4 Continuity and contact: Mutual influences between Iceland and Norway

The narrative accounts of medieval Icelandic history depict not only the internal development of the Icelandic social system, power structures, and institutions, but also the process of defining Iceland's relationship with other Nordic countries, especially Norway. It has been shown here that while the narratives of early Icelandic history show the importance of Iceland's relatedness to Norway, they simultaneously accentuate the importance of the Icelanders' active decisions and of finding balance between interaction and individuation. In this and the following chapters, it will be argued that the contemporary sagas express similar themes and attitudes, albeit in different contexts, determined by the historical development and by the nature of the sources.

The previous chapter has shown that the secular contemporary sagas dealing with the period before the Sturlung Age are focused on internal power relations in Iceland and pay little attention to contact with Norway. Nevertheless, the narrative image of this contact is recorded in the sagas of the three bishops who were venerated as saints in medieval Iceland. These sagas were modelled on Latin hagiographies, which were known in Iceland and some of them had been translated into Old Norse, but they also depict political relationships and significant elements of medieval Icelandic collective identity. Their wider geographical scope is understandable, as Church matters were inherently international and Christianity increased the Icelanders' awareness of their connection with a broader cultural region. As Sverrir Jakobsson has pointed out, Icelanders probably perceived their own peripherality mainly in the context of the Christian world: the Christian history had happened elsewhere, and the centres of the Church were far away (2005, 160–166; 2009). This feeling of marginality could be deconstructed by narratives of the spiritual and intellectual accomplishments of Icelandic ecclesiastical dignitaries, in which Icelanders "declared their arrival in the Christian world through the appropriation of the cult of saints" (Grønlie 2017a, 1). The Icelandic saintly bishops were thus even more important identity bearers than their predecessors.

Contact between Iceland and Norway is then foregrounded even more in the secular contemporary sagas dealing with the beginning of the Sturlung Age, the time of a significant transformation of the political relationship between the two countries. Although there had always been a political, economic, and cultural contact (see Wærdahl 2011, 1–8), which is a strong element of continuity, the character of the relationship between Icelanders and the Norwegian monarchy changed in the early thirteenth century. Icelanders had always visited the Norwegian

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111348476-004

royal court as travellers, court poets, or royal retainers, but direct political alliances between Icelandic chieftains and Norwegian rulers became a reality only when the chieftains started seeking the rulers' support in the Icelandic power struggle. That was a consequence of the power concentration in Iceland and of the intense internal conflicts during its final stage, when the chieftains needed a higher authority that they could turn to for support or arbitration.

A process of power concentration was simultaneously taking place in Norway as well, and it involved strife between different factions no less than in Iceland. After Sverrir Sigurðarson's (1184–1202) decisive victory over Magnús Erlingsson (1161–1184), his faction gained the throne and managed to retain it even after the death of Sverrir in 1202 and of his son Hákon in 1204. During the short reign of Sverrir's underage grandson Guttormr Sigurðarson (1204), the power was in the hands of the regent, Jarl Hákon Fólkviðarson galinn, who then held the position of jarl also during the reign of Sverrir's nephew Ingi Bárðarson (1204–1217). After Jarl Hákon's death in 1214, King Ingi appointed his own brother Skúli Bárðarson to the office of jarl. Skúli then claimed the throne after Ingi's death in 1217, but it was Sverrir's thirteen-year-old grandson Hákon Hákonarson who was elected king instead, while Skúli retained his position as jarl (see Bagge 2010, 40–67).

The scholarly assessment of the development after 1217 has varied. It has been suggested that there was little rivalry between Hákon and Skúli until 1238, with the exception of a few crises (Ólafía Einarsdóttir 1992, 99–104). Conversely, other scholars have argued that there was a constant power struggle between Hákon and Skúli (Bagge 1996, 107–111; Orning 2018, 206–215). At the beginning of their co-rule, Skúli refused to swear allegiance to Hákon until he had received a sufficient share of the country to govern (Bagge 1996, 108; HSH xxv).[48] Skúli's daughter Margrét was betrothed to Hákon already in 1219, but in *Hákonar saga*, Hákon expresses his opinion that the betrothal will not change anything (HSH lvii). After Skúli's defeat of other rebelling factions, the relationship between the co-rulers was partly stabilized by an agreement at the assembly in Björgyn in 1223, where they divided the country between themselves, but their rivalry was not entirely terminated (Bagge 1996, 108–109). This rivalry, however, does not contradict Ólafía Einarsdóttir's assertion that Hákon and Skúli issued documents together and frequently stayed together without any open strife in the 1220s and 1230s (1992, 99–104). The sources imply that Skúli, as a skilled politician, waited with open opposition to Hákon until he had secured himself enough support.

48 The references to *Hákonar saga* here follow the 2013 edition by Sverrir Jakobsson, Þorleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, in which the chapter numbers differ from the edition used by Bagge.

