SOCIAL NORMS IN MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIA

Edited by
JAKUB MORAWIEC, ALEKSANDRA JOCHYMÉK, and GRZEGORZ BARTUSIK
SOCIAL NORMS IN MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIA
BEYOND MEDIEVAL EUROPE

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THE RICHNESS AND diversity of the preserved literary tradition, together with the spiritual and material culture of medieval Scandinavia, have encouraged scholars of various fields to engage in searching analytical enquiry into the histories of past societies of the North. At the same time its disparities and fragmentation leave many aspects without final answers. This is especially relevant in the case of normative behaviour and reasoning which are mainly preserved orally, performatively, or ritually, and rarely in a written or material shape, making their transmission dependent on ongoing cultivation. Since no state in the North now follows the laws of past societies, they would have been inaccessible to us if it were not for new research methods that allow us to get a glimpse of these lost worlds preserved fragmentarily on archaeological sites and in literature.

For centuries studies undertaken in the field of Old Norse–Icelandic culture have embraced many issues: developments in material culture, religious change, processes of power consolidation, to name only a few. While individual and singular historical events and figures have perhaps for too long been the main subject of historical inquiries, the immense corpora of preserved texts and objects can reveal the regularities and recurrences of everyday life of both social elites and ordinary people, embodied in a set of implicit norms that determined behaviour and common understandings of social coexistence.

History is built on the great battles and wars, but the past consists in large part of the everyday struggles of ordinary, very often anonymous, people. Values cultivated by them such as honour, prestige, loyalty, fidelity, manhood, authority, and duty, were even more important than prescriptive norms superimposed by wishful thinking elites and rulers, because their meaning, practice, and evaluation exceeded legal provisions and law codes, expressed instead in rituals, habits, customs, religion, literature, language, and social cognition, revealing those norms that were actually internalized and performed by the society. These implicit rules and laws ultimately motivated human actions and were crucial as much for the pursuit of personal ambitions and goals as for everyday survival. There are numerous instances in which Scandinavian literature of the Middle Ages can be used to reveal the core meaning of these ideas. It is a rich source of representations of characters both maintaining and obeying the norms, as well as transgressing and breaking them.

The Icelandic sagas, the Sagas of Icelanders (Íslendingasögur) in particular, constitute the main source of insight into the normative phenomena of morality, ethics, and legality. Thus, unsurprisingly, the vast majority of chapters of this volume deal with the Old Norse–Icelandic literary corpus and its classical subgenres, Íslendingasögur and konungasögur. Naturally, analyses of particular narratives of the sagas are undertaken here with methodological awareness of certain limitations of the sagas, when it comes to reconstructing the past society in a distant time. The origins of particular stories have
their beginnings in now lost oral tradition, whereas most of their literary incarnations are dated to the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries onwards, which were preserved mainly in the manuscripts from the late Middle Ages, (most of them from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries), and the early Modern Ages. Moreover, their stylistic flavour, often triggered by a will to provide entertainment rather than genuine historical accounts, and additionally motivated by certain needs and expectations of the potential audience concerning saga characters and their dealings, results in a literary approach to various behaviours and/or social norms rather than allowing us to decipher pure and unaffected insights into the “social reality” of Commonwealth Iceland.

Despite these limitations, the Old Norse–Icelandic literary corpus, with Íslendingasögur at its helm, remains both the exclusive and the most coherent source of our present-day knowledge of social development in the medieval North. Preserved, compiled, and finally written down by those with their own ancestors in mind, the corpus consists of stories that were told to invoke particular values and norms found to be relevant and reliable, in order to fulfill their main role: the preservation of local lore and tradition treated as the main instigator of self-identity of the whole community.

Literary depiction of social developments in the medieval North can be, to some extent, confronted and corroborated or disproved by the relics of material culture. Such work also requires methodological awareness, particularly when the work is interdisciplinary. Still, this exclusive insight into specific aspects of economy, culture and everyday habits of medieval Scandinavians allows one to supplement a picture of the society and its norms with important and intriguing elements.

The desire to explore these issues in greater depth stands behind the present volume. Articles collected in this book address varied and complex matters to do with the functioning of Scandinavian society, such as lawmaking, pre-Christian ritual practices, the symbolic importance of economy and artifacts, the status of the ruler, interpersonal relations (from enmity and conflict to friendship), social cognition, and literary reflection on environmental developments. Together they shed light on multifarious aspects of medieval Scandinavia via normative values and how they changed over time, with the Christianization and Europeanization of Scandinavia as important steps in the development of northern societies.

Several years ago a fruitful cooperation started between the Institute of History at the University of Silesia in Katowice and the Andrzej Kaube Museum in Wolin, which resulted in a cycle of conferences and other scholarly endeavours aimed at popularizing the history of Wolin, the Baltic zone, and Scandinavia in the Middle Ages. The success of the original initiatives inspired representatives of both institutions to introduce a series of cyclical, international, and interdisciplinary conferences known as the Jómsborg Conference.

