Norway and the Icelanders' submission to the king of Norway in 1262–64. The writing of the family sagas continued, probably for the rest of the century, but whether they were composed before or after 1262–64

⁴⁷ Halvard Bjørkvik, "Nyare forskning i norsk seinmellomalder", *Norsk lektorlags faglig-pedagogiske skrifter. Nytt fra norsk middelalder II* (Oslo: Cappelen, 1970), p. 88, suggests that the Church owned around 40% of the land incomes around 1300, whereas the European average is unlikely to have been more than 20–30%. Although this calculation is uncertain and has been criticised, most recently by Jo Rune Ugulen, "alle the knaber ther inde och sædescwenne..." *Ei undersøking i den sosiale samansetninga av den jordeigande eliten på Vestlandet i mellomalderen* (Doctoral thesis, Bergen 2007), pp. 521–77, there are indications that the Norwegian Church at the time was very wealthy.

they mostly represent the norms and values of the old society. However, the kings' sagas also show connections with Norway. Although most saga authors were Icelanders, the Norwegian court was an important audience. Some sagas were directly commissioned by the king of Norway, such as *Sverris saga*, *Hákonar saga* and most probably *Fagrskinna*. King Sverrir is even said to have supervised the writing of the first part of his saga. As the kings' sagas have the Norwegian dynasty as their subject and frequently express Norwegian patriotism in describing the Norwegian kings' conflicts with neighbouring peoples, there can hardly be any doubt of the Norwegian influence on their composition, although it is more difficult to distinguish between Norwegian and Icelandic elements.

The contrast or even conflict between Norway and Iceland is often emphasised in modern scholarship, and the end of the so-called free state in 1262–64 is regarded as a kind of conquest. There are also hints at such an opposition in the saga literature. One example is the famous episode of Snorri's return to Iceland from Norway in 1220, when the high rank and rich gifts bestowed on him by the Norwegian king and earl are met with envy and ridicule;⁴⁸ another example is the explanation of the emigration to Iceland as the result of Haraldr hárfagri's "tyranny", most clearly expressed in *Egils saga's* account of the conflict between King Haraldr and Skallagrímr and his family.⁴⁹ The latter, as well as some other saga episodes, contrasts the simple, straightforward, egalitarian manners of the Icelanders – in accordance with the description above – with the refined, haughty, courtly manners of those in Norway. However, the extent to which Egill and his father represent an Icelandic ideal is an open question, and even more is the extent to which this ideal was still valid later in the 13th century. Nor is the account of Haraldr hárfagri consistently negative, not even in *Egils saga*.⁵⁰ Taken together, the Icelandic family sagas are more likely to express ambivalence towards the Norwegian king: on the one hand, the wealth and honour that might be gained from his service, on the other the loss of independence. The actual behaviour of the Icelandic

⁴⁸ *Sturlunga saga*, eds. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn I–II (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946) I, 278 f.; Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortalling og ære* (Århus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1993), 121–23.

⁴⁹ Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortalling og ære*, 127–47.

⁵⁰ Slavica Rancović, "Golden Ages and Fishing Grounds: The Emergent Past in the Íslendingasögur," *Saga-Book* 30 (2006), 56–59.

chieftains in the 13th century seems to indicate that the former consideration outweighed the latter, or perhaps more correctly, that the chieftains tried to retain as much independence as possible without losing the king's favour.⁵¹

If we move to the middle of the 13th century, we also find Norwegian courtliness and authoritarian monarchy described in a highly rhetorical style, the very opposite of that of the sagas, in *Konungs skuggsiá* (The Kings Mirror, c. 1255). In many ways, however, this work forms the best evidence for the similarity rather than the difference between Norwegian and Icelandic norms and manners, through its violent polemics against the bad manners of the courtiers, the lack of respect for the king, the courts of law and the royal officials and its condemnation of feuds and competition. The strength and amount of detail in these attacks, plus the Son's evident surprise at many of the Father's lessons in this dialogue, form clear evidence of the distance between doctrine and practice. At least ideologically, to some extent also in practice, great changes took place with the firm establishment of the royal power in Norway after the end of the so-called civil wars in 1240. These changes are also expressed in the last of the kings' sagas, that of Hákon Hákonarson, but we cannot use the ideals of the 1250s and -60s as evidence for practice in the 1220s and -30s.⁵²