Only in the late 1230s, he attempted to seize the throne by military means and was defeated (Bagge 1996, 111–119).

This political tension in Norway seems to have played an important role in intensifying the political contact with Iceland, which has often been neglected in research. The predominant tendency has been to study the political development in Iceland during the early Sturlung Age as an isolated process, since most scholars have believed that the internal strife in Norway did not allow the Norwegian rulers to focus on Iceland until the conflict was terminated by the defeat of Skúli Bárðarson in 1240 (see Wærdahl 2011, 103; Long 2017, 230). Here it will be argued, however, that the sagas present just this internal strife in Norway as the incentive that initiated the Norwegian rulers' active interest in Iceland already around 1220, because they sought the Icelanders' support in their mutual competition. One of Skúli's strategies for strengthening his power base seems to have been an effort to gain influential Icelandic allies, and King Hákon soon followed suit and sought political alliances with Icelanders as well. At the same time, the Icelandic chieftains sought both rulers' support in their own power struggles. Icelanders are thus described as a significant power unit in Norwegian politics at a time of intense conflicts in both countries, and the narratives accentuate the idea that the political ties that were established at this time stemmed from both sides' initiative.

The presentation of this historical period in the sources was shaped by various deliberate choices in the process of narrativization. As the stories of the recent past were transformed from communicative into cultural memory, some aspects were suppressed and others were foregrounded, so that certain themes were emphasized. Here it will be attempted to show how this interpretation was achieved in the contemporary sagas with the help of specific structural patterns and sets of motifs, through which the accounts of recent events were fitted into particular narrative types. This process endowed the stories with meanings that were significant for the construction of collective identity.

4.1 Þorlákr Þórhallsson, Jón Ögmundarson, Guðmundr Arason: Saints from the periphery

The sagas of the Icelandic saintly bishops construct identity on two levels, spiritual and social, which are not mutually contradictory and are interconnected in the narratives, reflecting the medieval perception of multi-layered identity. On the spiritual level, the sagas emphasize the genuine holiness and clerical virtues of the local saints. Due to these qualities, the saintly bishops can not only serve as role models for their successors and other Christians, but they are also compared to the foreign saints portrayed in the Latin hagiographies on which the bishops'

sagas are modelled. Such narrative parallels emphasize Iceland's spiritual equality with the rest of the Christian world despite its peripheral position.

On the social level, the bishops' sagas, in the stories of both the saintly bishops and other characters, present different types of relationships between Icelanders and Norwegian rulers. In their accounts of the Icelanders' contact with the monarchs, the bishops' sagas employ narrative types that they share with many secular sagas: the travel story and the royal retainer's story, which thematically connect them with the immanent narrative of Icelandic history.

4.1.1 The narrative type of the travel story

The story of an Icelander who arrives at the Norwegian royal court, faces derision, rejection, or a conflict, and finally proves his worth and gains social prestige, is best known from the *útanferðar þættir* that are incorporated in the kings' sagas, especially in *Morkinskinna* and *Flateyjarbók*.[49] The travel story also constitutes parts of some sagas of Icelanders (Lönnroth 1976, 71–72; Boulhosa 2005, 182–183) and plays a significant role in the contemporary sagas, including the bishops' sagas, as will be shown here.

The structure of the *útanferðar þættir* has been described by Joseph Harris, who defines six stages of the plot: (1) an introduction of the protagonist, (2) a journey out of Iceland, (3) an alienation between the king and the Icelander, followed by (4) a reconciliation, (5) a journey back to Iceland, and (6) a conclusion (Harris 1972, 7–14). Significantly, the journey to Norway is not just a physical relocation, but also a "movement into the king's sphere of authority" (1972, 10). It thus entails an acceptance of royal power and of different social norms, which can initially pose a challenge to the Icelander and cause disagreements. The reason for the alienation can be the breaking of a rule, the killing of a royal retainer, or slander by jealous courtiers; the reconciliation is then usually preceded by a test or an intervention of friends (1972, 11–13). Despite possible variations in the stories, this structural pattern, centred around the transition from estrangement to acceptance, defines the plot of all the *útanferðar þættir* (1972, 20).