The first such gathering took place in Wolin on April 20–22, 2017, dedicated to the topic of “Defining and Applying Social Norms in Medieval Scandinavia.” The conference brought together a group of scholars representing various international institutions and disciplines (history, archaeology, linguistics, literary studies, legal studies). The papers presented and the lively discussions that followed resulted in this collection of chapters, which seek to decipher social norms in medieval Scandinavia from a variety of
angles and their significance to everyday life. The editors and contributors believe that research on such a multifaceted and potentially elusive phenomenon calls for cooperation between diverse disciplines to conduct a cross-methodological investigation. The book therefore offers the audience a variety of methods, approaches, and, expectedly, results. The structure of the book proposes therefore a division into three thematical sections, preceded by introductory remarks on political developments on eleventh- to twelfth-century Iceland by Jón Vidar Sigurdsson (University of Oslo).

Part I: Pre-Christian Ritual Practices and Literary Discourses

The normative structure of a society is often expressed through its material culture. Certain social practices, trading and fashion among them, are reflected in material remains such as coins and clothing. Dariusz Adamczyk (German Historical Institute in Warsaw), in an article entitled “The Use of Silver by the Scandinavians of Truso and Wolin: The Logic of the Market or Social Prestige?,” uses silver finds from these ports-of-trade as his point of departure for discussing the varied roles of silver and different economic, social, and political contexts of its usage. Anita Sauckel (University of Iceland), in her article entitled “Silk, Settlements and Society in Íslendingasögur,” takes into account clothing and social norms at the thing-assemblies as depicted in Íslendingasögur, an occasion on which exclusive fabrics played an important role.

Social norms are implicit in the texture of certain literary works. The conventions a society follows in its forms of worship, mourning, and commemoration can be isolated from the text itself for close examination. Poetry, performed orally and ritually, resembles religious practices by mirroring its structures. Simon Nygaard (University of Aarhus), in an article entitled “Being Óðinn Bursson: The Creation of Social and Moral Obligation in Viking Age Warrior-Bands through the Ritualized, Oral Performance of Poetry: The Case of Grímnismál,” argues that pre-Christian Scandinavian rituals featured oral performances of Eddic poetry, that, like ljóðaháttr poems (e.g. Grímnismál) contained ritualized performatives, crucial to the formation and upholding of pre-Christian Scandinavian religions. Mourning practices were captured by a distinctive subgenre of skaldic poetry, the funerary ode. David Ashurst (University of Durham), in his article entitled “Elements of Satire and Social Commentary in Heathen Praise Poems and Commemorative Odes,” discusses the submerged and pervasive strains of satire and commentary on social norms in tenth-century funerary odes composed amid the intellectual turmoil of the late heathen period. The main focus is laid on Eiríksmál, Eyvindr skáldaspellir’s Hákonarmál and the group of Egill Skalla-Grímsson’s utterances (particularly Sonatorrek but reference is also made to Arinbjarnarkviða and Höfuðlausn).

The ideals embodied in the roles of friend, warrior, and king were among the most important of Old Norse–Icelandic society, as reflected in its tales of people succeeding or failing to live up to them. They are characterized by binary thinking such as the distinctions good versus bad friend / warrior / king; a mode of expression which is regularly encountered in the Icelandic sagas. In an article entitled “Friendship and Man’s Reputation: A Case of Odds þáttr Ófeigssonar,” Marta Rey-Radlińska (Jagiellonian
University) provides a case study based on one of the ðættir preserved in the Morkinskinna, the oldest collection of the kings’ sagas. The analysis focuses both on the motive of friendship in the story and the stylistic devices used to achieve an emotional effect—a deviation from objectivity in the narrative, and deployment of language that highlights negative emotions.

**Part II: Reception and Cultural Transfer**

Human behaviour is primarily influenced by cognitive processes, with metaphorical thinking at the core of human understanding of the world, influencing our experience of being in the world. Grzegorz Bartusik (University of Silesia in Katowice), in an article entitled “Cultural Transfer of Cognitive Structures of Fortune in the Latin and Old Icelandic Literatures and Languages: The Case of the Metaphor Fortune is a Wheel,” explores questions concerning influences of Latin culture on Old Norse–Icelandic language and literature and the potential influence of classical ideas on Old Norse–Icelandic ones. He looks for evidence of the transfer of social norms, in the form of cognitive metaphors, from continental Europe in the sagas of antiquity (Antikensagas) and the vernacular sagas.

With the increasing alphabetization introduced to Scandinavia by the Catholic Church and the development of written literature, Scandinavians adapted new literary modes of commemoration and cultivation of social memory through the medium of written language. The commemorative function of a saga is analyzed by Yoav Tirosh (University of Iceland), who, in “Dating, Authorship, and Generational Memory in Ljósvetninga saga: A Late Response to Barði Guðmundsson,” returns to the hypothesis that Þórr Þórvarðsson was the author of Ljósvetninga saga, and, interpreting it through the prism of the thirteenth-century society that generated the text, emphasizes its functional value as a form of cultural memory.

Łukasz Neubauer (Koszalin University of Technology), in “Quid Sigurthus cum Christo? An Examination of Sigurd’s Christian Potential in Medieval Scandinavia,” examines various features of Sigurd Fáfnisbani’s character that might have influenced the transformation of the legendary Germanic hero into the essentially St. George-like figure depicted by the anonymous late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century artist responsible for carvings on the portal doors of the Hylestad stave church.

