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CREATING AT THE MARGINS: CULTURAL DYNAMICS IN EARLY ICELAND

“Every society embodies conflicting factors, simply because it has gradually emerged from a past form and is tending toward a future one.”

Émile Durkheim (1960, 59)

Introduction

The study of *civilizations* is an emerging scholarly pursuit that revives some venerable traditions of social history (Jóhann Páll Árnason 2003). Its proponents investigate patterns of cultural development in widely dispersed times and places. From a range of such examples, they hope to weave broader comparative theories. It comes as no surprise that “civilizational” theory has begun to consider early Icelandic society and sagas. With its literary heritage and accompanying historical data, the Icelandic cultural record may provide a rich laboratory for testing new interpretations of cultural development. The encounter between civilization theorists and scholars of early Iceland should produce benefits for both sides. For broad theorists, civilizational concepts need to find concrete applications, especially through a range of textual sources, historical periods, and geographic locations. If this approach should bear fruit, it may provoke new questions and lend new resources to Icelandic literary and historical scholarship.

This recent concern with civilizations reflects contemporary interests and is not a regression to older styles (Wittrock 2006). We no longer share the gloomy prospects of Spengler’s *Untergang* (1918–22) or the eschatology of Toynbee’s mythic vitalism (1934–61), both of which belong to the last century. In the new millennium, as nations and cultures become increasingly focused on global connections and diverse conflicts, social historians search for patterns of cultural growth and decay. The study of civilizations is part of the self-commentary of our own age, providing us

with critical distance on our basic notions of modernity. Given the special dominance of the West, we are curious about tensions and conflicts that were likely present when our modern institutions first emerged in transitional societies. As a pre-modern cultural episode on the periphery of Christianizing Europe, the dynamic society portrayed in sagas and contemporary histories offers an unusually rich source of self-reflection. It responds fully to sociologist Jóhann Páll Árnason's interest in finding "connections between the internal pluralism of modernity and the civilizational pluralism of its prehistory" (2003, 13). A civilizational perspective on early Iceland invites us to roam with unusual freedom across normal scholarly boundaries of history, politics, philosophy, the arts, and literature.

The 2007 Skálholt symposium provided a multidisciplinary response to the challenge laid down by Jóhann, one of the leading exponents of the civilizational approach. The symposium was an occasion for scholars of medieval Iceland to revisit standard findings and controversies, including some that were assumed to have been safely settled (Gunnar Karlsson 2007). At its core, Jóhann's framework encourages a retrospective search for cultural tensions, contrasts, variations, and novelty within the cultural epoch of the Icelandic commonwealth [*þjóðveldi*]. His framework casts suspicion on static interpretive models, norms, and structures as tools for understanding what was plainly a changing society, evolving over four centuries. It asks skeptically whether we can reduce that distant culture to its legal codes, social functions, systematic ideologies, historical data sets, narrative structures, religious doctrines, artistic symbols. Indeed, the new framework suggests that standard disciplinary categories may need to be recast as more fluid and dynamic. Alongside the fixed rule, one must also look for the exception, the deviation, and the underlying creative force that blurs the boundaries of academic specialties. Some interpretations of early Iceland are content to presume monolithic world views, mentalités, or closed value systems, and to enforce strict boundaries between historical and literary modes of understanding. Jóhann's framework questions these standard interpretive categories and boundaries. His civilizational perspective leads to a more subversive, iconoclastic spirit of inquiry, accompanied by the scent of risk and danger. When it comes down to what we really know about the Icelandic commonwealth, one is tempted to quote, with mild irony, the dictum that "all that is solid melts into air."