In another study, Harris identifies the typical themes of the *útanferðar þættir*. A central theme is the reciprocity of friendship and the connection between gen-

49 The function of *þættir* in these compilations has been discussed in detail by Ármann Jakobsson (2014) and Stefanie Würth (1991) respectively. William Sayers sums it up (2021, 43): "The *þættir* incorporated in the Norwegian kings' sagas offer the compiler the opportunity to shift from the general biographical arc of the royal subject to more specific thematics, realized through the presence of an Icelander at the royal or other court."

erosity and loyalty (Harris 1976, 7–8). As for personal characterization, the Icelander is usually appreciated for his wit and eloquence, whereas the kings are often presented in contrasting pairs: heathen and Christian, generous and stingy, kind and overbearing (1976, 8–10). Concerning the central values, most *þættir* foreground Christian ethics, such as the importance of magnanimity and forgiveness, and some present conversion or divine intervention as a decisive plot element (1976, 10–14). As for the protagonist's condition, there is a sharp contrast between his initial position as a poor and awkward outsider, subjected to prejudice or hostility in Norway, and his later success after he has proven his cleverness and courage (1976, 16–17). Thus, the *þættir*, unlike the sagas of Icelanders, are characterized by an inherently optimistic tone (1976, 16–19).

Harris aptly characterizes the *útanferðar þættir* as a group, but his analysis tends to be descriptive and limited to the content of the stories, failing to capture their meaning. He does not sufficiently elaborate on how the narrative foregrounding of the reconciliation (1972, 11) or the dominant themes of the *þættir* (1976) reflect the social context of the texts' origin and contribute to their function as social commentary. Nevertheless, his focus on the *þættir* has served as a starting point for other studies that have paid more attention to their meaning.

Vésteinn Ólason (1985) shows that the *þættir* accentuate the mutuality of relationships between Icelanders and kings: the Icelander must deserve the king's favour, but the king must deserve the Icelander's loyalty as well. Thus, the central concept of the *þættir* is a hierarchical but reciprocal and voluntary relationship between the Icelander and the monarch, based on an exchange of service and allegiance for prestige and patronage. The popularity of this narrative type implies that it reflects attitudes towards the monarchy that were widespread among the thirteenth-century Icelanders who wrote down these stories in the decades before and after the formal acceptance of royal rule (1985, 64–70).

Else Mundal (1997) focuses on the perception of Icelanders by Norwegians and analyses the *þættir* as images of the Icelanders' position within the Norse cultural region. She shows that the typical protagonist is an inexperienced newcomer at the royal court, who is unfamiliar with the courtly manners and is used to more straightforward behaviour, so his conduct is perceived as awkward or eccentric. The Norwegian courtiers therefore ridicule the protagonist because they deem him simple-minded or ignorant, or because of his insufficient material resources and plain clothing, and such derision can lead to conflicts. The Icelander's unconventional behaviour can also cause an alienation from the king, so their relationship is initially characterized by mutual distrust. Nevertheless, the Icelander eventually proves to be no less clever or capable than the courtiers; he is appreciated by the king and reconciled with him, so his journey increases his prestige in the end (1997, 22–23).

A recent detailed study by Ármann Jakobsson (2014) shows that the Icelandic self-image presented in the *útanferðar þættir* is twofold, containing an inferiority complex as well as self-assurance, and relatedness to Norway as well as a sense of individuality (2014, 291–292). The travel story admits that Norwegians may stereotypically regard Icelanders as foolish and awkward, but the structure of the story emphasizes the Icelanders' positive personal qualities, such as integrity, courage, cleverness, or diplomatic eloquence, due to which they eventually gain appreciation (2014, 284–286; see also 2003, 45–47). The king is often presented as a righteous monarch who successfully terminates conflicts and protects the Icelanders if they are bullied by envious Norwegian courtiers (2014, 181–184). Overall, the travel stories foreground the idea that despite possible initial distrust or disagreements, contact between Icelanders and Norwegian kings is beneficial for both parties (2014, 281–283; 2003, 48–49).

All these thematic emphases can be illustrated by examples of *útanferðar þættir*. Some *þættir* depict individual conflicts between the Icelander and the king, caused by a particular disagreement. The alienation is typically followed either by a task undertaken by the Icelander to regain the king's favour, or by an influential Norwegian's intercession on the Icelander's behalf. In *Egils þáttr Síðu-Hallssonar*, the protagonist angers the king by disobedience on a military expedition; he then regains the king's favour by persuading a heathen jarl to convert to Christianity. In *Þorsteins þáttr Síðu-Hallssonar*, which deals with Egill's brother, the Icelander is outlawed by King Magnús Óláfsson for undertaking a trade journey without the king's permission and without paying the travel tax. Einarr þambarskelfir, the king's foster-father, intercedes on Þorsteinn's behalf, and the king finally agrees to pardon Þorsteinn out of respect for Einarr. These stories are less focused on the Icelander's position as a socially awkward newcomer and more on the dynamics of his relationship with the king, which is shown to be changeable and to depend on various circumstances, including the Icelander's contacts with other Norwegians. The central idea is that the conflicts can be resolved and should not be regarded as a sign of any lasting enmity between Icelanders and the monarchy.