The society depicted in sagas, with its norms, values, and behaviours, has attracted not only scholars but also people of widely defined culture and politics for centuries. It resulted, inevitably, with its idealization and rise of certain myths defining the Viking Age and the Middle Ages in the North as a golden era, free from evil and deceit of the contemporary world. Such attitude can be traced in numerous means of art (painting, literature) and political views that have been produced throughout recent centuries. Even if the picture it provided was biased, unreliable, and hence rejected by present-day scholarship, its popularity serves to inspire research questions aiming to find deeper and more coherent understanding of the phenomenon. Michael Irlenbusch-Reynard (University of Bonn), in his article “Jómsborg and the German Reception of Jómsvíkinga saga: Introducing Masterhood as a Social Norm,” examines the legend of the famous warrior band in the
context of the political and ideological conditions of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany. Various works of propaganda that used the saga as a crucial point of reference were responsible for an important transformation in the depiction of Jómsborg—from the residence of a romantic warrior community to the symbolic affirmation of a genuine Germanic socio-cultural institution, culminating in the suggestion of a normative epicentre for the whole North.

Part III: Outsiders and Transgressors

Sometimes, we are only able to distinguish a normative code when it is being transgressed. A norm is known by what it is not: a deviance, perversity, monstrosity, or rejection.

Alexander J. Wilson (University of Durham), in his article “The Unfamiliar Other: Distortions of Social Cognition Through Disguise in Two Íslendingasögur,” analyzes the way in which two narratives, Droplaugarsona saga and Fóstbrœðra saga, portray violent conflicts between different communities as expressions of the distortion of social cognition. This serves as a method of interpreting the way people constructed and deployed identity at various levels, both individually and within their communities, to structure perceptions of the world around them.

Keith Ruiter (University of Nottingham), in his article “A Deviant Word Hoard: A Preliminary Semantic Study of Non-Normative Terms in Early Medieval Scandinavia,” considers some of the particular lexical choices in early medieval Scandinavian texts in order to better understand the contemporary web of associations surrounding deviance and deviants. Utilizing philological, historical, literary, and legal methodologies, the article sets out to consider some words used to describe non-normative peoples and behaviours in three categories: terms relating to law, honour, and morality. Rebecca Merkelbach (University of Zurich), in an article entitled “Enchanting the Land: Monstrous Magic, Social Concerns, and the Natural World in the Íslendingasögur,” analyzes the way magic-users in Íslendingasögur are depicted as socially monstrous figures operating within and through the natural world to cause harm to society. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were a time of growing climatic variability, which must have caused significant anxiety to contemporary Icelanders, an anxiety that found its expression in the monstrous practitioners of magic. Aleksandra Jochymek (University of Silesia in Katowice), in “Social Margins in Karlamagnús saga: The Rejection of Poverty,” examines the two sides of medieval poverty in Scandinavian society, as expressed through the Historia Caroli Magni et Rotholandi and its northern counterpart, translated into a part of Karlamagnús saga.

In the Icelandic sagas there are several distinctive figures who put laws to the test by breaking them. Trouble-makers and outlaws hold a prominent place among them. In “Pótti mönnum ... hann myndi verða engi jafnáðarmaðr: The Narrator, the Trouble-Maker, and Public Opinion,” Joanne Shortt Butler (University of Cambridge) explores the ways in which public opinion is invoked by saga narrators through the frequently occurring figure of the jafnáðarmaðr (“inequitable person”), who is described as acting against the social norms of the society depicted in the sagas. Marion Poilveiz (University of Iceland), in “Discipline or Punish? Travels and Outlawry as Social Structures in Medieval
Iceland," discusses outlawry as a social structure from an inclusive perspective, arguing that many forms of outlawry did not function as outright exclusion, but were social structures made to respond in a didactic way to anti-social behaviours, with the goal of re-educating wrongdoers, or at least providing them with a fitting function to suit the dynamics of a given society.

The present volume could not have been completed without the contributions and support of particular individuals. We would like to express our deep gratitude towards Ryszard Banaszkiewicz, the head of the Andrzej Kaube Museum in Wolin; Christian Raffensperger, Erin T. Dailey, and Anna Henderson from ARC Humanities Press; Miriam Mayburd from the University of Iceland for her stylistic advice; and all participants of the First Jómsborg Conference.

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Introduction

THE GÓÐAR AND “CULTURAL POLITICS” OF THE YEARS CA. 1000–1150

Jón Viðar Sigurðsson

AS STATED IN the preface, the chapters in this volume address numerous and intricate questions regarding Old Norse culture; rituals, social ties, social norms, outlaws, lawmaking, and cognitive structures. The main sources for the discussion are the Icelandic family sagas, the kings’ sagas, as well as Eddic poetry, laws, and sagas such as Karlamagnús saga. The diversity of topics is the strength of the volume. This is possible due to the exceptional source situation that offers us almost endless opportunities of discussing different aspects of the Old Norse culture. This richness, from a population which was probably not larger than 50–60,000 during the High Middle Ages, is the main reason for the global interest in this culture. The scholarly debate over the last few decades has to a large extent focused on the High and Late Middle Ages. Little attention has been paid to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and the events which triggered the processes of the time. That will be the focus of this chapter, and particularly the roles played by the major churches, and Haukdælir and Oddaverjar, the two most important gðar families in the Free State Society (930–1262/64). The introduction of Christianity in the year 999/1000 will mark the beginning of the period in question, which will last until the foundation of the archbishopric in Nidaros in 1152/53.