Dynamics of Political Expansion

Taking up Jóhann's challenge to think more experimentally, this paper describes some possible scholarly paths for civilizational theory. The paper focuses on an important theme suggested by Jóhann (Gunnar Karlsson 2007, abstracts), concerning the "mechanisms of political expansion" during the commonwealth period. Current historical scholarship provides a solid foundation for analyzing political structures in Iceland from the time of early settlement until the collapse of the commonwealth in 1262. Perhaps the most comprehensive treatment is Gunnar Karlsson's *Goðamenning* (2004), which Gunnar admirably summarized for the discussants at Skálholt. Based on careful analysis of historical data and legal texts, Gunnar has described a coherent system of political organization, one that famously lacked any true executive function. The most distinctive political role within this system was that of the *goði*, a leader of sometimes charismatic dimensions around whom public duties and power struggles seemed to revolve. Gunnar has reconstructed the complex system of *goðar*, testing the structural rules against what we know about historical realities across the space of several centuries. His work seeks to establish the date when the number of *goðar* became stable, and when presumably the system functioned something like the model described in *Grágás* and in at least some saga texts.

Gunnar's emphasis on formal structures leaves room for further questions, however, since political practices were manifestly changing over the course of four centuries. During the final century of the commonwealth, as we know from reading *Sturlunga*, Iceland experienced a series of civil struggles centered on family-dominated regions or domains (*ríki*). Gunnar outlines this subsequent structure in his book, cataloguing the seven *ríki* that were eventually whittled down to even smaller numbers, until the system imploded in 1262–64. By formulating these two distinct formal structures separated by time, Gunnar's work points to the very questions that hold special interest for civilizational theorists. These questions concern the dynamics of development, beginning with how and why the system of *goðar* underwent its particular shift. What forces guided the evolution and eclipse of the "*goðamenning*," and what propelled the consolidation (and then competition) of domains? Gunnar is fully aware that formal

political structures leave unsettled these key dynamic questions. He reminds us of the truism that political power has an inherent tendency toward consolidation, but acknowledges that such general assumptions fail to specify the particular mechanisms through which the competitive struggle played out across the commonwealth period, with its destructive outcome (Gunnar Karlsson 2004, 314). He is also properly skeptical about some conventional dynamic explanations, including imputed belief systems or ideologies attributed to Icelandic settlers (e.g. the desire to be free of Norwegian precedents, the desire to establish “democratic” associations) (Gunnar Karlsson 2009). And it is likewise problematic to personalize complex political trends by attributing historical agency to saga protagonists featured in the *Sturlunga* compilation. For the historian, these saga-mediated personalities explain both more and less than we would like to know. In short, even with the most prodigious historical research on political structures, we are left with an intriguing set of questions about underlying dynamic forces of development.

A similar set of questions arise from the work of historian Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, who posits a series of structural shifts in the political order during the commonwealth era (1999). In contrast to Gunnar’s analysis, Jón believes that an “unstable” *goðar* system probably never conformed in fact to the formal prescriptions found in *Grágás*. He outlines multiple stages in which political power could have evolved from early decentralized alliances, soon after settlement, to the consolidation of power in family domains, and ultimately to fatal competition. The evidence for this more fluid pattern remains speculative, and it requires bolder assumptions about how the historian might weave saga texts into the scholarly tapestry. And the civilizational theorist can still ask what particular forces drove these multiple structural shifts. Jón suggests a wider range of explanations for his structural shifts: population density, the consolidation of wealth within families, increasing scale of landholding, new ideologies of power imported from Norway, control over church properties. But historians everywhere face the common difficulty of showing how such broad causes can serve as “mechanisms” of development in concrete situations. The dynamic orientation of civilizational theory points to a new kind of approach, and in doing so pushes interpretation further in the direction of the sagas.

Like Gunnar, Jón is willing to supplement the historical record with

references to events described in sagas, and not just to those events contemporary with *Sturlunga*. He notes patterns of alliance-building found in tales of the *söguöld*, and he mentions numerous sagas in which law serves as a strategic tool for gaming the prevailing authority structure. By accepting the sagas as supplementary evidence for historical generalizations, Jón seeks some greater leverage for Icelandic historical studies. His approach is compatible with recent European historiography, which has accepted more porous boundaries between historical “fact” and narrative “fiction” (Iggers 1997, 144). But important questions remain about exactly how to unlock the cultural meaning that is presumed to reside within the sagas. Although Jón subscribes to a relatively dynamic view of history and politics, paradoxically, when it comes to sagas he assigns them a monolithic cultural outlook or world view. Despite his eagerness to explore the fluidity of political development, Jón treats the broader culture as frozen into a constant value system. He seems to need that normative stability (or “high degree of continuity”) in cultural values as a guarantee of fixed reference for the whole field of saga evidence—as a condition for bringing saga examples into his historical work (1999, 28).