Other *þættir* accentuate the Icelander's conflicts with Norwegian aristocrats or royal retainers and the king's role as the Icelander's protector. The disagreements are typically not just personal but reflect the Norwegians' jealousy of the capable Icelander. In *Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttr*, for instance, the protagonist arrives in Norway as a poor and insignificant newcomer but earns the favour of the wealthy Norwegian woman Ása by his wit and his success as a merchant. A conflict develops between Þórðr and the king's vassal Ingimarr because of a theft; the law is on Þórðr's side, but Ingimarr is much more powerful. Ingimarr confronts Þórðr three times, but Þórðr stands his ground and is defended by Ása's

influential kinsman and finally by the king himself. Þórðr is called *stafkarl einn íslenzkr* (an Icelandic beggar) and *mörlandi* (suet-eater) by his Norwegian enemy, so his regional identity is clearly a source of antipathy (Ármann Jakobsson 2014, 283). The king, however, willingly protects the Icelander's interests; Ingimarr falls into disfavour with the king and must leave Norway because of this incident, whereas Þórðr marries Ása and enjoys prestige in Norway for the rest of his life. The story thus emphasizes not only the Icelander's skills and integrity, but also the king's fairness in judging the case objectively and not marginalizing the Icelander.[50]

The reciprocity of relationships between Icelanders and kings is foregrounded in *Auðunar þáttr vestfirzka*. It tells the story of a poor Icelander who travels to Greenland and spends all his money on a polar bear, which he wants to bring as a gift to King Sveinn Úlfsson of Denmark. In Norway, Auðunn daringly opposes King Haraldr Sigurðarson's wish to gain the bear; the king is angered by Auðunn's intention to give the bear to his enemy but decides to let him continue his journey in peace. King Sveinn rewards Auðunn for the bear by giving him provisions for a pilgrimage to Rome. When Auðunn returns in a poor condition, the retainers laugh at him, but the king replies to them that Auðunn takes better care of his soul than they do. As a parting gift, King Sveinn gives Auðunn a ship, a bag of silver, and a ring. Back in Norway, Auðunn gives the ring to King Haraldr as a token of his gratitude and receives gifts in return.

Auðunar þáttr thus shows how every gift, material or immaterial, is repaid, and the Icelander's determination, daring, and generosity are rewarded with respect and esteem. Auðunn's success can be interpreted as a result of his luck (Miller 2008, 71–77), but "there is a strong sense in *Audun's Story* that Audun deserves his good luck, because he generates so much of it for himself as a consequence of his virtue, his intelligence and integrity, and manifest charm" (2008, 75). The story thus foregrounds the Icelander's personal qualities as a precondition of his prestige. At the same time, apart from its obvious religious overtones

50 The king is similarly presented as the Icelander's protector in *Þorgríms þáttr Hallasonar*, in which King Magnús Óláfsson intervenes on the Icelanders' behalf in their conflict with the magnate Kálfr Árnason, caused by slander and political disagreements. The king pardons the imprisoned Icelander because he acknowledges that his action was justified. This again shows how the king protects the insignificant but honest Icelander from a powerful aristocrat regardless of the difference in their origin and social status.

In *Þorsteins þáttr Austfirðings*, the protagonist saves a young man's life without knowing that the man is in fact King Magnús. The king's retainers later laugh at Þorsteinn, implying that Icelanders are simple-minded and uncivilized. King Magnús, by contrast, praises Þorsteinn's selfless bravery; he thus implies that the Icelander, despite his humble origin, has done more to deserve his esteem than those who claim prestige with empty words.

(Rey-Radlińska 2010, 103–106, 109), the *þáttr* also presents "a conception of an ideal king shown in parabolic form" (2010, 108). Although King Haraldr and King Sveinn are opponents and rivals on the level of plot, on the level of discourse they both embody the same essential royal virtues, such as magnanimity, justice, nobility, and generosity (2010, 106–107). The reciprocity of the relationship with the Icelander is significant in this context as well: the kings test Auðunn, but he also tests their kingly qualities. That is a deeper level of reciprocity, which can refer to the relationship between Icelanders and the monarchy in general.

Another tale, *Hreiðars þáttr*,[51] accentuates the protagonist's role as an outsider. It tells the story of an eccentric Icelander who is considered foolish even at home. Upon his arrival at the royal court, his straightforward behaviour towards King Magnús borders on insolence, but it is not a sign of disrespect, rather a lack of refined manners. The king invites him into his retinue and predicts that his skills will be revealed at some point. Hreiðarr is ridiculed by the retainers at first but eventually earns respect by his wit, eloquence, and physical prowess. However, the retainers of Magnús's co-ruler, King Haraldr, treat Hreiðarr disrespectfully, so he gets angry and kills one of them, thus incurring King Haraldr's wrath. Hreiðarr then daringly addresses King Haraldr and gives him a mocking gift, angering him even more. King Magnús protects him and tells him that he found him strange at first but has come to like him. Hreiðarr finally returns to Iceland and enjoys a much better reputation there than before. Thus, the main idea of the story seems to be the increase of social prestige through contact with the monarch.

