

3 Constructing continuity: The Saga Age and the Sturlung Age

The Saga Age, which started with the settlement of Iceland and drew to an end a few decades after the conversion, was the time when the Icelandic social system with its chieftaincies, law, and assemblies was established and developed. Both the settlement and the conversion, as well as various important aspects of the social system, receive much attention in the sagas of Icelanders alongside their individual stories. Here it will be argued that the contemporary sagas are similarly focused on the key social mechanisms and the dynamics of power, depicting the transformation that they underwent before and during the Sturlung Age.

Between the settlement and the thirteenth century, medieval Icelandic society went through a complex process of social and political development, the main aspect of which was a gradual concentration of power. This was a consequence of the internal dynamics of the social system. Public authority was represented by a local hierarchy, which was flexible and changeable due to its situational and personal, rather than institutional character. The foundations of a chieftain's power were inherently fragile because they depended on the support he received from his followers, which again depended on his success in fulfilling his obligations to them: protection from violence, and, most importantly, resolution of conflicts. A chieftain's failure to fulfil these duties would thus lead to a loss of prestige and power, while popularity had a self-reinforcing effect (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 120–123, 149–150). This inherent instability of the system contributed to a gradual concentration of power in the hands of the most capable chieftains.

Another important factor in power concentration was the influence of the Church. The ecclesiastical and secular sphere were interconnected until the late twelfth century, so the Christian institutions affected the social structures and power strategies by providing new models of authority (Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 3–5; Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 19–30, 78–79). Early church building in Iceland was an initiative of the chieftains, who donated parts of their property to their church farms (*staðir*), which then consolidated the chieftain's authority in the area by tying it to a culturally important place. Power relations were thus gradually transformed from personal adherence to territorial authority (Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 112–115, 238–240; Sverrir Jakobsson 2012, 112). The wealthiest *staðir*, owned by influential families, became centres of power (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 102–115). Power concentration was then further intensified by the separation of secular and ecclesiastical power in the late twelfth century. When some chieftains' sons

chose a clerical career and gave up their secular power, other chieftains could easily receive or inherit a larger share of influence (Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 145–146).

This means that power concentration was a natural process, rooted in the internal structure of medieval Icelandic society (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 205–209). As such, it should not be perceived as a disruption caused by abrupt transformations, but rather as a gradual development that involved elements of both change and continuity. Since the political structure was variable from the beginning, the process went on throughout the Free State period (Byock 1985; Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 7). It can be divided into three overlapping phases: the creation of the structure of chieftaincies (*goðorð*) before 1050; the development of territorial power in the form of domains (*héraðsríki*) in 1050–1220; and the competition for power in the domains from 1220 (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 82–83).

As there was a different degree of social complexity in different regions of Iceland, the development was faster in the regions where the chieftaincies were in the hands of dominant families early on – the Haukdælir and the Oddaverjar in the Southern Quarter, the Ásbirningar in Skagafjörð, the Svínfellingar and the Austfirðingar in the Eastern Quarter. The development was slowest in Borgarfjörð and the Westfjords, regions with scattered settlements and a lack of dominant families until around 1200 (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 67–68; Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 240–245). This geographical variability also indicates that power concentration should not be regarded as an abrupt transformation. Moreover, effective hierarchical administration or executive power were never established during the Free State period, and the inhabitants never abandoned their farmsteads to resettle in larger, more defensible communities, despite the increased violence of the Sturlung Age – so that both social structures and settlement patterns were characterized by continuity (Byock 1986, 28–36).

In the light of these recent perceptions of the contemporary sagas' historical background, it is necessary to revise the interpretation of the sagas' narrative images of history as well. The temporary destabilization that inevitably accompanied the social transformation was traditionally considered a sign of a moral downfall and a social disintegration (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1940, 1–5), and this view has continued to shape research until recent times. Úlfar Bragason (1991b, 316–321; 2000, 481–482; 2010, 228–240), Stephen Tranter (1987, 2–3, 224), and Lois Bragg (1994) argue that *Sturlunga saga* expresses dissatisfaction with the social situation at the time of its origin and portrays a decline from a golden age after the settlement to the miserable present, characterized by a disruption of the social system. Bragg argues that the text presents an “unrelievedly dark and disfigured reality” (1994, 19). Úlfar Bragason states that the compilation’s “image of

history is tragic”³⁵ and that “it creates an apocalyptic image of how the magnates’ immoderation in their greed for wealth and power leads to the only possible solution being the acceptance of the Norwegian king’s rule”³⁶. The purpose of the compilation would then have been to reveal and explain the causes of the moral decline and social breakdown (2010, 240).

Similarly, Tranter analyses the compiler’s work with the introductory sagas in the compilation and argues that their central theme is the gradual intensification of conflicts and the decreasing possibility of full reconciliation, which in his opinion mark an absence of moral values (1987, 52–54). He therefore states that the compilation presents the Sturlung Age and the preceding decades as a period of a social disintegration (1987, 127–128). As an explanation for why such a narrative was constructed, he suggests that *Sturlunga saga* was composed as a response to the allegedly increasingly threatening political situation after 1300, which in his opinion was characterized by a renewed decline after a period of optimism in the late thirteenth century. He believes that the message of *Sturlunga saga* was a warning to contemporary Icelanders against a repetition of the horrors of the Sturlung Age, which the compiler may have perceived as an imminent danger around the turn of the fourteenth century (1987, 226–235).

Helgi Þorláksson argues against this view by showing that by 1300, fights and physical violence had been effectively reduced by the new legislation, so war was hardly an imminent threat (2012, 67–68). Furthermore, the view of *Sturlunga saga*, or *Íslendinga saga* specifically, as an image of a decline has been challenged as well. While Guðrún Nordal (1998) agrees that brutal violence is criticized in *Íslendinga saga*, she argues that the narrative does not portray a deterioration of morality but reflects a complex set of moral values. Since the social dynamics became more complicated during the Sturlung Age – as the Church demanded political autonomy and chieftains swore allegiance to the king, while loyalty to kinsmen and allies continued to be binding –, contradictory obligations could cause moral dilemmas (1998, 19–29, 227). However, with a few exceptions, kinship ties remained surprisingly strong under such circumstances (1998, 28–29, 42–44, 220).

Similarly, Ármann Jakobsson (1994a) agrees that *Íslendinga saga* condemns violence by always criticizing the aggressors and praising the defenders in fight scenes (1994a, 44–75; see also Gunnar Karlsson 1988, 217–220; Guðrún Nordal 1998, 199–200). Nevertheless, he shows that instead of portraying the Sturlung Age as a time of an overall moral downfall, the saga criticizes individual aggres-

35 [...] sögusýn hennar er tragísk (2010, 266).

36 [...] þar er dregin upp spámannleg mynd af því hvernig hófleysi valdamanna í sókn til auðs ok valda leiðir til þess að eina lausnin er að játast undir Noregskonung (2010, 267).

sors, while emphasizing the positive values, such as fearlessness in protecting others or in striving for peace (1994a, 76–78). He argues that the saga praises the new political system after the acceptance of royal rule because it secures peace (1994a, 44).

In the present study I will attempt to expand this re-evaluation of the contemporary sagas. Firstly, I will analyse all the extant texts, not just *Íslendinga saga*, and I will pay attention to the structural patterns that shape the meaning of the sagas, instead of studying individual scenes. Secondly, I will attempt to reach a deeper understanding of the connections between the sagas' comments on moral issues and their function as identity-building narratives. The aim is to reassess the fourteenth-century Icelanders' perception of their recent past, with a focus on how they integrated recent events into the image of history from which they derived their collective identity. That can only be achieved by studying the contemporary sagas in the context of the broader saga corpus, especially the sagas of Icelanders, which played a key role in shaping medieval Icelandic identity (see Mundal 2010, 465–466).

It will be argued here that both the sagas of Icelanders and the contemporary sagas, just like the early historiographical texts that were discussed in the preceding chapter, construct an image of the continuity of Iceland's history. On the surface level, this continuity is accentuated in the sagas by specific narrative elements, such as placenames and genealogies. Placenames derived from past events or persons inscribe traces of the past in the landscape (Glauser 2000, 208–209; 2007, 20); genealogies link the present generation to its ancestors (2000, 210). These narrative elements could thus reinforce the original recipients' identity by connecting their environment and descent with memorable events from the past. On a deeper literary level, the image of continuity is emphasized by the use of the same structural patterns in the sagas of Icelanders and the contemporary sagas. Since both types of sagas were composed roughly simultaneously, the structural similarities were probably a conscious choice, intended to foreground the elements of the stories that were socially relevant at the time of the sagas' origin.

On a thematic level, the sagas of Iceland's distant and recent past are connected by their shared emphasis on the same social concerns and values, albeit in different historical situations. It can be assumed that this memory of continuity was to some extent deliberately constructed, as current concerns were projected onto the accounts of the distant past. The sagas of Icelanders were for the most part composed during or after the Sturlung Age, when people could perceive them as "a space within which it was possible to deal with aspects that preoccupied them in their present situations" (Hermann 2017, 40). This thematic connection between the narratives of the Saga Age and their present could serve several purposes. Firstly, the sagas could have a "legitimizing effect", as they could justify

the leaders' privilege, which was crucial in the power struggles of the Sturlung Age (Jørgensen 2010, 21). Secondly, the sagas of the distant past, characterized by a "strong honour code and sense of order", could serve as a narrative commentary on moral issues that had become a pressing concern in the tumultuous period of internal clashes, so "the past was constructed in a way to work as a model for the present" (2010, 29–30). Thirdly, this image of the Saga Age as "a period of legal and social integrity" (Hastrup 1984, 249) could serve a deeper purpose in the construction of collective identity as well because it accentuated the positive values with which Icelandic society could identify.

This should not, however, be understood as a narrative portrayal of a contrast between the Saga Age as an idealized past and the Sturlung Age as a period of downfall. It will be argued here that the contemporary sagas, like the accounts of older Icelandic history, create a balanced image of the past. They avoid excessive idealization and admit the inevitability of violent conflicts in a decentralized society, but they also emphasize the significance of the stabilizing forces. They foreground the social mechanisms that enable the termination of conflicts by agreement or arbitration, as well as the social leaders who actively reduce violence and restore peace. These thematic emphases are central to the narrative types that predominate in the sagas describing internal Icelandic relations, the *conflict story* and the *peaceful chieftain's story*. As has been shown in the preceding chapter, the importance of the internal mechanisms that uphold social cohesion was accentuated already in the early historiographical texts, especially in *Íslendingabók*. Through the emphases of the predominant narrative types, this theme is further developed in the sagas of Icelanders and the contemporary sagas.

3.1 The conflict story

3.1.1 The narrative type of the conflict story

As has been pointed out above, conflict and its resolution were some of the central concerns in medieval Icelandic society. Conflicts were inevitable and could not be prevented by internal social mechanisms, but they actually contributed to increasing cohesion in a society with little developed central power, because the constant possibility of violence motivated everyone to maintain alliances across kin groups and to rely on a powerful local leader (see 1.2.1). Thus, the primary function of the stabilizing mechanisms was not to completely eradicate conflicts, but rather to regulate violence and restore peace.

In the context of this historical situation, it is understandable that contradictory moral codes coexisted in medieval Iceland – not primarily due to its transitional position between heathen and Christian ethics, as has often been suggested in research, but rather because of the nature of the social system itself (Vilhjálmur Árnason 1991, 157–165). On the one hand, individuals were obliged to protect their kin or allies, even with weapons if necessary – not so much due to any abstract ideas of heroism, but rather because the loyalty and courage of one's kin and allies were the only thing one could rely on in situations where life and death were at stake. On the other hand, moderation and advocacy were necessary for securing a workable order in a society without centralized law enforcement (1991, 171–172).

These social concerns, which were relevant both to the Saga Age and to the time when most sagas were written, are a major theme of the most frequent narrative type in saga literature – the conflict story. This narrative type is shaped by a structural pattern centred around a conflict and its resolution, which is to say, a disruption and subsequent renewal of social harmony. Theodore Andersson (1967, 4–29) defines six stages of the plot: (1) an introduction of the protagonists, (2) a development of a conflict, (3) the violent culmination of the conflict, (4) a revenge, (5) a reconciliation, and (6) an aftermath.

Andersson's study shows how the recognition of this structural pattern can help us make sense of sagas that otherwise seem to be “diffuse, overcrowded with persons and details” (1967, 5). Nevertheless, the main drawback of Andersson's approach is that he does not pay enough attention to the meaning of the sagas' structure. Although he accentuates the renewal of social balance through the revenge and the subsequent reconciliation (1967, 23) and shows the importance of arbitrators for successful conflict resolution (1967, 25–26), he only discusses the literary function of these elements, neglecting their contribution to the construction of social commentary. He even states that “there is no guiding principle laid down by the author in order to give his material a specific import”, so that “in this sense the saga is not interpretable” (1967, 32). Such a view hinders a deeper understanding of the sagas that could be reached with the help of structural analysis. In a later study, however, Andersson revises his view and argues that the sagas' theme is the importance of moderation and reconciliation (Andersson 1970).

This idea is then further developed by Jesse Byock (1982), who points out that the sagas “have often been characterized as a literature of conflict” but “are as much, if not more, a literature of resolution” (1982, x). Byock criticizes Andersson's structural analysis (1982, 49–58) and focuses on the structure of the conflicts described in the sagas, rather than on the literary structure of saga narrative. He divides individual episodes into segments representing small units of action – con-

flict, advocacy, and resolution –, which can be linked into longer chains in a variety of ways. This approach is not unproblematic either, mainly because it neglects the question of how the story is told and what elements are emphasized by the narrator (Lönnroth 2007, 70). Nevertheless, the essential contribution of Byock's study is that it emphasizes the significance of mediation for the resolution of conflicts in the sagas.