At this point the civilizational theorist will push the dynamic impulse still farther. Why should we accept the postulate of a single, unified value system standing behind the society portrayed in the sagas? It seems more likely that cultural values themselves evolved over the period of four centuries, and may thus have been riven with internal tensions. In the same way that Gunnar allows a second formal model into his political scheme, Jón suggests that the Icelandic commonwealth may have held two successive coherent value schemes, identified respectively with the *söguöld* and with the final century of the *samtíðarsögur* (1999, 31). With this approach, Jón follows standard historical conventions, hoping to explain the evolution of political forms in terms of an implied normative consensus in the broader culture (and hence reflected in saga writing). But the civilizational perspective asks whether it is in fact necessary to assume that value structures meet this requirement of coherence and stability. Values may rather be dynamic and fluid—perhaps even the central engine for evolution within a particular culture. Is it possible to integrate saga evidence into historical studies without falling back on this static model of culture? If cultural meaning is integral to the expansion of institutional structures (Jóhann Páll

Árnason 2003, 202), a dynamic value system may reveal the key pressure points. We may require a different approach that admits value tensions and variations as part of the cultural texture of early Iceland.

Dynamic undercurrents (a brief interruption)

All attention turns therefore to values. But before shifting to that topic, let us step back and review the particular concerns that have emerged about “mechanisms of political expansion” during the commonwealth period, using the civilizational perspective. Here we confront a problem that haunts all historical scholarship, in that the *outcomes* of political dynamics over time are always more complex than the mere historical *conditions* from which they evolve. Even when we master the whole gamut of data about laws, norms, individual ambitions, local feuds and battles, church initiatives, and foreign interventions, the synergistic process of political development transforms these baseline data into qualitatively new results. These results are like the emergent properties of complex systems: they are path-dependent mutations of individual motives and social structures, where the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts. We confront a critical gap between “input data” (such as structural patterns and micro-motives of individual actors) and transformative “outputs,” (the resulting macro-effects that emerge over time, jointly produced out of complex behavioral and cultural environments). As I have proposed elsewhere, one way to bridge this gap is to apply techniques of “network analysis,” which mediates between historical/social data and transformative social outcomes (Gaskins 2005). Network analysis operates on the assumption that historical outcomes are always richer than the sum of all inputs. By augmenting the study of social structures and personal motives, networks look for dynamic forces in transactional patterns, firmly embedded in alliance-building activities that reveal how and why new structures develop. In the case of Icelandic political development, we can take this dynamic step only by integrating the textual resources of the sagas – with all the subtlety and difficulty entailed by crossing disciplinary boundaries. In taking this step, it is important to state clearly what we hope to learn from sagas, and how to go about the task – a project that leans heavily on the humanistic content of Iceland’s vast literary heritage.

A civilizational perspective helps push us across this narrow bridge between historical studies and literary interpretation, while encouraging frequent return trips in both directions (Jóhann Páll Árnason 2003, 5, 52, 217). If the mediating path crosses through the field of moral values, we need a more dynamic conception of how those values enter into the flow of history and saga narrative. Taking values as a cultural pivot, we may come to understand the transformative powers embedded in historical causes. By way of contrast, we know of two scholarly strategies that fail to perform this connection between sagas and standard history, both of which make the fatal assumption that the secret of development lies entirely within individual agency. One such strategy uses exchange models, rational actors, and efficiency concepts to intensify the strength imputed to individual actors in charting their own historical destiny. (Some of these approaches have been critically examined by Sverre Bagge, including the mantra that “nothing succeeds like success” [1991, 96].) Such methods invariably downplay the complex social environments in which individuals assert their presumed power. Stories from the *Sturlunga* compilation provide us with tempting portraits of just such powerful personalities, and it seems plausible enough that increasingly large political domains (*ríki*) allowed their powerful masters to become more “effective” or “efficient” in 12th-century Iceland. But unless one reads the sagas solely for the plot, this line of interpretation has serious limits. Whether powerful individuals earn success or defeat depends also on the horizons of possibility available to them under actual circumstances (possibilities alluded to in the subtle framing qualities of saga narrative). Even the strongest agents must take their chances in ambiguous action arenas, where limits are not fully specified, where outcomes are field-contingent, and where cultural ironies abound. In using saga evidence, we need to attend both to agents and to the more elusive cultural fields in which their actions play out.