When the protagonist is initially presented as an outsider, the story offers much space for his social advancement; Hreiðarr eventually gets the opportunity to show that he is smarter and more capable than he seems to be at first (Hermann Pálsson 1992, 156–160). As Richard Harris has pointed out, Hreiðarr's speech and behaviour in the *þáttr* are rooted in the traditional, ancient wisdom that is represented by Old Icelandic proverbs and the Eddic poem *Hávamál* (2020, 22–25). Harris does not discuss the function of this literary feature as social commentary, but it can reflect the idea that such timeless, pragmatic cleverness, figuratively attributed to Icelanders collectively, is more important than the superficial courtly manners that are only a passing trend. However, the story implies that such differences should not discourage Icelanders from interaction with the royal court, where they can be appreciated by the open-minded kings, although they may be rejected by the overbearing ones. The narrative thus reflects the ambiguous Icelandic self-

51 The commonly used title, *Hreiðars þáttr heimska* (*The Tale of Hreiðarr the Foolish*), is actually not attested in *Morkinskinna*, which contains only the introductory phrase "frá Hreiðari" (Harris 2020, 20).

image, in which taking pride in distinctive qualities is combined with a need to overcome marginality. According to Ármann Jakobsson, Hreiðarr can be viewed as "a personification of the Icelandic nation" in the sense that although the king sees how inexperienced the newcomer is, he acknowledges his potential and encourages him to discover and develop his skills (2014, 282). The *þáttr* can thus have a significant figurative meaning.

These thematic emphases and inherent meanings of the travel story also shape the accounts of events in the contemporary sagas and the bishops' sagas, as I will show in this and the following chapters. I will argue that this narrative type is essential for the interpretation of relationships between Iceland and the rest of the North, so it significantly contributes to the construction of collective identity. In the secular sagas, it can be combined with contrasting, inherently tragic narrative types, so it modifies the tone and meaning of the whole story. In the bishops' sagas, it adds a new layer of meaning to the otherwise predominantly hagiographic narratives, thus enhancing their function as identity-building texts.

4.1.2 The saintly bishops and the narrative type of the travel story

The hagiographic sagas of the first Icelandic saintly bishops, *Jóns saga* and *Þorláks saga*, primarily follow the model of the Latin hagiographies, so they are focused on the saints' moral virtues, consecration, work for the Church, death, and miracles. However, they also deal with some of the social and political aspects of the bishops' careers, and they contain accounts of the protagonists' contact with continental Scandinavia.

In *Jóns saga*, Jón Ögmundarson's glorious ecclesiastical career is first predicted long before his birth, when his mother meets King Óláfr Haraldsson of Norway, who expresses his belief that her future child will be blessed with great glory (JS i). Later, when Jón stays at the Danish royal court with his parents in his childhood, the queen predicts that he will become a bishop (JS i). Next, the saga gives an account of Jón proving his worth abroad in his youth. While returning from a pilgrimage to Rome, he visits the king of Denmark and attends mass with him, but the priest reads poorly. Jón replaces him, and his performance is so impressive that the king then seats him by his side as a sign of respect (JS ii). Still at the king's court, Jón has a dream about King David playing the harp; Jón remembers the melody and plays it for the king and the courtiers, who are all deeply impressed (JS iii). Finally, during his consecration journey to Archbishop Özurr, Jón sings mass so beautifully that the archbishop compares his voice to the voice of angels (JS vii). All these episodes imply that the Icelander possesses excellent clerical qualities, although he comes from the periphery of the Christian world.

These scenes contextualize an episode dealing with the relationship between Icelanders and the Norwegian king, which is unexpectedly political for a hagiographic saga and is structured by the narrative pattern of the travel story. It begins when the Icelander Gísl Illugason kills a retainer of King Magnús Barefoot in revenge for his father, is captured and imprisoned, and the Icelanders in town break into the prison and set him free. In the earlier redactions of *Jóns saga*, the tale is brief: the angry king forbids the Icelanders to speak to their defence, but the priest Jón is allowed to speak and persuades the king to forgive Gísl (JS v). This version thus foregrounds Jón's eloquence that turns the monarch from vengeance to reconciliation.