The present study combines and revises the approaches employed in previous research. I work with the six-stage structural pattern defined by Andersson, which has been shown to be shared by both the sagas of Icelanders and the contemporary sagas (Úlfar Bragason 1981, 164–170; 1986a, 56–63; 2010, 82–87), but not to always shape whole sagas from beginning to end (Lönnroth 1976, 68–82; Úlfar Bragason 1986a, 60–68; 2010, 89–91). However, instead of mechanically fitting the sagas' plots into a structural scheme, I pay attention to how the pattern can be modified in individual sagas. Typically, peace is renewed only after serious bloodshed, usually the killing of at least one of the main characters (Andersson 1967, 17). Nevertheless, some contemporary sagas depict events to which this does not apply, and yet they are structured as conflict stories. This is not regarded here as an arbitrary irregularity, but rather as a deliberately employed narrative device.

Even more importantly, I attempt to show that the pattern of the narrative type does not just shape the plot on the literary level but systematically foregrounds certain elements of the story that accentuate the significance of the cohesive forces in society. The main device employed in the conflict story for this purpose is a set of techniques, such as narrative perspective, contrast, or direct speech, which emphasize the mediation that accompanies the reconciliation. The details can vary from saga to saga. In some cases, the negotiation that terminates a conflict is initiated by one of the opponents or encouraged by 'the people' or 'good-willed men' as a collective unit. Often, however, the reconciliation is negotiated by a mediator – a specific, named person who stands outside of the conflict but intervenes in it and contributes to terminating violence. The mediator is not the main protagonist of the story, but he is deemed *memorable* because he is crucial for the meaning of the narrative. This character type embodies the stabilizing forces and illustrates the moral importance of peace through his action or expresses it in direct speech. The ideas thus receive directed attention, instead of being just inherently implied by the structural pattern.

An example from the sagas of Icelanders is the action of Snorri goði Þorgríms-son in the final part of *Laxdæla saga*. In this saga, the central conflict between Kjartan Óláfsson and Bolli Þorleiksson culminates with Bolli killing Kjartan. In revenge, Bolli is slain by Kjartan's brothers and a man named Helgi. At this point, Snorri offers to negotiate a reconciliation, but Bolli's widow Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir rejects it, clearly preferring the prospect of vengeance. Years later, Guðrún incites her

sons to kill Helgi, which they do, and they intend to attack Kjartan's brothers as well. However, Snorri persuades them to agree to a reconciliation instead, and he negotiates the conditions. Both parties accept his suggestions out of respect for him, compensation is paid, and this marks the final termination of the conflict. This example shows how mediation can break the circle of vengeance even after many years and multiple killings.

Snorri goði plays a similar role at the end of *Njáls saga*, in the aftermath of the burning of Njáll by Flosi and his companions. At the Alþingi, the legal prosecution of the arsonists by Kári Sölmundarson turns into a violent clash, in which several men are killed. The fight is then terminated by Snorri, who manages to persuade everyone but Kári and his ally Þorgeirr to accept a reconciliation. Snorri is asked to judge the case together with others, and the text underlines the esteem (*virðing*) that he gains by his arbitration. Kári and Þorgeirr are later reconciled with Flosi as well, but that would clearly not have been possible without the preceding agreement. This episode thus again accentuates the significance of mediation in a situation when bloodshed seems inevitable but can still be prevented by an influential arbitrator.

Finally, Snorri goði is also depicted as a mediator in *Heiðarvíga saga*. Initially, he participates in the central conflict, because he is related by marriage to one of the parties. He relies on legal means at first, but when they fail, he turns to a violent vengeance, which leads to an escalation of the conflict. After the main battle, however, Snorri ensures a truce, due to which the violence is terminated, and the case can then be settled at the Alþingi. The story thus shows a balance in Snorri's behaviour. He does not hesitate to support his in-laws when needed, but when the conflict escalates to the point where it could threaten social stability in the district, he is ready to intervene and bring about peace. His intervention is successful because he uses both his authority and his wit, qualities necessary for a mediator.

It may or may not be a coincidence that it is Snorri goði who is presented as the mediator in all these sagas. Snorri may have represented an ambiguous image of a chieftain in collective memory. That is best seen in the text where he is the main protagonist, *Eyrbyggja saga*: he is shown to be clever or even cunning, eager to compete for prestige and power, and good at gaining influential allies, but also selfish and neither too brave nor an outstanding fighter (Vermeyden 2015, 114–130). The narrator does not unambiguously side with Snorri or show admiration for him, and different narrative techniques are employed to express an ambivalent evaluation of him as a chieftain (2015, 124–133). Such a multifaceted person could be perfectly suited for portrayal in different roles in various sagas. Different aspects of Snorri's character are foregrounded in each saga because they are relevant to its meaning. In the cultural memory constructed in the indi-

vidual sagas, then, his portrayal reflects different concerns that were current at the time when the sagas were composed.

Eyrbyggja saga does not follow the structural pattern of the conflict story and is focused on the development of the protagonist's social position (Andersson 1967, 153–162; Vésteinn Ólason 1971). It shows Snorri neither as a heroic character, nor as an ideal peaceful chieftain, but rather as a man who is pressured to gain and retain power in his district because of his descent from the local leaders. His story thus illustrates the competition for power between men of equally high ancestry, who are all pressured by their descent to strive for prestige (Torfi Tulinius 2014, 196–200). Nevertheless, Snorri seems to fulfil all the necessary preconditions for being a respectable leader and a successful mediator: he is influential, decisive, clever, eloquent, and possesses a strong sense of diplomacy (Andersson 1970, 581–582). He sometimes acts as a mediator in *Eyrbyggja saga*, which praises his moderation but also points out some of his less praiseworthy traits (Vermeyden 2015, 124–128).

The role of a mediator is dominant in Snorri's portrayal in *Laxdæla saga* and *Njáls saga*, but even in these sagas, he is not always presented as being morally flawless. For instance, he frequently gets involved in others' disputes in order to further his own political interests, and he coerces men into switching sides in a conflict and participating in an attack (Miller 2012, 377–386). In the narratives, however, his role as a mediator in critical situations is more significant than the details of individual morality, because the termination of conflicts is crucial for the renewal of social stability and for upholding the social structure itself. The character type of the mediator thus embodies the importance of forces that can break the cycle of violence and restore peace after a series of fights in the absence of executive power.³⁷

In the contemporary sagas, various characters can act as mediators. They are often clerics, because as clerical identity became more clearly defined in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, priests no longer got actively involved in violent conflicts, so they could act as neutral third parties (Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 37–41). Mediators can also be secular chieftains, especially the most powerful ones, who could successfully intervene in conflicts due to their supreme authority. What connects these characters is that they represent positive personal qualities, such as wisdom, moderation, and eloquence, and wield some type of authority, whether it is secular power or clerical dignity. A shared focus on this character type can connect

³⁷ Examples of other important mediators in the sagas of Icelanders are Guðmundr inn ríki (*Valla-Ljóts saga*, *Heiðarvíga saga*), Þorkell krafla (*Hallfreðar saga*), Gestr Oddleifsson (*Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*), Gellir Þorkelsson (*Ljósvetninga saga*), or Skapti Þóroddsson (*Valla-Ljóts saga*) (Andersson 1967, 25–26).

otherwise unrelated stories and stimulate an intertextual dialogue that can include both the sagas of Icelanders and the contemporary sagas.

3.1.2 *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*: Troublemakers and peacemakers

Þorgils saga ok Hafliða, the first long narrative in *Sturlunga saga*, is a conflict story dealing with a dispute between Þorgils Oddason and Hafliði Másson in 1117–1121. The saga starts with outlining the causes of the disagreement and continues with a description of the gradually escalating conflict and the subsequent mediation and reconciliation. Within this structural pattern, the narrative is focused on the contrast between several peaceful characters and the central troublemaker. This contrast is introduced as the main theme of the saga at the very beginning by means of a direct characterization of Hafliði and his nephew Már Bergþórsson.

Hafliði's portrayal is brief, but all the clearer in defining the essential personal qualities of a good social leader – he is described as being “wise and righteous and a powerful chieftain”.³⁸ Conversely, Már is presented as his opposite, the black sheep of the family:

Hann var óvinsæll ok illa skapi farinn ok ólíkr góðum fræendum sínum, hafði nakkvat fé ok helzt illa á. Hann var opt með Hafliða frænda sínum á vetrum ok var honum óskapuðr. (*Sturlunga saga*, I, 2021, ch. 6, p. 12)

(He was unpopular and evil-minded and different from his good kinsmen. He owned some property but took bad care of it. He often spent the winters with his kinsman Hafliði, who was not fond of him.)

Hafliði's discord with Þorgils starts because they both feel obliged to support their kinsmen and adherents. Such an obligation was defined by the medieval Icelandic social structure, in which kinship ties and patron-client relationships were binding. Again, the narrative is focused on the troublemaker: it shows that the conflict starts because of Már's reckless behaviour. Már wounds his own foster-father, who is one of Þorgils's adherents; Þorgils prosecutes the case, and Már seeks Hafliði's support (STU viii). Már also mistreats a farmhand who is Þorgils's adherent (STU ix), and he later kills a commoner for a petty reason (STU x). His behaviour is criticized by Hafliði, and he is again called the black sheep of the family.³⁹ He does not, however, take Hafliði's reproaches seriously, continues to

³⁸ [...] forvitri ok góðgjarn ok inn mesti höfðingi (*Sturlunga saga*, I, 2021, ch. 6, p. 12).

³⁹ Hafliði lét illa yfir verkinu ok kvað Má lengi hafa verit mikinn ónytjung ok kallaði sílika menn helzt mega heita frændaskömm. (*Sturlunga saga*, I, 2021, ch. 10, p. 19) (Hafliði criticized the deed

mistreat the local farmers, and has one of them killed (STU xi). Haflidi condemns his behaviour again, constantly emphasizing that Már does not fit among his kinsmen.⁴⁰ Such repeated comments by the protagonist cannot be regarded as a random literary convention; they clearly are a narrative device that constructs the meaning of the story by building up a contrast between the troublemaker and the peaceful characters.

The conflict, caused by Már's misdeeds, continues with clashes between both chieftains' adherents, after which the chieftains fail to reach an agreement (STU xvi–xix). Both carry an axe to a lawsuit, and when Þorgils sees that Haflidi is armed, he swings his axe at him and cuts off one of his fingers (STU xx–xxii). Þorgils is outlawed for this attack but disregards his outlawry, and a fight seems to be imminent (STU xxii–xxiii). The storyline thus creates the expectation of the typical violent culmination of a conflict story. At this point, however, the focus of the saga turns from the troublemaker to the mediators. Their argumentation is described in detail and receives much attention. The importance of peacefulness and moderation for personal honour (*virðing, sómi*) is emphasized, not least in a direct speech by a mediator named Guðmundr, who dissuades Haflidi from an armed clash (STU xxiii):

„[...] ok ger svá vel at þú far varliga, ok gæt virðingar þinnar ok sóma, af því at svá er mikit fjölmenni fyrir at þú hefir ekki liðs við, ok eigu menn mikit í hættu ef eigi gengr allvel til, ok er þér engin svívirðing í at búa þar mál þitt til er þú kemr framast at lögum ok yör er óhætt. Mun ek ok með þeim ykkum at snúa at míni orð virðir meira, með þá menn alla sem ek fæ til. Haf þú við ráð vina þinna at þú fylgir svá at eins málum þessum at þú gætir vel sóma þíns.“ (*Sturlunga saga*, I, 2021, ch. 23, p. 45)

(“[...] and please act prudently and think of your honour and esteem, for you are facing so large forces that your own troop cannot compare with them, and men will be in great danger if things do not turn out well. It is no dishonour for you to prepare your case in such a way that you can best apply the law and avoid danger. And I, with all the men I can get, will support the one of you who respects my words more. Follow your friends' advice and further your case only in such a way that you can retain your honour!”)

Haflidi, the central voice of the saga, agrees with Guðmundr and expresses his gratitude for such advice. Similarly, when the priest Ketill tries to persuade Haflidi to agree to a reconciliation (STU xxxiii), he uses a story from his own life, in

and said that Már had long been a very useless man and that such men can indeed be called a disgrace to the family.)

⁴⁰ Hann lætr margt illt af honum standa ok kallaði hann mjök segiast ór sinni ætt [...] (*Sturlunga saga*, I, 2021, ch. 11, p. 21) ([Haflidi] told [Már] that he caused much evil and said that he differed much from his kin [...].)

which he also accentuates the honour (*mannvirðing*, *sæmð*, *virðing*) connected with moderation:

„[...] Ok sá ek þá at þat eitt var hjálpráðit til, at skjóta málínu á guðs miskunn, því at allt tókst þá áðr öðru þungligar til mannvirðingar of mitt ráð. Fann ek þá þat, alls ek hugða þá at mannvirðinginni, at ekki mundi þær bætr fyrir koma er mundi at sæmð verða. Gerða ek þá fyrir guðs sakir at gefa honum upp allt málit. Vissa ek at þá munda ek þat fyrir taka er mér væri haldkvæmst. Ok bauð ek honum til míin, ok var hann með mér lengi síðan. Ok þá snerist þegar orðrómrinn ok með virðing manna, ok lagðist mér síðan hverr hlutur meir til gæfu ok virðingar en áðr. Ok vænti ek ok af guði at þér muni svá fara. [...]“ (*Sturlunga saga*, I, 2021, ch. 33, p. 60)

(“[...] Then I understood that the only helpful decision was to commit the matter to God’s mercy, because everything concerning my honour had gone worse than ever so far. When I thought about my honour, I understood that I would never receive any compensation that would increase my esteem. I decided for God’s sake to give up the whole case to [my opponent]. I knew that for that I would receive the reward that was most welcome to me. I also invited him to my home, and he stayed with me for a long time. My reputation and esteem among people changed soon, and since then everything has brought me better luck and more honour than before. And I assume that God will let it go the same way with you as well. [...]”)