Skálholt, Haukadalur, Oddi, and Hólar

Christianity became the official religion of Iceland in the year 999/1000. It was the control the gðar held over the Old Norse religion which made this possible. During the following years several foreign bishops arrived in the country, but nothing is known regarding their general impact. In Hungrvaka it is stated that Gizurr Teitsson of the Haukdælir family, who had supported the introduction of Christianity, took his son Íisleifr Gizurarson (1006–1080) to the nunnery Herford (Herfurða) in Westphalia, a renowned centre of learning. He returned ordained as a priest before 1030, and immediately, or soon thereafter, took over the gðord his father had controlled. The þáttir about Íisleifr

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1 Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, University of Oslo, email: j.v.sigurdsson@iakh.uio.no.
2 Íslendingabók, 18; jóns saga ins helga, 177.
3 Hungrvaka, 6; Jóns saga ins helga, 176–77.
5 Íisleifþ þáttir byskups, 335–36.
and Hungrvaka does not mention whether he had been learned in Latin before he travelled to Herford. The fact that he belonged to one of the most important families in the country, however, makes it likely that one, or several, of the foreign bishops had tutored him in the language. In the process of Christianization the first and most important step was to convert the godar, which then in the next stage would result in their friends and followers following suit.

In 1056, Ísleifr Gizurarson became the first bishop of Iceland.

And when chieftains and good men perceived that Ísleifr was far abler than other clerics who could then be obtained in this country, many sent him their sons to be educated and had them ordained priests. Two of them were later consecrated bishops: Kollr, who was in Vik in Norway, and Jóan at Hölar. Ísleifr had three sons, who all became able chieftains: Bishop Gizurr and the priest Teitr, father of Hallr, and Þorvaldr. Teitr was brought up by Hallr in Haukadalur, a man whom everyone described as the most generous layman in this country and the most eminent in good qualities. I also came to Hallr when I was seven years old, one year after Gellir Þorkelsson, my paternal grandfather and my foster-father, died; and I stayed there for fourteen years.

In the quotation above from Ari fróði Þorgílsson's Íslendingabók (the Book of Icelanders) written 1122–1133, it is mentioned that “many” householders sent Ísleifr “their sons to be educated.” Jóns saga ins helga confirms this and states that many “höfðingjar” (goðar) and respectable (“virðulegir”) men send their sons to Ísleifr to be fostered and educated (“fósturs ok til laerlingar”), and were subsequently ordained as priests. Many of them became “höfuðkennimenn” (major clerics), and two of them became bishops, Jón and Kollr. We have little information about the school in Skálholt, but it is likely that it became an important part of the bishopric’s activity, and it must have been kept on regular basis.

When Ísleifr died, his son Gizurr (1042–1118), also educated at Herford, replaced him as bishop in 1082. Kristni saga claims that when Gizurr was bishop, most of the

6 One of the missionaries, Þangbrandr; not only baptized members of the Haukdælir family, he also stayed with Gizurr inn hvíti in Skálholt (Íslendingabók, 21; Kristni saga, 19, 23–24; Kristniboð þangbrands, 137).

7 Íslendingabók, 20: “En es þat sá höfðingjar ok góðir menn, at Ísleifr vas miklu nýtri en aðrir kennimenn, þeir es á þvís laði næði, þá seldu hónum margir sønur sína til læringar ok létu vígja til prestu. Þeir urðu síðan vígjör tveir til byskupa, Kollr; es vas í Vík austur; ok Jóan at Höulum. Ísleifr átti þrjá sonu; þeir urðu allir höfðingjarnir nýtrir; Gizurr byskup ok Teitr prestur; Þorvalr, ak Hallr, ak Þorvaldr. Teitr fæddi Hallr í Haukadali, sá maðr es þat vas almælt, at miðastr væri ok ágæstr at gðóu á landi hér ðáðr manna. Ek kom ok til Háls sjau vetra gamall, vetri eptir þat, es Gellir Þorkelsson, Þóðurfóður minn ok fóstri, andaðís, ok vask þar fjórðán vetr.” All translations from Íslendingabók and Kristni saga are from Íslendingabók. Kristni saga. Cf. Jóns saga ins helga, 181–83.

8 Jóns saga ins helga, 181. Cf. Kristni saga, 39. The term hofjöngi was frequently used about goðar (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth, 49).

9 Jóns saga ins helga, 182.
influential men in the country were ordained as priests.\textsuperscript{10} The saga lists ten men, and out of them as many as seven were godar. The high educational level among the godar can also been seen in a register from about 1143, probably written by Ari fróði Þorgilsson,\textsuperscript{11} which mentions forty of the most significant priests in the country. As many as thirteen of the men listed were godar, and at the time there were only about twenty-seven godar in the country.\textsuperscript{12} In addition it is very likely that the other godar also were educated as clerics, without being ordained. In the power game it was usually the best son who took over the godar, not the oldest. If the godar did not have any sons, their power base evaporated.