In the later L-redaction, the story is more complex. It intertwines political and religious elements in a noteworthy manner, combining an utterly miraculous event with rivalry between the Icelandic cleric and a Norwegian retainer. During the lawsuit with Gísl, a retainer named Sigurðr speaks hatefully of Icelanders and claims that "it would not be too great a redress if ten Icelanders were killed for one Norwegian as a punishment for their insolence, as they freed a man who was in the king's power".[52] The priest Jón condemns Sigurðr's vengeful speech, but he also reminds the king of the Icelanders' allegiance to him:

> „[…] fjándinn mælti fyrir munn þeim er í fyrstu talaði, svá segjandi: ‚Nú er veginn einn konungs maðr, en makligt væri at drepnir væri tíu íslenzkir fyrir einn norrœnan.' En hugsið um þat, góðr herra, at svá erum vér íslenzkir menn yðrir þegnar sem þeir er hér eru innan lands. […]" (*Gísls þáttr Illugasonar*, 2003, p. 324)

> ("[…] the devil talked through the mouth of the man who spoke first, saying: 'Since one royal retainer has been killed, it would be fitting if ten Icelanders were killed for one Norwegian.' But keep in mind, my lord, that we Icelanders are your subjects, just like those who live here in this country. […]")

This conciliatory ending of the utterance is intended to discourage the king from heeding the retainer's evil words. The formulation that Icelanders are the king's subjects (*þegnar*) is used in a positive context, with the purpose of reminding the king of his duties as a protector and righteous judge of his subjects (see Sverrir Jakobsson 2005, 343–345). Icelanders were not the king's subjects at the time of Jón Ögmundarson's life, but they were his subjects when the L-redaction was composed. The projection of this situation onto a historical event can be regarded as an acknowledgement and approval of the situation, implying that Icelanders did not oppose royal rule, but emphasized their expectation of the king's justice in his dealings with them.

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52 […] eigi er at bœttra at tíu sé drepnir af íslenskum mǫnnum fyrir einn norrœnan, ok refsi þeim svá sína ofdirfð er þeir tóku mann ór konungs valdi (*Gísls þáttr Illugasonar*, 2003, p. 323).

In the story, however, the king is not persuaded by Jón's speech and has Gísl hanged on the gallows. Jón gives Gísl a cloak that protects him together with Jón's prayers, so he stays alive on the gallows and is taken down after three days. The retainer Sigurðr becomes mortally ill and asks Jón to heal him by his prayers. Jón does so, but only when the retainer has promised to establish a monastery and donate his property to it. The king is impressed by the miracles and shows Jón deep respect:

> Ok er konungr sá Jón prest, rétti hann báðar hendr á móti honum blíðliga ok mælti: „Gakk hér undir borð hjá oss, Jón prestr, inn kærasti Guðs vinr, ok svá vilda ek at þú værir várr inn bezti vinr, því at ek veit fyrir víst at saman ferr Guðs vili ok þinn, ok þat vilda ek gjarna at saman fœri okkar vili." Inn heilagi Jón svarar þá: „Nú munu þér vilja vel til Íslendinga, kumpána minna, því at þat þykir mér allmiklu varða." (*Gísls þáttr Illugasonar*, 2003, pp. 332–333)
>
> (And when the king saw the priest Jón, he stretched out both arms to him in a friendly gesture and said: "Come to our table, priest Jón, the dearest friend of God. I would like you to be our best friend, because I know for sure that God's will and yours are the same, and I would like our will to be the same as well." Saint Jón replied: "Now you should be kind to Icelanders, my companions, because that is very important to me.")

The king then offers Gísl a reconciliation and the same prestige that the slain retainer enjoyed before.[53] This is a conciliatory ending, focused on the mutual respect between the king and the Icelandic cleric and his companion. At the same time, however, the episode shows that the cleric clearly has the upper hand – he makes the proud retainer give up most of his property, and he makes the king almost beg for his friendship. He is helped by miraculous divine interventions, which mark his spiritual superiority. This combination of an emphasis on reconciliation and on the protagonist's accomplishment is typical of the travel story, which reflects the medieval Icelanders' wish to overcome their marginality within the Norse cultural region.

A similar concern with the Icelanders' position in the North characterizes an episode in *Þorláks saga* (ÞS-A x). Þorlákr Þórhallsson is elected as the Bishop of Skálholt in 1174, but before his consecration, the relationship between Norway and Iceland worsens due to conflicts that are mentioned, but not specified, in the saga.[54] The cause of the tension was probably a dispute between a Norwegian mer-

53 […] gakk til sætis Gjafvalds ok haf slíka virðing af oss sem hann hafði um alla sína daga. (*Gísls þáttr Illugasonar*, 2003, p. 333) (Go to Gjafvaldr's seat and have the same esteem from me as he had all his life.)

54 Menn vildu eigi at hann fœri útan fyrir sakir ófriðar þess er þá var millum Nóregs ok Íslands, er málum var ósett þeim er gǫrzk hǫfðu landa í millum af vígum ok fjárupptekðum. (*Þorláks saga* A, 2002, ch. 10, p. 64) (People did not want him to go abroad because of the hostilities that were taking place between Norway and Iceland while the conflicts that had occurred between the countries due to killings and confiscation of property were unresolved.)

chant named Brennu-Páll and the Icelandic priest Helgi Skaptason. Helgi's farm was burned in 1174; in revenge, Helgi burned the ship of Brennu-Páll, which was then avenged by the killing of Helgi in 1175.[55] *Þorláks saga* does not dwell on this story and focuses instead on Þorlákr's contact with the Norwegian authorities.