This speech again expresses the idea that honour is based on wise decisions, guided by a sense of moderation (see Jørgensen 2017, 53). The mediators’ monologues thus emphasize the importance of reconciliation, which is already inherently reflected in the structure of the conflict story. Whereas the opposition between the two chieftains is central to the saga’s *plot*, it is another opposition, between peace and violence or moderation and aggression, that is central to the *discourse*. The question that the text asks on the level of discourse is not whether Þorgils or Haflidið will prevail in the conflict, but whether they will fight or be reconciled. The saga’s ending then shows that in the absence of troublemakers and with the help of mediators, the chieftains choose to be reconciled and remain faithful allies ever since (STU xxxiv–xxxv).

Porgils saga ok Haflidið thus modifies the narrative type. Contrary to the expectations built up by the structural pattern of the conflict story, in which reconciliation usually takes place only after the killing of a protagonist and the subsequent revenge, this saga shows a conflict that is terminated by the mediators already before the violence fully escalates. This reduction of the tragic element of the narrative type further increases its emphasis on the stabilizing forces in society. The saga implies that discord is caused by individual troublemakers, who behave violently and refuse to follow the social rules. They are, however, counterbalanced by the mediators and by the chieftains who may behave unwisely under pressure but make the right decisions in the end. Such a modification of the narrative type is

possible due to the intertextual relationships within the saga corpus that the original audiences knew in written or oral form. The narrative type connects *Porgils saga ok Haflíða* with a group of other similar sagas, and this intra-literary context contributes to the construction of meaning through similarities and differences between various sagas belonging to this group.

3.1.3 *Guðmundar saga dýra*: An influential chieftain as a mediator

Compared with *Porgils saga ok Haflíða*, *Guðmundar saga dýra* follows the structural pattern of the conflict story more closely, without any significant modifications. Nevertheless, both sagas similarly emphasize the crucial role of mediators in conflicts. Whereas the mediators in *Porgils saga ok Haflíða* are respectable but not too powerful, *Guðmundar saga* foregrounds the social importance of an influential leader who can wield supreme authority in mediation.

This theme is first introduced when the protagonist Guðmundr Þorvaldsson is presented as a powerful chieftain, capable of resolving local disputes by arbitration (STU xci).⁴¹ His influence in the district illustrates the gradual establishment of territorial power (see Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 83–86). When Guðmundr later becomes one of the opponents in a conflict, he is replaced in the role of the arbitrator by Jón Loptsson of the powerful Oddaverjar clan. Jón's prestige is previously emphasized in the genealogical section of *Sturlunga saga* (*Ættartölur*):

Loptr Sæmundarson fór útan ok fekk í Nóregi Þóru, en reyndist síðan at hon var dóttir Magnúss konungs berfætts. Jón var son þeira er mestr höfðingi ok vinsælastr hefir verit á Íslandi. (*Sturlunga saga*, I, 2021, ch. 36, p. 65)

(Loptr Sæmundarson travelled from Iceland and married Þóra in Norway, and it was later discovered that she was the daughter of King Magnús Barefoot. Their son was Jón, the most powerful and most popular chieftain in Iceland.)

This focus on Jón's royal ancestry accentuates the compilation's emphasis on the Icelandic chieftains' noble, almost kingly qualities. It is thus implied that even the kingless Iceland is governed by leaders who do not differ much from monarchs. This idea is corroborated by *Guðmundar saga dýra*, where Jón arbitrates in the central conflict after the burning of Önundr Þorkelsson's farm by Guðmundr dýri

⁴¹ In this section there are considerable textual differences between the two extant redactions of *Sturlunga saga*. The text from the *Reykjafjarðarbók* redaction, which is less abridged, is followed here, but the chapter numbers continue to follow the main redaction (*Króksfjarðarbók*).

and Kolbeinn Tumason (STU xcix–c). It is shown that nobody but Jón possesses the authority necessary for resolving such a serious conflict (STU c):

Hann [Jón Loftsson] ætlaði ekki til þings at fara, áðr Eyjólfur sagði honum at þar var helzt til sætta stofnat at hann gerði um mál þessi. Jón svarar: „Eigi er ek til þessa færð,“ segir hann, „því at ek hefi aldrei fyrr átt um þetta at mæla.“ Eyjólfur svarar: „Þat man þó til liggja at leita við at menn sættist, ok eigi sýnt hverr þá má gera, ef þú pykkist eigi til færð.“ Þá bað Eyjólfur fyrir guðs sakir at hann skyldi eigi undan skerast. En þat varð um síðir at Jón fór til þings. (*Sturlunga saga*, I, 2021, ch. 100, pp. 246–247)

([Jón Loftsson] did not intend to go to the assembly until Eyjólfur told him that a reconciliation was most likely if he arbitrated in the case. Jón answered: “I am not capable of that because I have never judged such a case before.” Eyjólfur answered: “It is nevertheless necessary to aim for a reconciliation. And I cannot see who could arbitrate if you do not consider yourself capable of it.” Eyjólfur begged Jón not to avoid the task for God’s sake. And it finally turned out that Jón attended the assembly.)

Jón’s arbitration leads to an agreement because his authority is respected by everyone. Jón dies soon after, however, and there is no dominant chieftain after his death (STU c). In the absence of a strong leader, the reconciliation is broken when Önundr’s daughter urges her brothers and her husband Þorgrímr to take revenge (STU cii). The avengers kill several men who participated in the burning of Önundr (STU ciii). This situation is commented on by Jón’s son Ormr:

„[...] Vér áttum föður þann er hafði mikil metorð hér á landi, svá at eigi var sá maðr er eigi þótti sínu máli vel komit ef hann skyldi um gera. Nú veit ek eigi,“ segir hann, „hvárt meir er frá dæmum um málefni þessi er seld voru eðr sættir þær er hann gerði nú síðast. Nú hafa þeir þat upp goldit,“ segir Ormr, „ófin þau er ger voru er menn hugðu at aldrei mundu goldin verða ok þat mundi at sættabrigðum verða. En þeir er við tóku gjaldinu hafa nú rofit ok bakaferlat allt þat er hann mælti um, ok er mér óskapfellt at veita Þorgrími ok svívirða orð föður várð ok hann sjálfan ok alla oss sonu hans.“ (*Sturlunga saga*, I, 2021, ch. 103, p. 264)

(“[...] Our father enjoyed great respect in this country, so nobody was dissatisfied with his case if it was judged by our father. And I do not know,” he said, “what is more extraordinary – the dispute that was committed to him the last time, or the reconciliation he brought about. Now the compensation has been paid,” said Ormr, “although it was so high that people thought it would never be paid and the reconciliation would be broken for that reason. But now his whole judgement has been broken and disregarded by those who have accepted the compensation. I disapprove of supporting Þorgrímr and dishonouring our father’s decision, as well as him and all of us, his sons.”)

This monologue underlines the importance of the powerful chieftain for conflict resolution, and the story shows that peace becomes fragile in the absence of such a leader. The tension escalates again until the avengers attack Guðmundr, who

then retaliates with a much larger force, but the conflict is finally terminated after that (STU cviii). When Guðmundr gives up his chieftaincy and becomes a monk soon after (STU cxii), it can be perceived as a morally positive aftermath that highlights the rejection of violence by the previously belligerent protagonist. At the same time, it is Jón Loftsson who is the most important character in the central part of the saga on the level of discourse, although he is not the main protagonist on the level of plot.

In its interpretation of the past, *Guðmundar saga dýra* reflects the new conditions resulting from the historical development of Icelandic society. The action is therefore characterized by mobilization of large forces for aggressive and defensive purposes (Tranter 1987, 174) and personal disputes are increasingly replaced with rivalry for territorial power (Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 90). These are historical facts that cannot be denied in the saga. The narrative, however, does not present this social development as a downfall. Instead, it shows that the stabilizing forces evolve in line with the changing nature of conflicts. By emphasizing the importance of arbitration by a powerful chieftain and implying that peace is threatened in the absence of an authority that can keep aggressors under control, the saga promotes centralized power in the hands of influential leaders.

3.1.4 *Svínfellinga saga*: Mediation and morality

Svínfellinga saga has a simple structure, consisting of a single conflict story. The protagonists, Sæmundr Ormsson and Ögmundr Helgason, become enemies after the death of Sæmundr's father in 1241 because of a struggle for regional power (STU ccclvi). Ögmundr is not a chieftain but is popular in the district, and his influence increases when the young and inexperienced chieftain Sæmundr replaces his father.⁴² After an insignificant disagreement, which serves as a pretext in their competition for power, Sæmundr summons Ögmundr to a lawsuit, but Ögmundr prefers to solve the case through arbitration by Abbot Brandr Jónsson (STU ccclvii).

Like in *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*, the meaning of the saga is shaped by a contrast between a mediator and an instigator. With the exception of scenes that depict direct clashes, these characters almost receive more attention than the protagonists from the very beginning of the saga. The introductory chapter does not contain any

⁴² This resembles the situation before the Sturlung Age (especially the events described in *Sturla saga*, see 3.2.2), although *Svínfellinga saga* takes place several decades later. This shows that the concentration of power in Iceland was a gradual process with diverse phases taking place at different times in different regions.

characterization of the two protagonists, but it does contain a portrayal of the central mediator, Abbot Brandr (STU ccclv):

[Brandr Jónsson] var ágætr höfðingi, klerkr góðr, vitr ok vinsæll, ríkr ok góðgjarn. Ok í þann tíma hafði hann mest mannheill þeira manna er þá voru á Íslandi. (*Sturlunga saga, II*, 2021, ch. 355, p. 514)⁴³

([Brandr Jónsson] was a great chieftain, a good cleric, wise and popular, influential, and benevolent. And at that time, he enjoyed the greatest popularity of all the men in Iceland.)

Brandr contributes to preventing strife by his wise advice, which is described in detail. He warns Ögmundr against immoderately supporting his friends in unjust cases and disapproves of Sæmundr's actions against Ögmundr, although he understands his reasons (STU ccclvii). Brandr's authority is clearly shown in the first arbitration, when both opponents willingly accept his decision despite their uncompromising personalities (STU ccclvii). Brandr is also praised for his mediation by a reference to public opinion:

Af þinginu ríða þeir ábóti heim, ok þótti þá sem jafnan at Brandr ábóti hafði sér inn bezta hlut af deildan. (*Sturlunga saga, II*, 2021, ch. 357, p. 521)

(The abbot and the others rode home after the assembly, and as always, it was believed that Abbot Brandr had chosen the best option.)

Brandr's role in the saga is contrasted with the behaviour of the instigator Þórðr Sighvatsson, who is a side character, but his intervention is of crucial importance to the story. First, he convinces Sæmundr not to accept the agreement reached through Brandr's mediation:

Þórðr segir Sæmundi at hann vill at hann leggi hvergi sinn hlut fyrir Ögmundi, kvað hvárki til skorta fjölmenni né mægðoir. (*Sturlunga saga, II*, 2021, ch. 357, p. 521)

(Þórðr tells Sæmundr that he does not want him to back away from Ögmundr because he lacks neither supporters nor powerful in-laws.)

Consequently, Sæmundr and his brother Guðmundr decide to attack Ögmundr. A violent clash is prevented only because Ögmundr manages to gather the local men, so Sæmundr's troop is outnumbered and forced to retreat (STU ccclviii). Þórðr Sighvatsson now goads Ögmundr into continuing the hostilities, just like he previously goaded Sæmundr:

43 The text from the *Króksfjarðarbók* redaction is followed in all the references in this section.

Þórðr kvað Ögmundi sjálfrátt í hvern stað at láta hlut sinn fyrir Sæmundi, „því at þú hefir fjárkost meira. Þú ert ok vinsælli af bóndum. Þótt þú hafir eigi goðorð þá heyri ek ok at bændr vili þér eigi verr en Sæmundi. Ok þótt ek sé mægðr við Sæmund þá mæli ek þat eigi at hann ofsæki né einnmann. [...]” (*Sturlunga saga*, II, 2021, ch. 358, pp. 528–529)

(Þórðr told Ögmundr that it was his own choice to what extent he would back away from Sæmundr, “because you have better resources and are more popular among the farmers. Although you do not have a chieftaincy, I hear that the farmers do not want a worse position for you than for Sæmundr. And although Sæmundr and I are in-laws, I do not approve of his oppression of anybody. [...]”)

In the narrative, Þórðr is criticized by a reference to public opinion, and the results of his goading are condemned by his positive counterpart in the saga, Abbot Brandr:

Ok þat sumar ferr hann [Þórðr] útan, ok er þat mál manna at hann skilði harðliga við þetta mál. En er Brandr ábóti spyrr þessi tíðindi lætr hann illa yfir. (*Sturlunga saga*, II, 2021, ch. 359, p. 532)

(And the same summer he [Þórðr] sailed abroad, and people said that he left the case after having made it difficult. And when Abbot Brandr heard this news, he expressed his dissatisfaction.)