Besides the school in Skálholt three other active schools in Iceland are known from this period and to ca. 1110: Haukadalur, Oddi, and Hólavöllur.\textsuperscript{13} It is not known when the school in Haukadalur, which was controlled by the Haukdælir, was established, but it was probably sometime around 1070.\textsuperscript{14} It has been argued that godi Hallr Teitsson (ca. 1085–1150) was the author of The First Grammatical Treatise,\textsuperscript{15} and godi Gizurr Hallsson (ca. 1125–1206) might have been the author of Veraldar saga.\textsuperscript{16} Gizurr is, as Ari and Sæmundr from the Oddaverja family, described as “fróðr maðr.”\textsuperscript{17} He was godi, lawspeaker and King Sigurðr munnr’s, King Sverrir’s father, stallari. Gizurr was wise (“vitr”) and eloquent (“málsjnállr”). He travelled often to the continent and was highly esteemed (“betr metinn”) in Rome for his skill and prowess (“mennt sinni ok framkvæmð”). He possessed extensive knowledge about “suðrlöndin” (Germany and France) and wrote a book called Flos peregrinationis (Travel Flowers), in Latin,\textsuperscript{18} which unfortunately has been lost. In the prologue to Hungrvaka Gizurr is mentioned as one of the sources.\textsuperscript{19}

The best-known pupil known to have been educated at the school in Haukadalur is without a doubt the godi Ari fróði Þorgilsson (1067–1148), who lived at Staðastaður at Ölduhryggur. He showed his Íslendingabók, written 1112–1133, for approval to the

\textsuperscript{10} Kristni saga, 42–43: "virðingamenn læðir ok vígðir og læðir til presta þó at hofðingjar væri, svá sem Hallr Teitsson í Haukadal ok Sæmundr inn fróði, Magnús Þórðarson í Reykjaholti, Símun Þórundarson í Bæi, Guðmundr sonr Brands í Hjarðarholti, Ari inn fróði, Ingimundr Þórarson á Hólum, ok Ketill Porsteinsson á Móðruvöllum [in Eyjafjörður], ok Ketill Guðmundarson, Jón prestr Þórarðarson ok margir aðrir þó at eigi sé ritaðir."

\textsuperscript{11} Diplomatarium Islandicum I: no. 29.


\textsuperscript{14} Hungrvaka, 22.

\textsuperscript{15} The First Grammatical Treatise, 203.

\textsuperscript{16} Jónas Kristjánsson, Eddas and Sagas, 132.

\textsuperscript{17} Kristni saga, 3.

\textsuperscript{18} Sturlunga saga, I:60.

\textsuperscript{19} Hungrvaka, 3.
bishops Þorlákr Runólfsson in Skálholt (1118–1133), Ketill Porsteinsson (1122–1145) in Hólar, and the godi Sæmundr Sigfússon fróði (the Learned, 1056–1133).\textsuperscript{20} Sæmundr, as well as Ari fróði and Kolskeggr vitri, contributed to the first version of \textit{Landnámaabók}.\textsuperscript{21} Sæmundr, along with his grandson godi Jón Loftsson (1124–1197), were two of the most renowned leaders of the Oddaverjar family. This family controlled the church at Oddi, which was to become another important centre of education. A school was established there around 1080 after Sæmundr returned from studying abroad in either France or Franconia. In addition to being mentioned as one of the authorities consulted by Ari Þorgilsson when he wrote \textit{Íslendingabók}, Sæmundr also played an important role when the tithe was introduced in the years 1096/97. He himself wrote a short work about the Norwegian kings in Latin. This is now lost, but was used as a source by later authors, including Snorri Sturluson.\textsuperscript{22} Snorri Sturluson, also a godi, is without a doubt Oddi’s most famous pupil.

For both the Haukdælir and the Oddaverjar the schools were not only important symbols showing off their social position, but they were also important pieces in the power game. By fostering future godar, the sons of the social elite, the godar in Haukadalur and Oddi were able to build up a network they could activate in case of disputes.

It is striking that schools are not associated with any other godar families. If we look at the political situation in Iceland around 1100, five families controlled almost half of the country: Ásbirningar in Skagafjörður, Austfirðingar and Svínfellingar in the Quarter of the Austfirðingar, and Oddaverjar and Haukdælir in the south. The reasons why, for example, the Ásbirningar did not found a school is an open question, which we will not address here.

Jón Ógmundarson, the first bishop of Hólar (1106–21) and a pupil of Bishop Ísleifr, travelled according to his saga widely around Europe, his goal being to observe the ways of good men and to advance his learning.\textsuperscript{23} Jón established a school at Hólar, and got Gíslr, a man from Sweden (or Gaut) to teach Latin, and Ríkina, a Frenchman, to teach music and poetry.\textsuperscript{24}

As only one monastery was established in Iceland before 1150, Þingeyrar in Hólar bishopric ca. 1130, the possibility of institutions such as this playing major roles in the process of establishing schools can be ruled out. In the beginning of the twelfth century,

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Íslendingabók}, 3.
\textsuperscript{23} Jóns saga ins helga, 184: “að sjá göðra manna siðu ok nám sitt at auka.”
\textsuperscript{24} Jóns saga ins helga, 217.
after the foundation of the bishopric at Hólar, there were thus four schools in the country, at Skálholt, Hólar, Haukadalur and Oddi.

**The Major Churches**

Bishop Gizurr shaped the future of the Icelandic Church. In 1096/97, in cooperation with the godi Sæmundr fróði Sigfússson and the lawspeaker Markús Skeggjason, he convinced the Althing to accept the tithe, and that “everyone should reckon up and value all their property and swear an oath that it was correctly valued, whether it was in land or in movable possessions, and pay a tithe on it afterwards.” Gizurr “also laid down as law that the episcopal see in Iceland should be at Skálholt, whereas before it had had no fixed location, and he endowed the see with the estate at Skálholt and many other forms of wealth both in land and in movable possessions.” Finally, he “gave more than a quarter of his diocese,” that is the Quarter of the Norðlendinga, to the foundation of the Hólar bishopric, established in 1106.