A second flawed method for supplementing history projects back onto individual actors a set of intentions or ideologies that are presumed to be sufficiently powerful to produce historical change. For example, in order to rescue the agency of Icelanders at various stages of political development, it is tempting to assign them a prior belief system that devalues kingship. (It is also possible, according to Ármann Jakobsson [1997], to posit the opposite belief.) But such projections tend to reduce cultural

forces to static ideologies, rather than treating values and beliefs as part of an evolving cultural field. Gunnar Karlsson seems properly skeptical that implied belief systems of this sort can tell us very much about why history turns out the way it does (Gunnar Karlsson 2009). As conflicts unfolded in the thirteenth century on a very broad canvas, certain underlying forces favored actors with one or another set of strong beliefs. The beliefs alone can never explain the results. Unless the eventual outcomes of those heightened struggles are treated as simply inevitable, we need to identify the contingencies favoring their success. A civilizational approach pursues these matters into the field of values.

Evolving moral structures

Over the space of four centuries, a newly settled land passes through a succession of political forms, culminating in an expanding series of regional conflicts. The historical evidence, separated from us by nearly a thousand years, provides structural snapshots of that development, but the process itself must have been continuous, fluid, oblique, complex. Social scientists may look for supplementary theories to codify these hidden dynamics, anything from Marxism to rational choice; but the choice of such theories is itself a matter of scholarly taste, if not a leap of faith.

Historians like Gunnar and Jón Viðar bring saga texts into their analyses – although with considerable circumspection, in light of the traditional divide between historical and literary modes of interpretation. And yet the most distinctive quality of the Icelandic commonwealth must surely be its singular capacity for self-commentary in the sagas, which continued even as the political order ceded autonomy to the Norwegian crown. Such creative expression at the periphery of Europe, flourishing at the margins of kingly power and Christianizing forces, may point to dynamic undercurrents that elude traditional history. If civilizational theory hopes to gain from its experimental tour through early Iceland, its path must pass through the sagas.

The notion that sagas may reveal the deeper cultural fabric of commonwealth Iceland has its own history of caution and excess. In recent decades, scholars have sought detours around the old dichotomy of interpreting

sagas as either historical fact or literary fiction (Gísli Pálsson 1992). The most common route has been to treat sagas as repositories of cultural values contemporary with their time of composition. According to this approach, even if we reject their historical references as literal truth, the sagas remain undiminished as cultural artifacts, and thus as normative evidence of some kind. But this approach does not require us to regard the sagas as embracing a fixed scheme of values, any more than we accept timeless structures in historical or sociological studies. If Icelandic social history evolved over a period of four centuries, we would expect to find comparable movement at the level of norms, impelled by parallel forces. The pattern of evolution amid conflict should apply just as well to cultural values.

This dynamic perspective is often missing from social scientific studies of norms. Some anthropologists, for example, have tried to import the sagas into their professional domain as a type of alien “culture” ripe for antiquarian field studies. But their efforts have achieved mixed results. Anthropologists may overstate the coherence of value systems, in the same way that static models flourish in studies of Icelandic law, politics, and social structures. In their zeal to bring their discipline to bear on saga texts, social scientists have managed to distort the narrative complexities of saga writing (Gaskins 1997). They may also be captives of their own cultural assumptions, which oscillate between treating value systems as either consensus-based or conflict-based. Consensus theories led to the reductive arguments of structural/functionalism, while conflict theories impose a contrived disorder on the texture of moral life.