Interestingly, the role of an instigator is attributed to Þórðr Sighvatsson only in *Svínfellinga saga*. Conversely, *Þórðar saga kakala* states that he mediated between Sæmundr and Ögmundr in order to secure peace (STU cccliv):

Þetta sumar urðu þeir nökktut missáttir Sæmundr Ormsson ok Ögmundr Helgason. Kærðu þeir þat fyrir Þórði, ok setti hann þær greinir þá niðr er voru á milli þeira ok þeim bar á. Mælti þá ok engi maðr á móti því er Þórðr vildi at væri. (*Sturlunga saga*, II, 2021, ch. 354, p. 511)

(The same summer [1249] some disagreements occurred between Sæmundr Ormsson and Ögmundr Helgason. They complained to Þórðr, and he settled the matters that were between them and that they argued about. Nobody opposed Þórðr's decisions at the time.)

This is an illustrative example of how the same situation can be treated differently in different sagas. That does not necessarily mean that the truth is deliberately twisted in the texts. In communicative memory, Þórðr's involvement in the conflict was probably remembered as including some degree of goading and some degree of mediation, and different evaluations of his actions could exist simultaneously. As the material was transformed into cultural memory, the process of narrativization led to a selection of individual aspects that were significant for the construction of meaning in each saga.

In *Svínfellinga saga*, the selection of narrative material was guided by the fact that its meaning depends on the contrast between the instigator Þórðr and the

mediator Brandr. The saga shows how Þórðr's goading intensifies the strife, whereas Brandr constantly tries to resolve the conflict peacefully. After Sæmundr has had Ögmundr outlawed and has confiscated his property, Brandr persuades Sæmundr to let him mediate an agreement, and his mediation is again praised in the text (STU ccclix). There is still much mistrust between the two parties, so Brandr continues with his effort to maintain peace and encourages Sæmundr to trust Ögmundr and to keep to the agreement, which Sæmundr promises him (STU ccclix).

In the end, it is Ögmundr who breaks the agreement and attacks Sæmundr and his brother (STU ccclxi). At this point, the contrast between the instigator and the mediator is replaced with a contrast between the aggressor and the victims. The moral perspective in this episode is based on a condemnation of violence, underlined by a focus on the defenders, which is first enhanced by a foreshadowing of their killing (STU ccclx). In the description of the assault itself, it is emphasized that the brothers are outnumbered, caught unaware, and given no chance to defend themselves (STU ccclxi). The three priests who arrive at Sæmundr's request beg for Sæmundr's life and condemn Ögmundr's misdeed (*glæp*), but he does not heed it. The spiritual aspect is underlined in the death scene, when Sæmundr falls on his knees and repents his sins before his beheading. The narrative is then focused on the brothers' wounds, while also stressing that they faced death with courage and dignity. Guðmundr's plea for mercy is not presented as a sign of cowardice, but rather as an attempt at avoiding unnecessary bloodshed. This impression is strengthened by Guðmundr's statement that he prefers dying to living after his brother's death:

Guðmundr Ormsson ok prestarnir lásu þá sjau sálma, ok fann engi maðr at hann brygðoi sér nökkut við pessi tiðindi. Þá var hann átján vетra. Guðmundr mælti til Ögmundar þá er þeir höfðu lesit psálmana: „Gott væri enn at lifa, ok vildi ek grið, fóstri.“ Ögmundur leit frá ok mælti: „Eigi þorum vér nú þat, fóstri minn,“ segir hann. Var hann þá rauðr sem blöð. Guðmundr svarar þá: „Sá liggr heðan nú skammt í brott at eigi er betra at sáma við yðr ok lifa eptir hann dauðan.“ (*Sturlunga saga*, II, 2021, ch. 361, pp. 549–550)

(Guðmundr Ormsson and the priests then recited seven psalms, and nobody noticed him being affected by what had happened. He was eighteen years old at the time. When they had finished the psalms, Guðmundr said to Ögmundr: "It would be good to stay alive, and I would like to ask for mercy, foster-father." Ögmundr looked away and said: "I dare not let you have it now, foster-son." He was as red as blood. Guðmundr replied: "There lies the man not far from here, for whose sake it is better for me not to be reconciled with you and not to live when he is dead.")

The defenders' moderation and fearlessness are contrasted with the attacker's brutality, which is presented without any notion of heroism. The condemnation

of violence is also underlined by statements about the reluctance of Ögmundr's followers to perform the killings (STU ccclxi).

The case is again arbitrated by Abbot Brandr, who decides that Ögmundr must give up much of his property and leave the district; Ögmundr willingly accepts his sentence, so the judgement marks the end of the conflict (STU ccclxii). Following the typical structural pattern of the conflict story, the saga thus ends with a successful termination of the cycle of violence by the mediator. The final arbitration again highlights Brandr's importance and authority; the narrative thus foregrounds the social mechanisms that re-establish peace after the conflict, and the saga emphasizes the continuing significance of these stabilizing forces during the Sturlung Age. The saga's ending shows that Ögmundr's acts are not only morally unacceptable, but that the aggressor, by disrupting social harmony, also loses his own social position. This image of the mediator's superiority over the aggressor endows the saga with a morally positive tone. Instead of depicting a moral decline, the saga thus contrasts socially disruptive behaviour with a positive image of cohesive forces, embodied by the mediator Brandr.

3.2 The peaceful chieftain's story

3.2.1 The narrative type of the peaceful chieftain's story

While the central theme of many sagas dealing with internal Icelandic relations is the renewal of peace after a conflict, some sagas take this theme a step further by introducing a protagonist who embodies peacefulness throughout the story and attempts to prevent violence from the very beginning of the conflict. This is the character type of the peaceful chieftain, usually contrasted in the narrative with excessively ambitious men who refuse to terminate conflicts by reconciliation and prefer violent clashes. They can be the protagonist's friends or kinsmen, who cause their own downfall by their excessive belligerence. They can also be his opponents, who often mock him for being unmanly because he rejects violence, but there is a clearly marked difference between their mockery and the narrative voice of the saga. In the narrative, peacefulness is not presented as a sign of weakness or cowardice, but rather as a strong moral code – to apply his moral principles in practice, the protagonist must be decisive, determined, and courageous, because the morally right solutions are usually not the easiest ones. The protagonist's moral superiority is emphasized in contrast with the aggressive characters.

The peaceful chieftain is characterized not only by avoiding violence himself, but also by his effort to prevent the aggression of others by active interventions

and to dissuade them from violent behaviour by warning them about its consequences. The inherently tragic element of the narrative type is that the protagonist is usually unable to fulfil his peaceful intentions because others disregard his advice. The hope of a peaceful solution is thus implied and then thwarted; the bloodshed is presented as unnecessary because it could have been prevented if everyone had obeyed the peacemaker. The tragedy is finally completed when the peaceful chieftain himself, after his failed attempts at terminating violence, falls victim to a violent act. Nevertheless, the account of his death also emphasizes his integrity, fearlessness, and dignity, although it is usually not a heroic last stand. The protagonist typically chooses to die, rather than to leave his kinsmen and companions or to let them risk their lives for him. This emphasis on his selflessness accentuates the positive values that are embodied by him as the central character of this narrative type.

The structural pattern of the peaceful chieftain's story can be summarized as follows: (1) the protagonist's characterization in contrast with an aggressor; (2) the protagonist's involvement in a conflict, in which he attempts to prevent violence from the beginning; (3) the failure of the peaceful efforts; (4) the protagonist's violent death. A typical example of the peaceful chieftain is the protagonist of *Njáls saga*. Njáll Þorgeirsson is presented as a wise man who knows the law and aims for peaceful, legal solutions of disputes. He repeatedly brings about reconciliation on behalf of his closest friend, Gunnarr Hámundarson, and he agrees on settlement by negotiation with Gunnarr multiple times during a prolonged dispute between their wives. Njáll also warns Gunnarr against violent behaviour and predicts that it will lead to his downfall, but Gunnarr disregards his warning and is eventually outlawed and killed. Then we see Njáll's own sons in the role of aggressors when they thoughtlessly start a conflict with Gunnarr's kinsman Þráinn and kill him. Njáll arranges a reconciliation again in his effort to prevent further bloodshed, and he takes care of Þráinn's son Höskuldr, but Njáll's sons later kill Höskuldr because of envy. The efforts at reconciliation fail, and Flosi, a kinsman of Höskuldr's wife, takes revenge by burning Njáll's farm. Njáll refuses to leave his sons and chooses to die together with them. This ending accords with the inherently tragic tone of the narrative type, and researchers have rightfully perceived the text as a "tragic saga" (Torfi Tulinius 2015, 100).

Throughout the saga, Njáll is contrasted with Gunnarr and his own sons, who are aggressive, although they are not presented as villains. This contrast shows that violence is encouraged by some social norms, which are criticized in the saga, while Njáll embodies their positive counterparts (Andersson 1970, 587–588). Njáll is also mocked by his opponents, who consider him unmanly, and yet the narrative voice evaluates him positively; the saga thus implies that excessively heroic masculinity is not a desirable social norm (Ármann Jakobsson 2000, 31–32,

40–41; 2007b, 194–200). Instead, it presents a different image of the ideal man: the character type of the peaceful chieftain, defined by integrity, intelligence, authority, restraint, and moderation (Ármann Jakobsson 2007b, 209–212).

Understandably, the central characters in a complex narrative like *Njáls saga* are not portrayed stereotypically, so they have some ambiguous traits as well. Gunnarr is aggressive yet noble, heroic yet consumed with doubt; even the wise Njáll sometimes acts imprudently or his motivations seem confusing, and he even intentionally gives bad advice to those who seek his assistance; both are honourable but occasionally shown to participate in deceit (Ármann Jakobsson 2000, 33–34, 41; 2004, 48–49; 2007b, 199, 212; Tirosh 2014, 213–214). However, these ambiguities do not overshadow the persons' function as representatives of particular character types. As Ármann Jakobsson has pointed out, apparent incongruities or contradictions can be a narrative device employed in the sagas to make their recipients think more deeply about the story and “to involve their audience in the creation of the meaning” (2004, 51). In *Njáls saga*, the ambiguities in the characters' behaviour show that contrasting forces exist in every individual's mind. What matters is not that a person must be absolutely morally flawless, but rather that they manage to keep the darker side of their personality under control and choose socially beneficial behaviour in most, if not all, situations. If the text is read as social commentary, this can serve as a small-scale image of the tension between cohesive and disruptive forces in society.

Another ambiguity in *Njáls saga* is that whereas Njáll's loyalty to Gunnarr does not seem to falter, his relationship with his sons is problematic (Tirosh 2014, 216–222). On the level of social commentary, the tension between Njáll and his sons can again be understood as a narrative device that emphasizes the differences between their character types, which figuratively embody contrasting forces in society. Their tragic fate then accentuates the fragility of peace in a society where conflict resolution is not an institutional procedure but a private matter, influenced by personal grudges and emotions. This tragedy culminates when Njáll chooses to die alongside his kinsmen and willingly accepts death, as do several other characters in the saga (see Torfi Tulinius 2015). And yet, his fearless approach to death corroborates the idea that he is mentally stronger than many of the belligerent heroes, so his peacefulness is definitely not a sign of weakness. As such, he can be regarded as the model chieftain both in life and in death, with whom the audience was intended to sympathize and identify (Ármann Jakobsson 2007b, 195–197, 212).

The importance of this character type is further emphasized through parallels between different sagas, where similar portrayals of peaceful chieftains repeatedly foreground the same values. For instance, the type is represented by Ingimundr Þorsteinsson, the protagonist of the first half of *Vatnsdæla saga*. He is a raider and a fighter in his youth before he moves to Iceland as a settler, but as

an Icelandic chieftain, he protects harmony in his district and never employs or incites violence. He is contrasted with the local troublemaker Hrolleifr, who transgresses multiple social norms. When Hrolleifr is exiled from his home district for his misdeeds, Ingimundr shows goodwill by providing him with a new home. Instead of showing gratitude, Hrolleifr mistreats the local people and initiates a conflict with Ingimundr's sons. A fight breaks out and the aged Ingimundr intervenes in order to stop the battle, but Hrolleifr pierces him with a spear. This tragic ending shows the peaceful chieftain as a victim of the same violence that he was trying to prevent, and his moral integrity is contrasted with the aggressor's recklessness. Although the structural pattern of the peaceful chieftain's story does not shape the whole saga, it significantly contributes to the construction of meaning in the section dealing with Ingimundr.

Another typical peaceful chieftain is Áskell Eyvindarson in *Reykðæla saga*, who repeatedly regulates violence and encourages reconciliation in a prolonged dispute between his aggressive nephew Vémundr and his opponent. He usually achieves a temporary settlement, but then the conflict is renewed again. Finally, Áskell himself falls victim to violence when his kinsmen are attacked by their enemy. He is mortally wounded but conceals his wound and advises his kinsmen to be reconciled with their opponents, which they do out of respect for him, but his son does not participate and later takes revenge. The tragedy of Áskell's killing is underlined by his unswerving commitment to peace immediately before his death, which highlights his moral strength. Throughout the saga, Áskell is praised for his honourable behaviour (*drengskapr*), justice (*réttðaemi*), and peaceful efforts by the narrator's voice and by references to public opinion (Andersson 1970, 583–584). He is contrasted with the socially disruptive Vémundr, “the most unprovoked and most unmotivated agitator on record” (Andersson 1967, 270). After Áskell's death, the second half of the saga, describing the revenge and counter-revenge, shows how violence escalates in the absence of a peaceful chieftain.

Overall, the peaceful chieftains' stories in the sagas of Icelanders reveal the flaws of the medieval Icelandic social system – its internal instability and the social norms that encourage violence –, while simultaneously foregrounding the positive values that uphold social cohesion, which are embodied by the central character. Here it will be argued that the same applies to the interpretation of the recent past in the contemporary sagas, which are equally critical but also accentuate the cohesive forces by their emphasis on peaceful chieftains. *Sturlunga saga* constructs sophisticated parallels between several protagonists representing this character type, thus highlighting its importance for the compilation's meaning. The tragic tone of the narrative type shapes some parts of *Sturlunga saga* but is modified in others; their unexpectedly optimistic endings then emphasize the continuing social superiority of the morally positive values represented by the peaceful chieftains.