The connection between narrative and society would also seem to be confirmed by the parallel between north and south, "republican Iceland" and the Italian city republics. In one sense, these two parts of Europe are the most different of all, the wealthy, densely populated and urbanised Northern and Central Italy, with proto-capitalism, extensive trade routes and highly developed political institutions, versus the poor island in the north, with no towns at all, depending on foreign merchants for import and export and with no real government until the submission under the Norwegian king in 1262–64. There are, however, similarities. Both societies were less hierarchical and more competitive than the kingdoms and principalities in the zone between them, such as England, France and the Empire, and secular values were stronger in both. Politically, the Church had a weak position in Italy, and the main focus of learning in Italian uni-

51 Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1999), 71–83.

52 Bagge, *From Gang Leader*, 147–60.

versities and elsewhere was on secular disciplines, law and medicine. Although we can hardly claim any detailed similarity, the Italian urban chronicles, for instance the works of the Florentines Villani and Compagni, share some of the characteristics of the sagas, in their vivid representations of men and actions and their relatively secular outlook. These authors also serve as some of the main examples of representation in Phillips's study of representation and argument mentioned above.⁵³ While these authors do refer to divine intervention and miracles, and lament the struggles they narrate to a greater extent than the saga writers, the main topic of their narratives is the external world, human actions, success and failure, political alliances, family and other networks, and competition. Like the sagas, these chronicles are composed by men of action for men of action, and their authors as well as their audience are people engaged in the external, material world rather than the spiritual and supernatural one, merchants in Italy, combined farmers and politicians in Iceland.

Conclusion

While taking medieval Scandinavia and particularly Iceland as models of later European democracy seems to be methodologically doubtful, there is a more solid basis for identifying a distinct cultural tradition expressed in the saga literature, which in turn is related to the character of Icelandic society, and to some extent also the other Scandinavian countries, notably Norway. Taken as a whole, the kings' sagas clearly differ from the main European tradition in narrative style, composition and in their attitude to politics and society. The retreat of the author, the use of irony and understatement, dramatic "representation", the emphasis on political manoeuvring and the kings' and leaders' need for popular support are all characteristic features. To some extent, these features can be understood against the background of a competitive society without a clear hierarchy and a literary audience dominated by practical men of action, a hypothesis that seems to be confirmed by the comparison with the contemporary Italian towns.

53 Phillips, "Representation and Argument," 51–55; Sverre Bagge, "Medieval and Renaissance Historiography: Break or Continuity?" *The Individual in European Culture, The European Legacy*, vol. 2 no. 8, ed. Sverre Bagge (1997): 1336–1371.

Admittedly, literature cannot be explained sociologically in the sense that a certain kind of society will inevitably produce a certain kind of literature. Individual creativity also plays a part; we are dealing with connections and probabilities, not with exact correlation.

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SUMMARY

The article addresses the question of Nordic uniqueness in the Middle Ages in the political and social fields, as well as in the literary field. With regard to the political dimension, there is not much evidence to support the notion that countries like Iceland and Norway were any more democratic than the rest of Europe in that they had more developed constitutional arrangements. They may, however, be regarded as more democratic in the sense that the social and economic differences between the elite and the common people were not as pronounced as they seem to have been in most other European countries. The main evidence for Nordic – i.e. Icelandic and to some extent Norwegian – uniqueness comes from the literary field. The sagas differ significantly from Latin historiography in not only being written in the vernacular but also because of their distinctive style, the aim of which was to convey a concrete representation of external reality and a political explanation for this reality. By contrast, Latin historiography tended to regard external events as the expression of a spiritual reality and to comment on the significance of these events from an ethical or typological point of view. Finally, the relationship between the literary features of the Icelandic sagas and Icelandic/Norwegian society is discussed. Does the sagas' literary style reflect a more egalitarian Icelandic/Norwegian/Nordic society than any contemporary European society, as well as a society less dominated by ecclesiastical culture and ideals?

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