A promising approach to exploring values in Icelandic sagas and society has been presented by philosopher Vilhjálmur Árnason, starting with his seminal essay (1985). Reviewing past efforts to find moral content in the sagas, Vilhjálmur notes the tendency of interpreters to reduce the contents of saga texts to one or more moral ideologies. It is common enough, for example, for interpreters to find a finished set of Christian moral beliefs in various sagas, either replacing or in serious conflict with an opposing “pagan” moral system. Vilhjálmur questions whether we should read sagas as advocating (or contesting) such monolithic belief systems, especially when these systems have been defined centuries later by critics with their own cultural agendas. Following Hermann Pálson’s terminology, Vil-

hjálmur also explores (1985, 23) a contrast between “romantic” and “humanistic” interpretations of saga morality: the romantic mode focusing on the intrinsic qualities of singular individuals (notably the “heroic” individuals), and the humanistic mode (following Hermann himself) on the moral qualities of deeds in these action-packed tales. Both methods of moral interpretation present difficulties, according to Vilhjálmur. I think he would be especially dubious about reducing saga culture to a mere “clash of civilizations,” where distinct pagan and Christian ideologies are locked in single combat. To be sure, there is plenty of combat to be found in these pages; but the protagonists are best not confused with static, abstract belief systems.

Vilhjálmur explains why we should understand values in the sagas as complex and evolutionary – no less so than the political, legal, and social systems in which they are embedded. He warns against reducing moral actions to either abstract belief systems or mere sociological functions. To be sure, the sagas are deeply concerned with moral issues, and these issues cannot be isolated from the social structures in which they develop. But moral actions portrayed in the sagas occur within a specific horizon of social possibilities, the contours of which stand outside the control of moral choice. Moral actions and social structures are thus distinct but mutually interacting features of a common culture (Vilhjálmur Árnason 1991). The actions of saga characters acquire moral significance within the boundaries of social possibilities, which are often implied or tacitly invoked in the delicate balancing of saga narrative. Vilhjálmur calls for a different kind of moral reading from the romantic or humanistic scholars of earlier generations. His approach treats sagas as a mode of self-reflection on tensions between situational moral choices and the social or political order under which moral problems arise. One can say that morality is present in, but distinct from, a field of social possibilities – a condition Vilhjálmur appropriately compares to the Hegelian concept of *Sittlichkeit* (1991, 163). As this self-reflective culture passes through four centuries of development, we can assume that moral possibilities appear within a constantly changing horizon. And as sagas flourish during the final century of the commonwealth era, they scrutinize the virtues of prior centuries under the inevitable strain of an ever-present “law of unintended consequences.” Examples of how saga narratives convey this form of commentary can be

found in Vilhjálmur's contribution to this current symposium (here, 217–240).

Civilization as self-reflection: the importance of sagas

Early Iceland was a society in transition, filled with conflicting tensions and dynamic forces. But where was it all coming from, and where was it going? So far I have used the civilizational perspective as a methodological guide, but have withheld specific historical labels. Was the Icelandic commonwealth late pagan? Early Christian? Some combination of the two? These are very broad categories created retrospectively by modern scholars, and subject to styles of scholarly consensus. It is certainly possible to explicate sagas as a competition of world views, but it is more useful to look for qualities of self-reflection in the elusive forms of narrative practice (Sigurður Nordal 1942). If we want to find deeper undercurrents and subtle dynamics that have eluded both the social scientist and the moralist, we must pursue this conjunction of narration and representation (Vésteinn Ólason 1998, 191–205).