3.2.2 *Sturlu saga*: The moral and political superiority of the peaceful chieftain

Sturlu saga deals with a dispute that took place in the years 1148–1183 between Sturla Þórðarson the elder and Einarr Þorgilsson, son of Þorgils Oddason from *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*. The saga is shaped by the structural pattern of the peaceful chieftain’s story, and its central focus is the contrast between Sturla and his negative counterpart Einarr.

Einarr Þorgilsson inherits his social position from his father, the leading chieftain in the district, but Einarr is far less capable and disregards some essential social norms. He frees a rover and killer from captivity and assists him in escaping, and the saga is quite direct in expressing the condemnation of such behaviour by references to public opinion (STU xlvi). When Einarr is not only unable, but clearly also unwilling, to rid his district of a rover band, his reputation worsens, and the loss of popularity leads to a loss of power (STU xlii):

Eptir þessa atburði lagðist sá orðrómr á at annarr hátr þótti á um heraðsstjórnina en þá er Þorgils hafði. Ok tóku þá margir þeir er mikil þóttust at sér eiga at ráða sér til eigna í aðra staði, þar sem þeim þótti trausts at ván. (*Sturlunga saga*, I, 2021, ch. 49, p. 85)

(After these events, the general opinion was that the leadership in the district seemed very different from how it had been when Þorgils was in charge. Many of those who felt that much was at stake, started to seek property in other districts, where they believed they could expect support.)

Sturla Þórðarson comes from a less powerful family than his adversary but is more capable and more honourable; he is characterized positively from the beginning of the saga (STU xlvi). The two chieftains get into a dispute while protecting their adherents’ interests (STU xlvi), as well as due to more personal matters (STU I). Einarr behaves dishonourably in his conflict with Sturla, attacking and burning his farm while Sturla is away and cannot defend his property (STU li). Sturla, by contrast, shows goodwill by accepting arbitration after this attack in order to prevent further hostilities. Einarr and his followers generally act aggressively and recklessly, while Sturla’s party turns to violence only in necessary defence (STU lii–lxi).

When the decisive fight takes place, the structural pattern of the peaceful chieftain’s story leads to the expectation of Sturla’s violent death, but this expectation is not fulfilled in the saga. Instead, Einarr is severely wounded in the battle and must ask for quarter, which Sturla grants him (STU lxii). Sturla not only survives the battle but even gains the local power that previously belonged to his opponent. Thus, instead of presenting a contrast between the peaceful chieftain’s moral superiority and his tragic death, the saga combines the protagonist’s moral

and political victory. The idea that a rightful victory, accompanied by magnanimity towards the defeated opponent, increases a chieftain's esteem much more than a killing of the opponent, is supported by a reference to public opinion (STU lxiii). This modification of the narrative type emphasizes the saga's overall positive image of a society in which the disruptive forces are counterbalanced by the peacefulness and moral integrity of some of its most successful leaders.

Sturla is, however, not a sufficiently strong chieftain yet – he possesses all the necessary personal qualities, but his position is not fully established. For this reason, a lasting reconciliation between him and his adversary cannot be reached without the intervention of a more powerful leader, whose authority is practically undisputed. The influential chieftain Jón Loptsson is therefore asked to arbitrate between Sturla and Einarr after the fight, and the reconciliation has a lasting effect (STU lxiii). Thus, the saga, apart from portraying a peaceful chieftain, emphasizes the importance of a strong leader.

Sturla then continues to defend his adherents, as well as his social position, against other rivals (STU lxiv–lxxiv). In the descriptions of these disputes, it is again Jón Loptsson's role as an arbitrator that receives much of the narrator's attention:

Voru þá sem mestar virðingar Jóns, ok var þangat skotit öllum stórmálum sem hann var. [...] ok koma þessi mál öll undir Jón Loptsson á þingi ok réð einn sem hann vildi ok skipaði svá at flestum líkaði vel. (*Sturlunga saga*, I, 2021, ch. 69, pp. 125–126)

(Jón's esteem was then greater than ever, and all the important cases were committed to him. [...] and all these matters were committed to Jón Loptsson at the assembly, and he decided everything alone as he wished, and he solved the matters in such a way that most people were satisfied.)

Ok ganga menn nú meðal þeira ok beiða at Sturla játaði í dóm Jóns um málit, kváðu þess ván at honum mundi í því aukast mestr sæmðarhlutr [...]. [Sturla] kvað nú svá at orði: „Kunnigt man mönnum vera um málaferli vár Páls ok um þá svívirðing er mér var ætluð at gera [...]. En þeir menn er sik binda nú við málit, nefni ek fyrst til þess Jón Loptsson er dýrstr maðr er á landi þessu ok allir skjóta sínum málaferlum til, þá veit eigi ek hvárt annat er nú virðingarvænna en reyna hvern sóma hann vill minn gera. [...]“ (*Sturlunga saga*, I, 2021, ch. 74, pp. 136–137)

(And people mediated between them and asked Sturla to agree to Jón's judgement on the matter; they said it was likely to greatly increase his esteem [...]. [Sturla] uttered these words: “People certainly know about my dispute with Páll and about how he intended to dishonour me [...]. But of the men who will now be involved in the case, I name Jón Loptsson first, the most powerful man in the country, to whom everyone commits their disputes. I do not know what could be more likely to increase my esteem than trying what he will do for my honour. [...]”)

In Sturla's conflict with Páll Sölvason, Jón manages to moderate Sturla's ambition without impeding his honour; to increase Sturla's esteem even more, Jón offers to

foster his son Snorri (STU lxxiv). Everyone is satisfied with his solution, nobody suffers a loss of honour, and no serious bloodshed is committed. The narrative shows that this would not be possible without Jón's intervention, so he becomes a highly important character in the second half of the saga. He represents the character type of the peaceful chieftain, while also being portrayed as an embodiment of centralized power – a leader whose decisions are accepted by everybody due to his authority, which enables him to arbitrate in conflicts and prevent violence. The saga thus evaluates the concentration of power positively and emphasizes its importance for peace and stability through its image of Jón as an excellent leader.

3.2.3 *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*: The portrayal of the ideal peaceful chieftain

Unlike *Sturlu saga*, *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, which deals with the conflict between Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson and Þorvaldr Snorrason around the turn of the thirteenth century, follows the structural pattern of the peaceful chieftain's story without any significant modifications. In accordance with its narrative type, the saga presents a contrast between a peaceful chieftain and his aggressive opponent. Þorvaldr is portrayed as a man who treats others unjustly but refuses to tolerate even the slightest injustice against himself and always prefers violent retaliation. He assaults Hrafn's adherents and repeatedly attempts to attack Hrafn. Conversely, Hrafn is shown to be decisive in legal cases but opposed to any form of aggression. He defends himself when necessary but refuses to attack Þorvaldr in response. The structural pattern of the narrative type leads to the expectation of the protagonist's violent death, which is fulfilled in this case. When Þorvaldr finally succeeds in attacking Hrafn's farm, Hrafn gives himself up, so that his companions' lives can be spared, and is beheaded on Þorvaldr's command. The case is then settled by arbitration; Þorvaldr must pay compensation and leave Iceland for three years.

Hrafns saga is preserved both in the *Sturlunga* compilation and in a separate redaction. Compared with other secular contemporary sagas, the separate version is characterized by a stronger religious undertone. It has been described as a narrative portrayal of Christian ethics, or even as a text combining secular biography with hagiography (Guðrún P. Helgadóttir 1987, xx–xxx, lxi–lxxxi; Úlfar Bragason 1988, 269–284; Cormack 1993, 210–216; Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2004, 29–39; Grønlie 2017a, 18). The *Sturlunga* redaction omits the long introduction of *Hrafns saga*, which most directly foregrounds the moral aspects of Hrafn's story, as well as some other material with a strongly religious emphasis or a miraculous undertone. Scholars have agreed that whereas the separate saga is more biographical and focused on the dichotomy between good and evil or on the spiritual aspects of the

protagonist's decisions, the redaction in *Sturlunga saga* turns the narrative into a more typical saga story focused on a conflict between two opponents (Úlfar Bragason 1986a, 152–169; 1988, 285–289; Tranter 1987, 31–50; Guðrún P. Helgadóttir 1993, 68–74; Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2004, 29).

While that is doubtlessly true, I will argue that Úlfar Bragason (1988, 277–289) places too much emphasis on the difference between the two versions in terms of meaning. In his opinion, the question of the boundary between peacefulness and weakness remains open in the *Sturlunga* redaction because the text without the morally oriented introduction does not replace the secular code of honour with the religious moral code (1988, 288–289). This interpretation does not seem accurate, however, because aggression is never presented as honourable behaviour in *Sturlunga saga*. On the contrary, condemnation of violence and the contrast between peacefulness and aggression are recurrent themes in the compilation, as has been shown here. The *Sturlunga* redaction of *Hrafn's saga* is centred around the same themes and underlines their moral implications by multiple narrative devices.

The first of these devices is a contrast between the overall positive evaluation of Hrafn in the narrative and the opinion of some characters who criticize his peacefulness as cowardice. The separate saga contains a more detailed account of Hrafn's argumentation and places a greater emphasis on religious concerns, but both versions express the same evaluation, underlined by a stanza:

Þeir voru sumir at pess fýstu at ríða skyldi eptir þeim Þorvaldi ok drepa hann, svá berr sem hann varð at fjörráðum við Hrafn. Þat vildi Hrafn eigi. Hér af fekk Hrafn mikit ámæli, svá sem Guðmundr Galtason sagði Guðrún, systur hans, er hon spurði hvat hann heyrði rætt of málaferli Hrafnar:

Heyri ek Hrafni fjarða / hyrtælendr ámæla, / þjóð er til lymsk á láði, / línspöng, um atgöngu.
Raun man segja sína / seimhrjóðandi góða: / Vígs er Ullr at öllu / eitrþvengs fyrirleitinn.

Þá er Þorvaldr kom til Ísafjarðar sagði hann allt annat frá fundi þeira Hrafnar en verit hafði. (*Sturlunga saga*, II, 2021, ch. 172, p. 87)

(Some of them suggested that they should pursue Þorvaldr and kill him, as he had so clearly plotted against Hrafn's life. Hrafn refused to do that. He was severely criticized for this, as Guðmundr Galtason said to Guðrún, his sister, when she asked what he had heard about Hrafn's case:

I hear that the destroyers of the bay-fire [men] reprove Hrafn for his conduct, plate of linen [woman]; the people of the country are too wily. The scatterer of gold [man: the poet] will describe his good experience: the Ullr of the poison-strap of battle [man: Hrafn] is always prudent.

When Þorvaldr arrived in Ísafjörður, he described his confrontation with Hrafn very differently from how it had been.)

Þeir váru margir vinir Hrafnar er mæltu at þá skyldi gøra eptir Þorvaldi ok drepa hann, svá berr sem hann gørðisk í fjörráðum við Hrafn er hann vildi brenna hann inni. En þat sýndisk opt at Hrafn var ógrimmr maðr ok hann vildi heldr deyja fyrir tryggðar sakir en fyrir ótryggðar. Nú vildi hann eigi gøra eptir þeim Þorvaldi né drepa hann, svá sem hann átti kost, ef hann vildi, því at hann vildi eigi vinna þat til fára vetra virðingar, sem opt kunnu manna ráð verða, heldr vildi Hrafn hafa svívirðing af mönnum í orðalagi fyrir guðs sakir ok hætta svá lífi sínu til eilífrar miskunnar almáttigs guðs. Fyrir þessa tryggð Hrafnas ámæltu honum margir menn, fyrir þat er hann hafði Þorvald látit undan ganga, svá sem Guðmundr skáld Galtason segir Guðrún, systur Hrafnar, þá er hon spurði hvat hann heyrði røtt of málferli þeira Hrafnar. Hann sagði ok kvað vísu: Heyri ek [...].⁴⁴ Þá er Þorvaldr kom í Ísafjörð þá sagði hann allt annat frá fundi þeira ok hver sætt verit hafði en var. (*Hrafn saga*, 2021, ch. 15, pp. 349–350)

(Many of Hrafn's friends said that they should pursue Þorvaldr and kill him, as he had so clearly plotted against Hrafn's life when he tried to burn his farm. And yet it was shown as usual that Hrafn was not a ferocious man and would rather die to bring about a truce than to break a truce. He did not want to pursue Þorvaldr or kill him, although he had the chance to do so if he wished. He would not do what others could often suggest just to gain esteem for a few years. He would rather be dishonoured by men's speech for the sake of God and risk his life to earn the eternal mercy of God Almighty. Many men reproved Hrafn for this truce and for letting Þorvaldr escape, as the skáld Guðmundr Galtason said to Guðrún, Hrafn's sister, when she asked what he had heard about Hrafn's case. He recited a stanza: I hear [...]. When Þorvaldr arrived in Ísafjörð, he described their confrontation and reconciliation very differently from how it had been.)

The omission of the spiritual argumentation changes the emphasis of the scene but not its overall meaning. In both versions, the stanza and the comment on Þorvaldr's untrue description of the confrontation clearly imply that the slander against Hrafn is unjustified. This dichotomy between the criticism of peacefulness on the story level and its praise on the discourse level is typical of this narrative type.