When the tithe was introduced in 1096/97 the number of churches in the country was significantly higher than the 330 churches which were chosen to become parish churches, a decision made by the bishops and the godar. Churches not becoming parish churches became half-churches (hálfkirkjur), quarter-churches (fjórdungskirkjur) and chapels (bænhús). In the parish churches mass was to be sung every Sunday and every day during Lent, the Christmas season, and on Ember days. In a half-church, as the name suggests,
only half of the normal number of masses was sung, while in quarter-churches only every fourth mass was sung, and in a chapel (bænhús) mass was sung only once every month.\footnote{29}

In Iceland there were two types of parish churches, bændakirkjur and staðir. If a church owned the entire farm it was established on it was staðr, and if it owned less it was called a farmer’s church or bændakirkja. The staðir parish churches were therefore usually wealthier than the bændakirkjur. Those who founded churches dedicated them to a saint (or several), and God, on the condition that they and their heirs should control the gift for all eternity. The gift was divided into four parts and given to the bishop, the priests at the parish churches, the maintenance of the parish church, and the poor. Those who owned or governed the churches, before the bishops gained control over the parish churches in 1297, had a great deal of freedom with controlling their incomes and fortunes. They received half of the tithes, the share belonging to the priest and the church, and could also control the funeral fees. In addition to this the administrators for example also kept the profits from the land tax of church-owned farms.\footnote{30}

For the godar and the social elite it was important to gain control over the new religion, and one way to do this was to build churches that were larger than those affordable to common householders. The thirty-three wealthiest churches in Iceland, which I have labelled as major churches, have, beside their wealth, two other important aspects in common: they employed three or more clerics, among the best educated in the country,\footnote{31} and many of them, like Haukadalu and Oddi, became centres of learning.

It is difficult to determine exactly when these major churches were founded. There are no sources that bear evidence to it, but there is reason to assume that most of them were established in the first half of the eleventh century, after the introduction of the tithe.\footnote{32} Out of the thirty-three major churches, over two-thirds can be associated with godar families, which tells us that almost all godar families built such churches. In the power game it became important for the godar to show their status through their churches, as well as their education.

Two of the major churches, Kirkjubæjar and Oddi, are described as hofuðstaðr, and in the case of Oddi, even as the hæsti hofuðstaðr.\footnote{33} This terminology may indicate a superior status in the Church hierarchy. However, it is difficult to prove that these churches, or indeed other major churches, has had any special tasks which other churches has not. On the other hand Kirkjubæjar and Oddi both had backgrounds which possibly make them

\footnote{29} Pormóður Sveinsson, “Bæjatalið í Auðunarmáldögum,” 26; Magnús Stefánsson, “Isländsk egenkirkevesen,” 236; Gunnar F. Guðmundsson, Íslenskt samfélag og Rómakirkja, 185–86.


\footnote{31} Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, “Høvdingene, storkirkene og den litterære aktiviteten på Island fram til ca. 1300,” 190–94.


\footnote{33} Kirkjubæjar (Pórlaks saga byskups yngri, 149), Oddi (Pórlaks saga byskups in elsta, 49; bórlaks saga byskups yngri, 145).
deserving of the title hofudstaðr. Oddi was without a doubt the country’s richest church in the second half of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and it was, as has been discussed above, one of the most important schools in the country. Kirkjubær was, if we are to believe Landnámabók, an important Christian religious centre from the time of the settlement.

It is difficult to look to Europe for models of the major churches. The most obvious parallels can be drawn to the so-called “minster churches” in England and the main churches (hovedkirker) in Norway. Minsters were founded by kings and served by several priests who were in charge of pastoral care in a large geographical area. They were also important as literary–administrative centres. However, it is difficult to argue in favour of these churches being used as models for the major churches in Iceland, since their heyday was over by the time the godar started to build their churches. In Norway the main churches were erected by the kings, and as they held a supreme position in the church hierarchy, we can rule out the possibility of the main churches there being an inspiration for the godar.

Map 1. Bishop seats and major churches in medieval Iceland (copyright Jón Viðar Sigurðsson).

34 For an overview of the discussion about minster churches, see: Blair, “Secular Minster Churches in Domesday Book,” 104–42; Blair, Minsters and Parish Churches; Blair and Sharpe, Pastoral Care before the Parish; Blair and Pyrah, Church Archaeology.
Where do we draw a line between Haukadalur and Oddi, and the other major churches, after the introduction of the tithe? It is problematic to distinguish one from the other. The main difference between them was probably that the “schools” in Haukadalur and Oddi received more “students” from other godar families than the other major churches, whose students were recruited more locally. Because the godar and the social elite in general got involved with the new religion as heavily as they did, and so many of them received clerical learning in addition to being trained as lawyers and skalds, the educational level in Iceland was high. A significant feature in Icelandic medieval society was that only a select few went abroad in order to receive an education. Sons, and daughters, of the social elite were usually educated at the major churches, and at the bishoprics.