In the summer of 1177, Þorlákr insists on undertaking the consecration journey despite the discord, because he cannot bear the absence of a bishop at Skálholt after his predecessor's death (ÞS-A x). King Magnús Erlingsson opposes Þorlákr's consecration at first, although Þorlákr is clearly not personally involved in the conflict (ÞS-A xi); scholars believe that the reason may have been Þorlákr's connection to the Oddaverjar, who were probably involved in the conflict (Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 153–154; Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 67–68). Instead of discussing the causes of the enmity, which were probably known to the intended audience, the saga foregrounds the central structural elements of the travel story: the alienation and subsequent reconciliation between the Icelander and the king. In the account of the initial disagreement, Þorlákr's vulnerable position in Norway is contrasted with his mental strength, which is emphasized by a biblical quotation:

> Þeir hǫfðu þá ríki yfir Nóregi feðgar, Magnús konungr ok Erlingr jarl, faðir hans, ok tóku þeir þungliga ǫllu Þorláks máli, ok kómu þaðan hót fyrir hœgendi at hvárki myndi óhætt fé né mǫnnum. En Þorlákr lét sér lítit um þat finnask ok sýndi þar sinn alhuga vera allan sem Davíð kennir í psaltara, at betra sé Guði at treystask en hǫfðingjum, ok lét hann þetta af því hjá sér líða. (*Þorláks saga* A, 2002, ch. 11, pp. 64–65)
>
> (Norway was then ruled by King Magnús and his father, Jarl Erlingr, and they showed reluctance in Þorlákr's matter, and threats came from them instead of favour, that neither property nor people would stay safe. But Þorlákr was little affected by it, in which he showed his steadfastness, as David teaches us in his psalm that it is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes, and so he did not let this affect him.)

This contrast accentuates Þorlákr's clerical virtue, which outweighs his marginality in Norway. The focus on his trust in God foreshadows a satisfactory solution,

55 A brief account of this conflict is found in *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða* (STU lxxix). The beginning of this conflict may also be referred to in Archbishop Eysteinn's letter to the Icelanders from 1173. If the dating is correct, the letter was written before the events depicted in *Prestssaga*, which implies that the Icelanders must have mistreated the Norwegians in some way before the clash between Helgi and Brennu-Páll broke out: "Svá ok þat sem þér hafit af gert við konunginn ok við landslýð hans, þá leiðréttisk þat við hann, þótt margir verði við bótina skipask, þar sem fáir hafa misgert." (*Diplomatarium Islandicum, I,* 1857, p. 223) (And your misdeeds against the king and his people must be redressed, even if many people must contribute to the compensation, although few people have committed the misdeed.)

and the account is indeed immediately followed by a description of the reconciliation that is brought about by Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson:

> En erkibyskup þóttisk sitja í miklum vanda er hann vildi hvártveggja elska, ok vildi hann þess gæta er Páll postoli kennir í sínum pistli: „Óttizk þér Guð," segir hann, „en vegsamið konung." Mátti þat ok á ǫllu sjá at hann vildi hér hvárstveggja vandliga gæta í þeirra máli. Bar erkibyskup þá boð á millum þeira ok aðrir góðgjarnir menn, ok kom þar at konungrinn ok jarlinn samþykkðu því at Þorlákr tœki byskupsvígslu, ok gerðisk þá vingunarsvipr þeira á milli, ok gáfusk þeir gjǫfum áðr þeir skilði. (*Þorláks saga* A, 2002, ch. 11, p. 65)

> (But the archbishop found himself in a great difficulty because he wished to love both parties, and he wanted to follow what the apostle Paul teaches us in his epistle: "Fear God," he says, "and honour the king." It was obvious from all his acts that he wished to carefully assist both parties in this matter. The archbishop then mediated between them together with other goodwilled men, and it came about that the king and the jarl consented to Þorlákr's consecration, and they appeared to be friends from then on, and they exchanged gifts before they parted.)

The two biblical quotations, "þetra sé Guði at treystask en hǫfðingjum" and "óttizk þér Guð, en vegsamið konung", seem to contradict each other, but they make sense together within the structural pattern of the travel story. The former is linked to the alienation between Þorlákr and the monarch, expressing the idea that while the Icelandic cleric lacks political power in Norway, he can hope for God's help. The latter is related to the agreement mediated by the archbishop; it accentuates the connection between secular and ecclesiastical power despite the temporary discord. The contradiction between the quotations emphasizes the contrast between the initial conflict and the subsequent agreement; it thus highlights the importance of reconciliation.