The moral aspects of the story are further emphasized by an extraordinary abundance of predictions and omens, which are, with some exceptions, included in both redactions. This implies that the compiler of *Sturlunga saga* was aware of the moral framework created by the foreshadowing and deemed it important for the meaning of the narrative – otherwise he could have omitted this material, as it is not indispensable for the description of the events. Þorvaldr's first attack on Hrafn is preceded by a series of prophetic dreams and visions, including dreams of ominous figures reciting stanzas (HSS xiv; STU clxxii). These predictions not only build up tension in the story, but, more importantly, contribute to building up the moral contrast between Þorvaldr as the aggressor and Hrafn as the peaceful chieftain.

⁴⁴ The stanza is the same as in the *Sturlunga saga* redaction.

Another series of predictions precedes Hrafn's death (HSS xvii–xix; STU clxxii). Several people see a mysterious fire, others see blood without knowing where it came from. There is also a vision of three riders armed with long spears, a vision of a large man armed with a sword, and several visions of light. This is followed by an account of an actual miracle (HSS xx; STU clxxii): when Þorvaldr prepares the attack on Hrafn, he binds all the people on the nearby farms, so that they cannot warn Hrafn. A man invokes Saint Þorlákr and his bonds break, so he can free everyone else. They fail to warn Hrafn in time, but the event clearly qualifies as miraculous. Such occurrences are not usual in *Sturlunga saga* otherwise, but the scene is not omitted in the *Sturlunga* redaction because it accentuates the overall moral framework of *Hrafn's saga*.

The supernatural elements contained in the predictions, both in the form of pre-Christian symbolism and Christian allusions, endow the foreshadowing with a meaning that transcends the given situation and expresses a universal condemnation of violence. The emotional intensity of the predictions draws attention to Hrafn's upcoming suffering and marks a narrative focus on the protagonist's undeservedly tragic end.

The spiritual aspect of the story is then also accentuated by allusions to a saint. The death scene is immediately preceded by a scene in which a poem about Saint Andrew is recited to Hrafn, who comments on the saint's martyrdom after each stanza; it is also mentioned that a priest dreams about Saint Andrew's death the same night. These allusions, which are included in both redactions, construct a parallel between Hrafn and the saint. This parallel highlights the evaluation of Hrafn as a model to be followed, just like he followed the example of saints.

The death scene itself shows that Hrafn faces danger bravely and is more concerned for others' safety than his own. The reason why he surrenders is not that he dares not fight Þorvaldr, but rather that he does not want his companions to risk their lives for him:

Hrafn spurði ef Þorvaldr vildi taka sættum nökkurum af þeim, kvað Þorvald ráða skyldu sjálfan fyrir sættum, ef hann vildi gefa mönnum grið, þeim er þar voru fyrir. (*Sturlunga saga*, II, 2021, ch. 172, p. 94)

Hrafn spurði ef Þorvaldr vildi nökkurar sættir af þeim taka, kvað hann ráða skyldu sjálfan fyrir sættum, ef hann gæfi bönum frið, en þeim öllum grið er þar váru fyrir með honum. (*Hrafn's saga*, 2021, ch. 20, p. 361)

(Hrafn asked whether Þorvaldr would agree to a settlement and said that Þorvaldr would set the conditions himself if he /left the farm in peace and/ gave quarter to those who were there.)

Hrafn sacrifices his own life, so that others can be spared; his selfless, morally motivated courage is contrasted with Þorvaldr's ruthless aggression. Thus, al-

though the description of both opponents is less openly biased in the *Sturlunga* redaction than in the separate *Hrafns saga* (Guðrún P. Helgadóttir 1993, 68), the text still expresses a clear evaluation. Hrafn is presented as an innocent victim of violence, who nevertheless cannot be regarded as being passive or weak, as he makes important decisions motivated by a clearly defined moral code.

The most important interpretative devices and morally significant scenes are thus retained in the *Sturlunga* redaction of *Hrafns saga*. Moreover, the *Sturlunga* compilation as a whole accentuates the meaning of the individual story by its overall emphasis on the character type of the peaceful chieftain, which shapes the structure and meaning of the entire narrative. Its importance is underlined by parallels between several characters: apart from Hrafn, this type is also represented by Sturla Þórðarson the elder, Þórðr Sturluson, who appears in the role of an arbitrator in *Hrafns saga* as well, Þorgils skarði Böðvarsson, and others. All the peaceful chieftains in *Sturlunga saga*, in sections preceding and following *Hrafns saga*, are contrasted with the opposite character type, the aggressor. The stories clearly show the protagonists' moral superiority over their opponents and present them as embodiments of beneficial social forces. Furthermore, as will be shown later, the narratives of Þórðr Sturluson, and especially of Þorgils Böðvarsson, share *Hrafns saga*'s focus on similarities between peaceful chieftains and saints or bishops. The whole compilation thus foregrounds the moral and spiritual significance of the values embodied by this character type.

These parallels between peaceful chieftains throughout the compilation highlight the moral implications of Hrafn's story, so its overall meaning is not lost when the introduction is omitted. Although the *Sturlunga* redaction is characterized by a more secular perspective, whereas the separate *Hrafns saga* has a stronger religious emphasis, both versions express the same ideas. Despite its tragic ending, the saga accentuates the continuing presence of morally positive values in Icelandic society during a time of inevitable internal destabilization. It thus presents the recent past as a time of difficulty but not of a downfall.

3.2.4 *Íslendinga saga*: Þórðr Sturluson as the perfect peaceful chieftain

Íslendinga saga, the longest and chronologically broadest part of *Sturlunga saga*, begins around the year 1180 and continues until the end of the Sturlung Age in the 1260s. The extensive saga can be divided into three main sections. The first section describes the gradual rise of the Sturlungar to power and their subsequent downfall, caused by mutual discord. The second section deals with the conflict between the Sturlungar and their rival Gizurr Þorvaldsson; the third section shows Gizurr's rise to power after his defeat of the Sturlungar.

The first section, the account of the rise and fall of the Sturlungar, is a continuation of *Sturlu saga*, where Sturla Þórðarson the elder secures his local power, while the supremacy of the leading clans, the Oddaverjar and the Haukdælir, is still unshakeable. Sturla's sons, by contrast, already have the ambition to assume a position among Iceland's leaders. The beginning of *Íslendinga saga* is focused on the Sturlung brothers Þórðr, Sighvatr, and Snorri, showing their gradual ascent to power by various means, such as successful resolution of local conflicts, marriages to women from the leading families, and challenging the power of the previously invincible chieftains in legal cases. While there is no central conflict, the rivalry between the Sturlungar, the Oddaverjar, and the Haukdælir is clearly described in the narrative. The brothers' success is eventually thwarted by a combination of this rivalry and internal conflicts within the clan, caused by some of its members' immoderate greed for power.

Íslendinga saga depicts political intrigue and does not avoid direct portrayal of brutal bloodshed, but it does not present the Sturlung Age as a time without moral values. It criticizes individuals for their excessive aggression, which is nevertheless counterbalanced by other characters' moderation or morally motivated heroism in defence. As Gunnar Karlsson (1988, 213–215) and Ármann Jakobsson (1994a) have pointed out, the fight scenes in *Íslendinga saga* always condemn the attacker and praise the defender, even if the same persons are alternately presented in both roles. Here it will be argued that apart from this contrast between attackers and defenders, another crucial element of *Íslendinga saga* is its emphasis on the character type of the peaceful chieftain, who is never presented in the role of an attacker and always attempts to prevent bloodshed, so he embodies the stabilizing forces in society.

This type is represented first and foremost by Þórðr Sturluson, who is primarily characterized by his active effort to prevent or reduce violence. He is portrayed as a man who lacks neither skills nor noble descent and could compete for the highest position in the power hierarchy but chooses to reject the violence that the power struggle entails and to focus instead on attempting to moderate his brothers' and nephews' aggression. The narrative contrasts Þórðr with his belligerent kinsmen, thus figuratively depicting the dichotomy between disruptive forces and positive moral values in medieval Icelandic society.

The contrast between the brothers is shown already at the beginning of *Íslendinga saga*, in a scene that foreshadows the upcoming development (STU cxviii). Þórðr defends one of his adherents in a lawsuit and wishes to stick to legal means and avoid violence. One of the plaintiffs, however, hurls his axe at Þórðr's back, but Þórðr stays unharmed despite wearing no armour. His brother Sighvatr wants to avenge the attack, and several men are wounded before the fight is interrupted, but Þórðr then pays compensation for the harm caused by Sighvatr in

order to avoid the cycle of revenge. Although there is no overt reference to divine intervention protecting Þórðr, the scene creates the impression that he was protected by his good intentions alone. The same protection later becomes an option for those who agree to follow Þórðr's wise advice. Þórðr is consistently portrayed as a chieftain committed to lessening the cruelty of the power struggle by always choosing peaceful solutions.

This portrayal is contrasted with the image of Þórðr's kinsmen, in particular his brother Snorri Sturluson and nephew Sturla Sighvatsson, who disrupt the clan's unity by their mutual rivalry. The dispute begins due to their participation in the conflict between Þorvaldr Snorrason and the sons of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson,⁴⁵ in which they end up on the opposite sides (STU clxxxv–cxcvi). The discord is then further intensified by disagreements about the family's chieftaincy (STU cxcviii). At this point, Þórðr Sturluson is involuntarily drawn into the conflict when Sturla Sighvatsson attacks his farm with an armed force (STU cxcix). However, the saga now presents another image of Þórðr being protected by his moral integrity. During the attack, Sturla suddenly realizes how inappropriate it is and decides to stop the fight:

Gengu þeir út ok sögðu Sturlu hvat í hafði gjörzt ok spurðu hvárt hann vildi láta ganga at skálanum. Sturla lézt þat eigi vilja ok kvað ærit at gert. Sendi hann pá Árna Auðunarson til loptsins ok bauð Þórði grið ok öllum mönnum. Sagði Árni svá síðan at honum þótti sem Sturla sæi pá þegar missmiði á fór sinni. (*Sturlunga saga*, II, 2021, ch. 199, p. 174)

(They went out and told Sturla what had happened and asked him whether he wanted them to attack the hall. Sturla said he did not want them to do that because they had already done enough. He then sent Árni Auðunarson to the loft to give quarter to Þórðr and all his men. Árni later said that he thought Sturla had already realized how misguided his expedition was.)

This scene indicates that Þórðr's morality motivates Sturla to suppress his own ferocity and follow Þórðr's example, at least for the moment. Þórðr rejects Snorri's incitement to attack Sturla in revenge and insists on a peaceful settlement (STU cxcix); this clearly illustrates the contrast between his peacefulness and his kinsmen's belligerence, and he is shown to be at least temporarily successful in preventing a tragic outcome of their aggression.

Nevertheless, the conflicts between the Sturlungar continue, although Þórðr always does his best to dissuade his kinsmen from violence. He keeps Snorri from attacking Sturla, offers to mediate between them, and prevents a meeting while

⁴⁵ This is a continuation of the central conflict in *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, which ends with Hrafn's death, while the second part of the conflict, the revenge of Hrafn's sons, is depicted only in *Íslendinga saga*.

both opponents are in a fierce mood (STU cci). The clashes then subside during Sturla's journey to Norway (STU ccxxii, ccxxvi), but after his return, he and Sighvatr continue their violent conflict with Snorri, his son Órækja, and their ally Þorleifr Þórðarson (STU ccli–cclxxviii). This time, Þórðr is unable to prevent bloodshed, but his peaceful attitude still receives much attention in the narrative. When Sighvatr and Sturla intend to attack Snorri (STU ccli–ccli), Þórðr criticizes his brother and predicts the downfall of the Sturlungar, suggesting that it will be caused by their own greed for power:

Veitti hann Sighvati átölur miklar um þat er hann fór at bróður sínum á hátiðum ok sagði at hann mundi stór gjöld fyrir slíkt taka af guði, gamall maðr. Sighvatr tók undir í gamni ok með nökkurri svá græð: „Hvárrgi okkar þarf nú at bregða öðrum elli, eðr hvárt gjörist þú nú spámaðr, frændi?“ Þórðr svarar: „Engi em ek spámaðr, en þó mun ek þér verða spámaðr. Svá mikill sem þú þykkest nú ok trúir á mátt þinn ok sona þinna, þá munu fáir vetr líða áðr þat mun mælt at þar sé mest eptir sik orðit.“ (*Sturlunga saga, II*, 2021, ch. 253, p. 279)

(He strongly reproached Sighvatr for intending to attack his brother during the feast days. He said that Sighvatr would pay dearly to God for such an act, an old man as he was. Sighvatr answered jokingly, and yet with some malice: “Neither of us needs to remind the other of his age. And are you pretending to be a prophet now, brother?” Þórðr replied: “I am not a prophet, and yet I will make a prophecy for you. As influential as you now consider yourself, believing in your own and your sons’ power, few winters will pass before people say that most of your power is gone.”)

Þórðr’s prediction accentuates the destructive effect of the discord between the Sturlungar, which contrasts with their preceding rise to power. This is one of the typical tragic elements of the peaceful chieftain’s story: the protagonist is unable to prevent disaster because others disregard his advice. However, the narrative type is modified in the saga by the absence of its typical tragic ending. The structure of the peaceful chieftain’s story builds up the expectation of the protagonist’s violent death, but Þórðr dies peacefully of old age instead (STU cclxiv):

Eptir þat var hann óleaðr er hann hafði til skipat. En hann andaðist föstudag fyrir pálmsunnudag at miðjum degi ok söng í andlátinu *Pater, in manus tuas commendō spiritum meum* eptir Hauki presti. (*Sturlunga saga, II*, 2021, ch. 264, p. 294)

(When he had proclaimed his decisions, he was anointed. He died on Friday before Palm Sunday in the middle of the day, and in the moment of his death he sang *Pater, in manus tuas commendō spiritum meum*, repeating the words after the priest Haukr.)