The Lawspeakers

So far the focus has been on godar and bishops, but another group of men also played an important role in this process: the lawspeakers. The lawspeakers belonged to the social elite, with both strong family and friendship ties to the godar, and in some cases (although not in the period we are focusing on) the godar were also lawspeakers. In the period ca. 1050–1150 there were eleven lawspeakers, and in these years three important legal steps were taken: in 1096/97 the law of the tithe was accepted; in the winter of 1117/18 a part of the secular law was written down at Breiðabólstaður; and in the years 1122–1132 church laws were introduced. Probably all of these law codes were written in the vernacular, and the two latest ones most definitely. In the following paragraphs we will have a look at the lawspeakers in office when these three laws were made.

As mentioned above, the law of the tithe was introduced when Gizurr Ísleifsson was bishop, in cooperation with the godi Sæmundr Sigfússon and the lawspeaker Markús Skeggjason. We know that both Gizurr and Sæmundr were well educated, and it is probable that Markús, in addition to his in-depth knowledge of Icelandic law, was educated as a cleric, though he was not ordained to be a priest. Little is known about the lawspeakers’ education. They, obviously, must have been thoroughly learned in the laws, and it is likely that most of them also received a clerical education. In Kristni saga it is stated that Markús had been “the wisest of Iceland’s lawspeakers apart from Skapti [Póroddsson]”. Markús is the only lawspeaker listed in Skáldatal, and in Hungryaka

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35 Gellir Bölverksson (1054–1062); Gunnar hinnspaki Þorgrímsson (1063–1065); Kolbeinn Flosason (1066–1071); Gellir Bölverksson (1072–1074); Gunnar hinnspaki Þorgrímsson (1075); Sighvatr Surtsson (1076–1083); Markús Skeggjason (1084–1107); Úlfhéðinn Gunnarsson (1108–1116); Bergþórr Hrafnsson (1117–1122); Guðmundr Þorgeirsson (1123–1134); Hrafn Úlfhéðinsson (1135–1138); Finnr Hallsson (1139–1145); Gunnar Úlfhéðinsson (1146–1155).

36 Íslendingabók, 22.


38 Kristni saga, 40, “vitrastr verit lǫgmanna á Íslandi annarr en Skapti [Þóroddsson]” Cfr. Íslendingabók, 22.

39 Edda Snorra Sturlusonar.
he is described as “a very wise man and skald.”40 That Hungrvaka characterizes him as skáld underlines that his social position was associated not only with his role as a lawspeaker. 

Fyrsta málfræðirgerðin (The First Grammatical Treatise) claims that: “The skalds are the authorities in all [matters touching the art of] writing or the distinctions [made in] discourse, just as craftsmen [are in their craft] or lawmen [lógmenn] in the laws.”41 The distinctions often made between “saga authors,” skalds, legal specialists (either lógmenn and lawspeakers), clerics, and godi are misleading since most of skalds and “saga authors” we know of from this period belonged to many of these categories, Sæmundr fróði being an example of this. This can also clearly been seen in the term guðspjallaskáld,42 a word used to describe the four evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Being a skald meant that one had to travel abroad to meet kings, and in Markús’s case Íngi Steinkelsson of Sweden (d. 1105), the Danish kings Knútr helgi (d. 1086), and Eiríkr Sveinsson (d. 1103).43 It is likely that it was on his journeys abroad that Markús learned about the tithe system. When brought back home it was, as previously stated, probable that the laws were written in the vernacular, since they would probably not have been accepted at the Althing otherwise. For the Icelandic Church it was important to create a secure economic foundation, and the introduction of the tithe was a precondition for that. It was therefore vital that these laws were made in the vernacular, in close cooperation with the lawspeaker, and the godar.

In 1117 it was decided at the Althing that the laws should be written down, and Ari fróði narrates in Íslendingabók that this was done

in a book at the home of Hafiði Másson [Breiðabólstaður, a major church] the following winter, at the dictation and with the guidance of Hafiði and Bergþórr, as well as of other wise men appointed for this task. They were to make new provisions in the law in all cases where these seemed to them better than the old laws. These were to be proclaimed the next summer in the Law Council, and all those were to be kept which a majority of people did not oppose. And it happened as a result that the Treatment of Homicide Law and many other things in the laws were then written down and proclaimed in the Law Council by clerics the next summer. And everyone was very pleased with this, and no one opposed it.44

Hafiði Másson was one of the most powerful godi in the country. Lawspeaker Bergþórr Hrafnsson was the grandson of the lawspeaker Gunnar Þorgrímsson spaki, and nephew to

40 Hungrvaka, 17: “inn mesti spekingr ok skáld.”
42 Íslensk hómillubók, 81, 231, 258, 262, 266.
43 Edda Snorra Sturlusonar.
the lawspeaker Úlfhéðinn Gunnarsson. We know nothing about Bergbórr’s education, but to be able to take on this task he had to be able to read and probably also write.

Kristinnalaga þáttur (Christian Law Section) was made in the period 1122–1123, at which time Guðmundr Þorgeirsson was lawspeaker. Nothing is known about him, and even though the country’s two bishops, with the aid of an archbishop, made the laws, it is unlikely that Guðmundr and the goðar had not been involved in the process. The assembly men at the Althing had to accept the laws in the end, and for this reason it is unthinkable that Guðmundr Þorgeirsson was not able to read. This would also have been the case with all of the lawspeakers in the period ca. 1060–1150.