This direction seems entirely consistent with the aims of civilizational theorists. Sociologist S.N. Eisenstadt finds the core interest in civilizations in the specific reflective capacities of “transitional” societies (2006). For Eisenstadt the “civilizational turn” looks to the emergence of transcending ideas, symbols, utopias, technologies and alternative realities, held up against a background of prior stability. This notion of transcendence marks a culture that encompasses a plurality of standpoints, where mere realities are continually contrasted with alternative possibilities. According to Eisenstadt, societies where pluralistic conceptions are integral to the culture are dynamic in ways that contrast sharply with static empires, frozen in their monotonic cultural landscapes. The dynamic civilization displays epistemological complexities, generating fruitful and fractious tensions, while serving also as an engine of development for law, politics, morality, and cultural expression. (Long before Eisenstadt, the philosopher Hegel [1993–95] described civilizations as dynamic by virtue of such divided visions.) According to Eisenstadt, the notable civilizations of the “axial age” were the loci of profound theological insights, including the bifurcated vision of the early Christian culture with its dichotomous realms of God

and man. The emergence of a competing, transcendent order opens the way for revolutions, radical discoveries, new social institutions, but also constant strife. When the distance between dichotomous realms reaches into infinity, the most stringent battles are waged by the supreme authority assigned to that transcendent realm, as it casts perpetual suspicion on the mundane features of the temporal realm.

In summarizing Eisenstadt's general model, Jóhann emphasizes the connections between cognitive transcendence and the dynamics of political development:

The axial visions give rise to more ambitious and elaborate ways of legitimating more complex and expansive power structures...; the axial transformation broadens the cognitive horizon and therefore the strategic scope of power centres and elites, but the growing quantity and diversity of cognitive resources is at the same time an obstacle to the monopolization of power... (Jóhann Páll Árnason 2003, 47).

Questions about authority and legitimacy thus shift from the strategic realm of mundane competition and acquire a new horizon and potentially a new conceptual vocabulary, importing values from a newly accessible normative realm.

In applying this model to early Iceland, Jóhann seems to identify that new realm as already belonging to transcendent religion. For him, the turning point is the emergence of sacred kingship, often a pivotal transition for the civilizations of the axial age (2003, 42). And surely this emphasis on the sacred deserves to be developed further. But there is another possibility, if one regards this transitional period in Iceland from the vantage point of its own past, and especially from the perspective of "the only European people who remember their beginnings" (Sigurður Nordal 1942, 1). Saga writing presents us with a muted or inchoate form of transcendence – one that retains a distinctly human or pragmatic dimension, where the distance between realms falls short of the infinite distance found in Plato, St. Augustine, and other visionaries of the axial age. Elsewhere I have suggested that a work like *Heimskringla* offers a fundamentally secular vision of concepts that later periods would eventually label "legitimacy" and "authority," a vision that holds great interest for us because of its pre-con-

ceptual richness (Gaskins 1998). That elusive saga voice may resound strongly for a post-Enlightenment age like our own, where we struggle with paradoxes of political authority, but without the consolation of theological certainties. (For more on the secular perspective of diverse saga types and periods, see Vésteinn Ólason 1998, 49).

In this less canonical form of transcendence, the dynamic tensions of a transitional society are nonetheless on display. The heroic moral virtues of earlier days appear as socially problematic; the conciliatory spirit (seen as weak in an earlier context) may be superior in meeting new political demands for social peace. A cultural system based on kinship loyalties reveals its dysfunctions as the young society advances multiple generations past the time of first settlement. Alliances created outside the bonds of kinship open up new but yet unknown political possibilities—revealed in future disorder, as disparate layers of loyalty come into open conflict. Lawfulness can build up a new nation, as trust and friendship flower in a system of decentralized authority; but that same nation may soon be laid waste with lawlessness, amid the diffusion of authority and lack of a unifying center. The charismatic individuals who build large domains of power cannot ultimately sustain competition against comparably sized units, especially when power must learn to survive transitions across generations. Societies with kings may be understood to have strengths and weaknesses, and the very idea of a single highest form of authority (whether secular or sacred), must be carefully weighed in secular terms.