This modification of the inherently tragic narrative type emphasizes the superiority of the morally positive and socially beneficial values represented by Þórðr. The storyline is of course determined by historical reality, but the way the story is narrated endows the real events with additional meaning. As Úlfar Bragason has

pointed out, the death scene can highlight the essence of a protagonist's character and the overall interpretation of his life, and its meaning can be emphasized by narrative symmetry. The technique of symmetry is used in the death scene of Þórðr Sturluson: the peacefulness of his death is underlined by a parallel with the death of Bishop Guðmundr Arason, which mirrors the deaths of other saintly bishops (1991a, 453–455). According to Guðrún Nordal, Þórðr's peaceful death is presented as a reward for his efforts at peace throughout his life, and it underlines his moral righteousness (1998, 182–183). At the same time, the saga transcends this individual dimension of the story: in the context of *Íslendinga saga* as a whole, Þórðr's peaceful death contrasts with the bloodshed of the Sturlung Age, contributing to a balanced image of this turbulent period of social transformation.

The whole narrative arc of Þórðr's life – from his youth, when he is almost miraculously protected from an attack, to his peaceful death in his old age – unifies the structure of this section of *Íslendinga saga* and endows it with moral significance. If we interpret Þórðr as the key figure of this section of the saga, which is an interpretation encouraged by the structural pattern of the peaceful chieftain's story, we see that the saga, instead of portraying the Sturlung Age as a time of a moral downfall, presents a positive model of behaviour, based on a clearly defined set of moral values. The inevitable accounts of conflicts are counterbalanced by the emphasis on Þórðr's peacefulness, which foregrounds the cohesive forces that uphold society even during a period of increased violence. The saga could thus provide Icelanders with a past that they could be proud of, as well as with a sense of continuity in terms of the values that defined Icelandic society from the settlement and the Saga Age throughout the Sturlung Age.

3.2.5 *Íslendinga saga*: Sturla Sighvatsson and Gizurr Þorvaldsson as fighters

We now turn to the second section of *Íslendinga saga*, which is centred around the conflict between Sturla Sighvatsson and Gizurr Þorvaldsson. By the time it begins, the strife between the Sturlungar has forced Snorri Sturluson and his allies to escape to Norway (STU ccli–cclxxviii). The peaceful chieftain Þórðr Sturluson is dead and Sturla's and Sighvatr's awareness of their weakened position probably makes them all the more eager to confront their rivals.

An open conflict between Sturla and Gizurr and his ally Kolbeinn Arnórsson starts in the spring of 1238 (STU cclxxxiii–cclxxxv). After Sturla's imprudent capture of Gizurr by Lake Apavatn (STU cclxxxiv), the tension turns into armed clashes (STU cclxxxvi–ccxcii). It is directly expressed in the narrative that the conflict is motivated by rivalry in the power struggle – both parties clearly understand that the winner will attain the position they both strive for:

Gizurr spyrr Sturlu þá hví hann léti leggja hendr á hann. Sturla bað hann ekki efast í því at hann ætlaði sér meira hlut en öðrum mönnum á Íslandi, „en mér þykkir sem þá sé allir yfirkomnir er þú ert, því at ek uggi þík einn manna á Íslandi ef eigi ferr vel með okkr.“ (*Sturlunga saga*, II, 2021, ch. 284, p. 313)

(Gizurr asked Sturla why he had him captured. Sturla told him not to doubt that he intended to attain a higher position than anyone else in Iceland. “And I believe that everyone will be defeated if you are, because you are the only Icelander I fear, if we do not get along.”)

Þeir Kolbeinn frændr réðu þat á Kjölrum at þeir skyldu flokka uppi hafa ok slíta eigi fyrr en aðrir hvárir væri í helju, Sturla eðr þeir. (*Sturlunga saga*, II, 2021, ch. 285, p. 315)

(Kolbeinn and his kinsmen decided at Kjölr to gather forces and not to dissolve them until either Sturla or they were in Hell.)

The Sturlungar, weakened by the conflict within their clan, are finally defeated by Gizurr and Kolbeinn in the battle of Örlygsstaðir on 21 August 1238 (STU ccxciii–ccxciv). This is a decisive event in the Sturlungar’s downfall, as Gizurr now becomes the most powerful chieftain in Iceland. It is admitted in the text that he attains this position by partly unfair means, but he cannot be regarded as the undisputed villain of this section of the saga, because his opponents do not always behave much better. Overall, the moral interpretation of this section is ambiguous and must be sought in the deeper layers of the text’s meaning.

The portrayal of Gizurr Porvaldsson is so ambivalent that it has been considered inconsistent. Some scholars have even argued that the sections in which Gizurr is evaluated positively cannot have been original parts of Sturla Þórðarson’s *Íslendinga saga* but were interpolated by *Sturlunga saga*’s compiler from a separate, now lost saga of Gizurr (Björn M. Ólsen 1902, 311–325; Kålund 1904, iv; Pétur Sigurðsson 1933–1935, 42; Nedrelið 1994, 615–616; Helgi Þorláksson 2012, 60–61; 2017, 209). While the origin of the individual sections cannot be determined with certainty, I will attempt to show that their selection is neither inconsistent nor arbitrary and that this ambiguity is an important component of the saga’s overall pattern of evaluating its protagonists, which is based on a remarkable narrative symmetry between the portrayals of Gizurr and Sturla.

This symmetry has been noticed by scholars, but the existing interpretations have not been convincing. Guðrún Nordal suggests that the two opponents are presented as contrasting characters, with Sturla representing recklessness and Gizurr representing moderation (1998, 53–61). She shows how the negative portrayal of Sturla is emphasized by the symbolism of the wolf (1998, 163–171), but her analysis of symbolism overshadows various other aspects of Sturla’s personality that are depicted in the saga. Furthermore, Gizurr’s behaviour can hardly be regarded as a model of moderation at this point, as he often acts much more vio-

lently than necessary. Conversely, Úlfar Bragason states that both the birth scene and the death scene mark Sturla Sighvatsson as the positive hero of the saga (1986b, 68–76). However, drawing such a conclusion on account of two individual scenes is too limiting because it isolates these scenes from the saga's overall portrayal of Sturla and his opponent. Here it will be attempted to shed better light on the meaning of the narrative parallel between Sturla and Gizurr.

The two protagonists are directly characterized by the narrator, and such direct characterization is strikingly positive. In the description of Sturla Sighvatsson, it is emphasized that he gives useful advice and is a popular chieftain and a good troop leader:

[...] engi flokkr pótti betr siðaðr vera en sá er Sturla hafði. Lagði hann vel til ok allgegnliga þessa mála ok fekk af því mikla vinsæld suðr þar. (*Sturlunga saga*, II, 2021, ch. 179, p. 132)

([...] no troop seemed to have better manners than the one led by Sturla. He gave good and very useful advice in these matters, so he gained much popularity there in the south.)

Similarly, the direct characterization of Gizurr Þorvaldsson is entirely positive and portrays him as a popular, capable chieftain. Above all, it emphasizes that he does not behave immoderately:

Hann gerðist höfðingi mikill ok vitr maðr. [...] Gizurr var meðalmaðr at vexti ok allra manna bezt á sik kominn, vel limaðr, snareygðr, ok lágu fast augun, ok skýrligr í viðbragði, betr talaðr en flestir menn hér á landi, bliðmæltr ok mikill rómrinn, engi ákafamaðr ok pótti jafnan inn drjúligsti til ráðagerðar. (*Sturlunga saga*, II, 2021, ch. 265, p. 295)

(He became an influential chieftain and a wise man. [...] Gizurr was a man of average height but extremely well-built, with strong arms and legs and keen eyes with a firm look – and he answered cleverly, was more eloquent than most men in this country, and spoke kindly but with a strong voice. He did not behave immoderately and seemed to always stick to his decisions.)

In contrast to this directly expressed praise, the indirect characterization of both protagonists in individual episodes shows that they often act immoderately and turn to excessive violence. The criticism of such behaviour is expressed either by a narrative focus on the defender (see Ármann Jakobsson 1994a), or more directly in dialogues and in the characters' comments.

Sturla Sighvatsson's personality is revealed in several key scenes, which are not an essential part of the saga's account of the historical events but are important as a means of character portrayal. In an introductory scene from his youth, Sturla wants to try a precious sword owned by a farmer and takes it without permission, which leads to a fight. Sturla fights carelessly, hurts the farmer more than he intends to, and is criticized by his father, who then brings about a reconciliation (STU clxxiii). Later in the saga, Sturla fights for power ruthlessly and is

again criticized by Sighvatr, who is a rather aggressive man himself but understands that his son's ambition is excessive. He ridicules Sturla's greed for power in a long monologue, in which he lists the most influential chieftains as Sturla's future farm servants (STU cclxxvi). Sturla's hot temper is reflected in his response: he jumps up in anger and leaves his father's farm. Sighvatr then implies a prediction of Sturla's fall:

Þá tók Sighvatr til orða: „Hvé lengi mun haldast ofsi sjá inn mikli er Sturla hefir umfram alla frændr vára?“ Már svarar: „Þat þykkir líkligt at lengi haldist fyrir þínar sakir ok annarra frænda yðvarra gófugra, en þó muntu slíku næst geta, bóni, ok vilda ek heyrá hvers þú gætir til eða hversu pér segði hugr um petta.“ Sighvatr svarar: „Ekki kann ek til slíks at sjá, en fá eru óhóf alllangæ. En þó má vera at þetta sé langætt ef hann drepr eigi fæti fyrr, en ef hann drepr þá mun hann drepa eigi sem minnst.“ (*Sturlunga saga*, II, 2021, ch. 280, p. 309)

(Sighvatr said: "How long will this huge immoderation, which characterizes Sturla more than any other of our kinsmen, last?" Már answered: "I deem it likely that it will last long due to you and your other noble kinsmen. But you would surely make a better guess, franklin, and I would like to hear what you expect or how you feel about this." Sighvatr replied: "I am not able to predict such things, but immoderation seldom lasts too long. And yet it is possible that it will last long this time, if he does not stumble soon, but if he stumbles, he will not stumble too little.")

This prediction, just like the previously discussed prediction by Þórðr Sturluson, serves as a comment that guides the interpretation of the story. It expresses the idea that immoderation causes the downfall of capable men, which is here applied to Sturla Sighvatsson but can also be understood as a universally valid norm.

Sighvatr continues to criticize Sturla's decisions and Sturla's responses gradually become more ambivalent. At first, he jumps up in anger again, but then he comes back and sits humbly by his father's feet (STU cclxxxi). This probably shows that Sturla understands that he is going too far, and that he feels uncertain about his actions. Such uncertainty seems to be caused by moral concerns, so Sturla is not portrayed as an entirely ruthless man, rather as a promising chieftain blinded by his excessive greed for power.

Sighvatr's comments throughout this section of the saga serve as a narrative device for evaluating Sturla's behaviour. They contradict the narrator's direct characterization of Sturla, but it would be a simplification to suspect the saga's writer of failing to create consistent personal portrayals or of unsuccessfully trying to conceal his personal bias. Instead, this contrast can be understood as implying a comparison between the ideal chieftain, portrayed in the direct characterization, and Sturla's actual behaviour, which is criticized in the saga. This becomes even clearer when we notice the same pattern in the portrayal of Gizurr Þorvaldsson.

The first negative perception of Gizurr is also expressed by Sighvatr Sturluson. When he is asked about his opinion of the boy, he answers: "I do not like

that frowning brow”,⁴⁶ indicating that Gizurr appears to be fierce and stubborn. This is followed by a dialogue in which Gizurr’s father Þorvaldr predicts the future conflict:

Þá mælti Sighvatr: „Þess vil ek biðja þík, Þorvaldr, at vit gætim svá til með sonum okkrum at þeir heldi vel vináttu með frændsemi.“ Þorvaldr leit niðr fyrir sik ok heldr áhyggjusamliga ok mælti: „Gætt man meðan vit lifum báðir.“ Þetta virðist mönnum in mesta spásaga at því sem síðar varð, því at Þorvaldr var sálaðr þá er Apavatnsför var. (*Sturlunga saga*, II, 2021, ch. 189, p. 152)

(Then Sighvatr said: “I want to ask a favour of you, Þorvaldr, that we both keep an eye on our sons, so they keep their friendship and respect their kinship.” Þorvaldr looked down, somewhat worried, and said: “It will be so while we both live.” People thought that this was a significant prediction, with regard to what happened later, for Þorvaldr was dead when the meeting by Apavatn took place.)

Like the aforementioned predictions, this dialogue foreshadows the upcoming violence and its tragic consequences. It highlights the contrast between the fathers, who are concerned for peace – although Sighvatr is a fighter himself, but at least his ambition has some limits – and the sons, whose greed for power is stronger than any moral concerns. As such, the dialogue contributes to constructing the moral framework of the narrative.

The contrast between the positive direct characterization and the indirect portrayal of Gizurr is even more striking in the key scenes that depict his action. The description of Gizurr’s brutality in the battle of Örlygsstaðir speaks for itself (STU ccxciv):

Þat segja menn þeir er hjá voru at Gizurr hljóp báðum fótum upp við er hann hjó Sturlu, svá at lopt sá milli fótanna ok jarðarinnar. (*Sturlunga saga*, II, 2021, ch. 294, pp. 342–343)

(Those who were there say that when Gizurr hewed at Sturla, he jumped up with both legs, so one could see air between his feet and the ground.)