The situation regarding literary activity in Iceland around 1150 is well known. This is because of a statement in Fyrsta málfræðiritgerðin that lists up, at the time it was made, “laws and genealogies, or interpretations of sacred writings, or also that sagacious (historical) lore that Ari Þorgilsson has recorded in books with such reasonable understanding.” This proves that around 1150 Icelanders were writing extensively in the vernacular, and it was the goðar, under the initiative of the Haukdaðir and the Oddaverjar, who, together with the bishops, were the driving forces behind this process.

In his prologue to Heimskringla Snorri Sturluson claims that Ari was the first Icelander to write in the vernacular (“at norrœnu máli”). This statement and the prologue have been debated extensively, and we will not be engaged in that discussion at this time, and can only conclude that Snorri is not referring to the laws.

Vernacular

One central feature of social development in the Middle Ages is the transition from oral to written communication. It was the Church which provided contact between Iceland and the literary communities in Western Europe. Writing in the vernacular started around 1100 in Iceland, and it soon became the dominant writing form, superseding Latin. It is complicated to explain why the vernacular became so important in Iceland. It has been argued that this may have been due to Benedictine influence. However, as we have seen, the first and only monastic house was established ca. 1130 at Þingeyrar, years after Icelanders started to write in the vernacular. As mentioned above, the focus was strongly on writing down the laws, in the vernacular, and when the problem of adapting

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45 Hungrvara, 23–24.
47 The First Grammatical Treatise, 209: “bæði lög ok á áttvísí eða þyðingar helgar eða sva þav hín spaklegv fraðið er ari þorgilsson hefir a þókr sett af skynsamlgv viti.”
48 Heimskringla, 5.
the Latin alphabet to fit *ðønsk tunga* had been solved, the next steps were easy. It is likely that these steps were taken among the learned Icelandic social elite, bishops, *goðar*, lawspeakers, lawmen, and the most educated priests. What is also significant is the Icelandic dominance regarding leading positions in the church: until 1238 all bishops in Iceland were Icelanders, whereas in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark most of the bishops were foreigners up to the middle of the twelfth century.⁵¹

The cult of saints was an important aspect of the new religion, and there can be little doubt that this had a significant impact on society.⁵² A clear testimony to this is found in *Íslendingabók*. Here Ari *froði* claims that Iceland was settled in the year Edmund the Holy was killed, as is written in the “saga” dedicated to him. It is uncertain whether this saga was *Passio Sancti Eadmundi* from around 1000 or *De miraculis Sancti Eadmundi* from approximately 1100.⁵³ Either way, the legend about the Holy Edmund was known in Iceland at the beginning of the twelfth century. Other evidence is clearly found in *Fyrsta málfræðirgerðin*, which lists “Þýðingar helgar” (sacred writings) as one of the genres which existed in Iceland around 1250.⁵⁴ “Þýðingar helgar” could be used about *vitas*, sagas about holy men and women. In the survey *The Saints in Iceland. Their Veneration from the Conversion to 1400* Margaret Cormack mentions approximately seventy-five saints used as patron saints of churches in Iceland.⁵⁵ Of these, only seven do not have a saga in Old Norse. A number of Icelandic medieval manuscripts have been lost, and it is therefore not unlikely that all the patron saints had their legends translated. Every single parish church probably owned a saga about its patron saint,⁵⁶ maybe in the vernacular.

It is hard to explain why the *goðar*, in contrast to lords abroad, were so keen on the new Christian book culture. It could probably be associated with the possibility of learning, books etc. being used as a means of creating social differences. In other words, there was a political motif behind the interest. An important difference between the political game in Iceland and in Europe was that the society in Iceland was more peaceful. This can easily be seen in the adjectives the sagas use in their descriptions of the *goðar*: skills regarding weaponry were only used regarding one or two of them, and instead their most important personal abilities were generosity and wisdom.⁵⁷ The peace in Iceland is clearly demonstrated through the period between ca. 1030 and 1118 has been called *fríðaröld* (the age of peace) by scholars.⁵⁸ This view stems from the scarcity of sources from the period and from an account in *Kristni saga* which states that when Gizurr Ísleifsson was bishop (1082–1118), he looked after the country so well that

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⁵² Grønlie, *The Saint and the Saga Hero*.
⁵³ *Íslendingabók*, xxii–xxiii.
⁵⁴ *The First Grammatical Treatise*, 209.
⁵⁵ Cormack, *The Saints in Iceland*.
“no major disputes arose among the godar, and the practice of carrying arms was to a large degree abandoned.”\(^{59}\) Even though this is an exaggeration,\(^ {60}\) no major disputes are known from this period.

It was the godar who made the first steps into the new Christian world, a world they could use in order to advance their own social superiority. The schools at Skálholt, Haukadalur and Oddi played a significant role in the second half of the eleventh century, and after the introduction of the tithe other chieftains followed suit. Another crucial driving force in the literary process was the major churches, which became centres of learning under the control of the godar. Learning and “saga writing” became important aspects of the culture of the social elite, and also gradually developed into a national popular culture. There is a strong continuity of this culture through to the present time, the main reason for this being that the literary works were written in the vernacular language, which hardly changed since the first settlers came to Iceland around 870.

References

**Primary Sources**


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\(^{59}\) *Kristni saga*, 42: “at þá urðu engars með hófðingjum, en vápnaburð lagðisk mjók níðr.”


Secondary Literature