Precisely how does saga narrative address these puzzles and paradoxes? This is a question that cannot be adequately addressed in a conclusion; and there are obviously diverse types of sagas and poetry that may capture different sides of this emerging capacity for self-reflection. Along with multiple styles, one finds a comparable variety of rhetorical effects directed toward transcending notions. Vésteinn Ólason has provided a broad overview of these effects, showing how narrative displays of balance and judiciousness project their own sense of authority and reason (Vésteinn Ólason 1998, 59, 101). Elsewhere I have offered brief examples of how some standard conventions of saga writing may capture cultural undercurrents (Gaskins 2005). In the present essay my goal has been to connect this self-reflective activity to the special concerns of civilizational theory. For some Iceland scholars the civilizational approach may seem tangential, grandiose,

or both. But Jóhann and his colleagues have laid down an intriguing challenge, which holds great promise for future scholarly experimentation.

It is often said that “heroic societies” are static places where reflection has no place—where social structure and morality are one and the same, as in Eisenstadt’s definition of the stable empire (Vilhjálmur Árnason 1991, 164, citing Alasdair MacIntyre). Perhaps early Iceland can be seen as an exceptional case study: a heroic society in the process of emerging from that static condition, spreading out over four centuries, and recorded in singular fashion by a contemporary literature of self-reflection. As Sigurður Nordal pointed out long ago, the retrospective orientation of later sagas can be seen as an occasion for cultural renewal, as has been the pattern in other cultures (1942, Part III). In Icelandic prose and poetry, the distinctive quality of this reflection may reside in its restraint in embracing a stricter, theological form of transcendence, in favor of a more humanistic, immanent form (Vésteinn Ólason 1998, 137). This evolutionary phase may have lasted for a brilliant moment, before its visions of authority adapted more fully to the Christian dichotomy of sacred and temporal.

As suggested earlier, our own post-Enlightenment concerns with authority and legitimacy may find special resonance in the early Icelandic experience, if we see it as preoccupied less by theological imperatives than by humanistic interests in peace and honor. A recent study by intellectual historian Mark Lilla notes that most civilizations in history have been organized on the more extreme premises of “political theology,” which bases the correct order of society on transcendent revelation. Our own liberal culture, according to Lilla, has struggled to reconcile our continuing need for authority with the demise of its theological underpinnings, starting with Hobbes. We honor our liberation from sacred transcendence, but we yearn for stories and myths that reconcile us to the rigors of that freedom:

We are still like children when it comes to thinking about modern political life, whose experimental nature we prefer not to contemplate. Instead, we tell ourselves stories about how our big world came to be and why it is destined to persist. These are legends about the course of history, full of grand terms to describe the process supposedly at work—modernization, secularization, democratization, the ‘disenchantment of the world,’ ‘history as the

story of liberty,' and countless others. These are the fairy tales of our time. Whether they are recounted in epic mode by those satisfied with the present, or in tragic mode by those nostalgic for Eden, they serve the same function in our intellectual culture that tales of witches and wizards do in our children's imaginations: they make the world legible, they reassure us of its irrevocability, and they relieve us of responsibility for maintaining it (Lilla 2007, 6).

We may find it useful to contrast these modern legends to the sagas told by Icelanders, which serve as the prelude to the rise of "political theology," and not its postlude. A self-commentary on our own age draws us into such distant times and places, and civilizational theory should be especially grateful for its encounter with commonwealth Iceland.

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SUMMARY

The Icelandic þjóðveldi was a society in transition, filled with conflicting tensions and dynamic forces. The civilizational perspective advanced by Jóhann Páll Árnason and others provides a useful approach to understanding Icelandic cultural development over four centuries, including the development of political forms. That approach casts suspicion on static interpretive models, stable norms and ideologies, and fixed legal structures in favor of more dynamic analysis. It also prompts us to use creatively the rich materials contained in saga narratives, written near the end of this period. For it is here, in the self-reflection of a culture, that the fault-lines within ethical forms are revealed, along with the subtle mechanisms of legal and political development. Civilizational analysis overplays its hand by applying standard categories of paganism or sacred kingship to the Icelandic case. Rather the sagas display a more fundamentally secular vision of authority and legitimacy, imbued with a humanism and immanence that marks the cultural temper of the Icelandic þjóðveldi.

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