Within the terse saga style, this unusually vivid depiction emphasizes the impression of Gizurr taking pleasure in killing his opponent. After this merciless killing, Gizurr also plunders Sturla’s body and steals his money, jewellery, and weapons. No direct commentary is needed for understanding the moral evaluation of such acts.

Some of the remaining Sturlungar, Órækja Snorrason and Sturla Þórðarson the younger, later take revenge by killing Gizurr’s kinsman Klængr Bjarnarson (STU cccxi). They fight Gizurr at the Skálholt bishopric, but the outcome of the battle is not decisive (STU cccxiv). Both parties then arrange a meeting, but de-

46 „Ekki er mér um ygglibrún þá.“ (*Sturlunga saga*, II, 2021, ch. 189, p. 152).

spite the promises of a peaceful negotiation, Gizurr and Kolbeinn capture Órækja and Sturla in a treacherous manner (STU cccxv). Their treachery is sharply criticized by the two clerics who witness it and even by some of their own men:

Byskup ok Brandr ábóti bregðast mjök reiðir við þetta ok kalla in mestu svik við sik gjör ok alla þá er hlut áttu at þessum málum. [...] Bændr nökkurir ór flokki Kolbeins gengu þá til Órækju ok kváðust skyldu berjast með honum ok kváðu þetta in mestu svik. [...] Sigvarðr byskup ok Brandr ábóti ámaeltu Gizuri mjök um þessar málalyktir at honum hefði illa farit. Gizurr svarar svá, kvað á öllu öðru meiri mein sjá en þessu. (*Sturlunga saga*, II, 2021, ch. 315, pp. 387–388)

(The bishop and Abbot Brandr were enraged by this and called it the worst betrayal of themselves and of everyone who was involved in the case. [...] Some farmers from Kolbeinn's troop went over to Órækja and offered to fight for him, because they deemed this the worst betrayal. [...] Bishop Sigvarðr and Abbot Brandr strongly reproached Gizurr for his decision, saying that he had committed a misdeed. Gizurr answered that he saw more harm in everything else than in this.)

The structure of this scene follows the same pattern as some of the episodes dealing with Sturla: the protagonist behaves immoderately, is criticized, and responds arrogantly. The clerics' opinion serves as a means of evaluation, and there is again a sharp contrast between this evaluation and the direct characterization. The protagonist is thus compared with an ideal.

This means that there is not an opposition between the depiction of Sturla and Gizurr, but rather a parallel. The similarity of the pattern is too striking to be a coincidence, and both portrayals together make sense as a narrative device for expressing ideas about the behaviour of chieftains. The text portrays neither Sturla nor Gizurr one-sidedly as a villain but contrasts their occasional recklessness with the image of the ideal chieftain. This ideal is not presented as something unattainable, however, but rather as a set of qualities that both protagonists inherently possess but do not fully develop due to their excessive greed for power, pride, and belligerence. The saga thus shows that individual chieftains possess both desirable and disruptive qualities. On the level of individual morals, this highlights the idea that everyone's actions are guided by their own decision to behave either moderately or immoderately. On a more universal level, it can be understood as an image of the inevitable presence of both disruptive and beneficial forces in any society. In this sense, Icelandic society of the Sturlung Age is neither better nor worse than any other.

Both Sturla and Gizurr are also contrasted with the ideal peaceful chieftain Þórðr Sturluson, who embodies the personal qualities that are praised in the direct characterizations. The tragic aspect of the story is the peaceful chieftain's inability to dissuade his kinsmen from their violent intentions, but his central position in the narrative emphasizes the morally positive values that uphold soci-

ety. The narrative thus creates a figurative image of Icelandic society with its various aspects, implying that the positive elements counterbalance the flaws and prevent social disintegration, although they cannot always prevent individual acts of violence.

3.3 Constructing a memory of continuity

The present chapter has shown that the contemporary sagas dealing with internal Icelandic relations share some of their central themes with the narratives of the distant past, such as the early historiographical texts or the sagas of Icelanders. This thematic continuity accentuates the image of Icelandic history as a coherent process and foregrounds some of the values with which the community identified. Among these themes, the central focus is the importance of stabilizing forces in society, embodied by decisive peaceful leaders or other influential persons who strive to regulate or terminate conflicts by non-violent means.

In the sagas – both those dealing with the settlement period and with the recent past – this theme shapes not only their content, but also their structure, as it determines the form of the predominant narrative types, the conflict story and the peaceful chieftain's story. Their structural patterns construct the meaning of the sagas by emphasizing certain aspects of the events, foregrounding specific character types, and creating parallels or contrasts within individual sagas or across different sagas. It has been argued here that the narrative types thus play an important role in transforming accounts of the recent past from communicative memory into coherent stories in the contemporary sagas, and that they endow the complex chains of events with additional layers of meaning that transcend the events themselves. As recipients of the texts, we need to reveal the narrative types and their inherent meanings in order to fully appreciate the interpretations of history that are hidden beneath the surface of the seemingly straightforward historiographical style of *Sturlunga saga*.

The narrative type of the conflict story is centred around an evolution from the initial escalation of discord to the final reconciliation. As such, it admits that violence is inevitable in a decentralized society, but it foregrounds the social mechanisms that enable the renewal of peace with the help of the community, its most respectable representatives, and its institutions. These mechanisms are embodied by the character type of the mediator, which has a crucial position in the conflict story. The mediators are not the main characters on the level of plot, but they are essential for the expression of values and ideas on the level of discourse. They accentuate the importance of peaceful reconciliation by their action, as well

as by their speeches, in which they emphasize the connection between moderation and honour.

In the conflict story, the mediator is typically contrasted with his negative counterpart, an aggressor who disrupts social harmony by his violent behaviour or an instigator who goads others into aggression. Such pairs, Ketill and Már in *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða* or Abbot Brandr and Þórðr Sighvatsson in *Svínfellinga saga*, embody the presence of both stabilizing and disruptive forces in society. The moral and social superiority of the mediators in the sagas shows that despite the presence of disruptive forces, the past depicted in the contemporary sagas is not presented as a period of social disintegration and moral downfall, because the negative elements are counterbalanced by the positive forces.

The importance of an influential leader who strives to maintain peace in his district is foregrounded even more in the peaceful chieftain's story. This narrative type is centred around the portrayal of its protagonist, who embodies the social mechanisms that prevent fights and promote non-violent resolution of conflicts. Its inherently tragic plot accentuates the disruptive effects of excessive aggression, while its emphasis on the protagonist's moral integrity underlines the constant presence of cohesive forces in Icelandic society. Just like the conflict story, this narrative type contributes to an interpretation and evaluation of the recent past in the contemporary sagas by accentuating a specific character type and creating contrasts and parallels. Firstly, the peaceful chieftains' stories are characterized by a contrast between the protagonist and his negative counterpart, an aggressive chieftain. This contrast draws increased attention to the peaceful chieftains as representatives of the positive values that uphold society. Secondly, *Sturlunga saga* as a compilation builds up parallels between several noteworthy peaceful chieftains: the ambitious but moderate Sturla Þórðarson the elder, the morally perfect tragic hero Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, the wise Þórðr Sturluson as the positive counterpart of his power-greedy kinsmen, and others in its later sections (see chapter 5). The compilation thus emphasizes the peaceful chieftains' importance for the interpretation of the past.

Furthermore, it has been shown here how the compilation's overall focus on the character type of the peaceful chieftain serves as an interpretative device that can replace other narrative means. The analysis of *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* has revealed how the meaning constructed in *Sturlunga saga* by the typological similarity between Hrafn and other peaceful chieftains replaces the introductory section of the separate *Hrafn's saga*, which draws attention to the dichotomy between good and evil. The overall meaning of the story is thus not changed by the omission of the introductory section in the *Sturlunga* redaction, although the separate version reflects a more spiritual perspective and the *Sturlunga* redaction a more social perspective. Another function of these parallels in the compilation is

that as the other peaceful chieftains' stories in *Sturlunga saga* modify the inherently tragic tone of this narrative type, the recipient is reminded that the gloomy ending of *Hrafns saga* is not the only possible option, and that the overall image of the recent past in *Sturlunga saga* is more optimistic. Such intertextual interpretation is only possible due to the typological connections between several sagas that share the same narrative type.

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The focus on mediators or peaceful chieftains in these sagas shows how the collective knowledge of the narrative types with their given ensemble of character types and their inherent meanings shaped the stories during the narrativization of recent events. Furthermore, it seems likely that the predominant narrative types with their specific thematic emphases even contributed to the selection of stories to be narrativized and written down or of persons to be remembered. It can be assumed that many historical events and persons were remembered in communicative memory, but whether they would be incorporated into cultural memory or gradually forgotten, depended mainly on whether their importance in the stories transcended their individual historical significance and could contribute to a broader interpretation of history, from which the community could derive its collective identity. It was therefore not just political importance, but also typological characteristics that determined whether an event or a person would be remembered and *how* they would be remembered.

For instance, Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson was probably not as politically significant as most other central characters in the contemporary sagas, and yet his story was remembered beyond communicative memory. In the separate *Hrafns saga*, he is portrayed as a potential saint (Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2004, 33–39), which doubtlessly made him an important bearer of collective identity. In the *Sturlunga* redaction, however, this aspect of his portrayal is suppressed, albeit not completely removed. Instead, the reason why *Hrafns saga* was incorporated into *Sturlunga saga* was presumably Hrafn's role as a model peaceful chieftain, an embodiment of values that defined the Icelanders' preferred image of their past.⁴⁷ Similarly, Þórðr Sturluson was probably mostly overshadowed by his more ambitious brothers and nephews on the political level, but he can be regarded as the key character of a section of *Sturlunga saga* on the level of discourse, as his portrayal contributes to the compilation's interpretation of the recent past alongside other peaceful chieftains' stories. These stories are more than just moralistic tales intended to illustrate the dichot-

⁴⁷ The events described in *Hrafns saga* are also important as causes of later conflicts involving the Sturlungar (see 3.2.4), but a brief outline of the events would have sufficed as an introduction to these conflicts.

omy between virtue and sin. The peaceful chieftains, apart from representing individual morality, embody the evolving ideals of government and public authority.

As Torfi Tulinius has pointed out, the increased focus on peaceful chieftains in thirteenth-century Iceland was part of a trend in western civilization at the time (2016, 92). A significant aspect of the Church's rise to power in Europe was its insistence on the link between government and service. This may have affected the perception of the gradually changing, and possibly debated, role of the Icelandic chieftains (2016, 92, 99–100). The new ideology may have influenced not only the current political thinking, but also the memory of the past. It could be important for the collective identity of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelanders to possess stories showing that although the currently popular ideology was not dogmatically formulated in the past, its central values naturally existed in society. Icelanders could thus derive their identity and a sense of historical continuity from an image of the past that mirrored ideas that were socially or ideologically relevant to the present.

The same importance for the interpretation of history presumably shaped the portrayals of individuals who receive attention in the conflict stories as mediators. These persons, such as the clerics Ketill and Brandr, probably enjoyed a good reputation as mediators in real life, which made them *memorable* in communicative memory. However, they were side characters in the respective stories, so they would hardly have received so much attention in the sagas if they had not been regarded as essential for the sagas' meaning as embodiments of the stabilizing forces in society. Another influential mediator, the chieftain Jón Loptsson, was doubtlessly a historically significant person, so it can seem surprising that he is not the central protagonist of any extant saga. However, he is presented in several contemporary sagas, primarily in *Sturlu saga* and *Guðmundar saga dýra*, as the main arbitrator – a side character who nevertheless has a crucial position in the sagas. This social role of Jón Loptsson is essential in cultural memory because it is associated with an important theme of the narrative of medieval Icelandic history: the significance of a strong social leader who can effectively terminate serious conflicts that could not be resolved without the intervention of such a superior authority.

As has been shown in the preceding chapter, the importance of strong social leaders is a theme that appears already in the early Icelandic historiographical texts. The theme is then further developed in the contemporary sagas that praise powerful arbitrators or peaceful chieftains, illustrate the dire consequences of their absence, and depict the desirable personal qualities of an ideal leader. These sagas reflect the political transformation of Icelandic society and show that the nature and extent of the chieftains' power changed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Nevertheless, the social significance of strong leadership is

equally emphasized in texts dealing with all periods of medieval Icelandic history. That can be understood as a comment on the entire process of power concentration from the perspective of the time when the narratives were composed. The positive portrayal of powerful social leaders throughout different sources indicates that power concentration was probably generally regarded as a beneficial development that increased social stability in the long term, although some aspects of the process inevitably had a temporarily destabilizing effect. As the memory of this process was narrativized, the structure of the narrative types enabled an interpretation that foregrounds the positive evaluation without entirely concealing the negative aspects.

Since the sagas accentuate the mechanisms and values that unite a society in the absence of a central unifying figure, such as a monarch, they are an essential component of the medieval Icelanders' collective memory of their pre-monarchic past. Nevertheless, even the sagas that primarily depict internal Icelandic relations construct collective identity with an awareness of the relationship between Iceland and the Norwegian monarchy, which was an inseparable part of their extra-textual context. What is important in this respect is that it would be misleading to assume that the sagas, by emphasizing the positive aspects of the original Icelandic kingless society, express a rejection of royal rule. What they do reject, however, is an interpretation of Iceland as a failed, disintegrated society that is unable to resist a submission to external forces. Instead, the texts present a society that is solidly anchored in its own authentic set of values but is open to political contact with the monarchy. This contact is the focus of other contemporary sagas, which pay much more attention to the process of establishing deeper political connections between Iceland and Norway. Their interpretation of these connections is built upon the image of Icelandic society that has been presented here, and it further develops some of its aspects. These sagas will be the object of the following chapters.