This emphasis on the final reconciliation underlines the overall message of the episode structured by the narrative pattern of the travel story, which expresses a positive attitude to the relationship between Iceland and Norway despite an awareness of inevitable conflicts. The Icelander faces the king's distrust when he first arrives in Norway, but due to his own intellectual and spiritual qualities, he overcomes the alienation with the help of a mediator. His relationship with the king eventually turns from enmity into mutual respect, and his social prestige is increased, so his initial marginality is overcome.

The focus on Þorlákr's prestige is further accentuated by the ending of the episode, which describes the archbishop's appreciation of Þorlákr, showing that the archbishop himself considers the Icelandic bishop an ideal embodiment of clerical virtues:

> En er Þorlákr byskup var skiliðr at samvistu viðr erkibyskup þá spurðu þeir byskuparnir hversu honum hefði þokkazk Þorlákr byskup. Hann sagði svá at hann þóttisk øngan byskup þann hafa vígt er honum þótti jafn gǫrla með sér hafa alla þá mannkosti er byskupum er skylt at hafa […]. „Má ek yðr svá nǫkkut segja helzt hve vitrligir mér hafa virzk hans hættir,"

> sagði erkibyskup, „at ek munda þvílíkt kjósa mitt lífsdœgr it efsta sem ek sá hans hvert.“ (*Þorláks saga* A, 2002, ch. 11, p. 66)
>
> (And when Bishop Þorlákr had left the archbishop's company, the other bishops asked how he had felt about Bishop Þorlákr. He said he felt that he had never consecrated a bishop who seemed to equally possess all the virtues that befit bishops […]. "The best way to express how wise I find his behaviour," said the archbishop, "is that I would choose the last day of my life to be like I saw each of his days to be.")

As has been shown above (2.1.3), such emphasis on the appreciation of Icelandic bishops by foreign dignitaries significantly contributes to the narrative image of Iceland's position within the Christian world. *Þorláks saga*, due to its protagonist's sainthood, subverts the idea of Iceland's spiritual marginality even more than the portrayals of his predecessors.

Overall, the episodes discussed in this section show how interpretations of individual stories as figurative comments on medieval Icelandic society are enabled by the intertextual connections of the bishops' sagas with the Latin hagiographies and with the secular *útanferðar þættir*. An image of the bishops' double role as saints and political dignitaries may have existed already in communicative memory, but the integration of this image into cultural memory through the intertextual processes in a literary discourse strengthened the bishops' function as identity bearers representing the whole community. The hagiographic elements establish the idea of Iceland's spiritual equality with other Christian countries, while the elements shared with the secular *útanferðar þættir* evaluate the Icelanders' position in their relationship with the Norwegian royal court. Such a thematic variety would not be possible without the sagas' intertextuality, which shapes the meaning of the bishops' sagas not just as religious texts, but also as identity-building narratives.

4.1.3 Ingimundr Þorgeirsson's travel story in *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*

Unlike *Þorláks saga* and *Jóns saga*, *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*, in the version preserved as a part of *Sturlunga saga*, is not primarily hagiographic, although it accentuates spiritual values more than the rest of the compilation. It presents a balanced image of Guðmundr's development into a saintly cleric and of his kinsmen's contact with the Norwegian rulers.

The main traveller in *Prestssaga* is the priest Ingimundr Þorgeirsson, a brother of Guðmundr's father Ari. The saga underlines his significance for the future bishop's upbringing after Ari's death, but it also depicts his regular contact with Norway. Ingimundr sails there first with his brother Ari (STU lxxviii), then with Guðmundr (STU lxxx), and finally with his nephew Ögmundr Þorvarðsson (STU lxxxii–lxxxvi). Al-

ready the account of his second journey contains some elements of the travel story, as the Icelandic protagonist faces disagreements with Norwegians on the ship, is scorned for his alleged lack of knowledge, and must prove his worth. It is, however, mainly the third journey that is narrated as a fully developed travel story, structured by a conflict and a reconciliation between the Icelander and the royal court.[56]

After Ingimundr's arrival in Norway, the king's men confiscate some of his merchandise, including some valuable cloth, despite the king's promise to protect his property (STU lxxxv). Ingimundr nevertheless decides not to complain, because – due to his clerical peacefulness – he does not wish to cause a dispute.[57] When he recognizes his own cloth on the garments of the king's courtiers, he still chooses not to cause a conflict and asks his nephew Ögmundr to keep peace.[58] Ögmundr and his companions, however, insist on taking action, so they attack and kill four of the courtiers who are wearing the confiscated cloth (STU lxxxvi). When the king judges the case, he takes into account the ancestry of Ögmundr's companions and believes that they are telling the truth. He decides that the revenge was justified, dismisses all those who participated in stealing the merchandise, and lets Ingimundr and his nephew receive the clothes:

> Þá koma þessi tíðindi fyrir Jón kuflung, ok kvað þá við hirðmannalúðr, ok sögðu hvárir tveggju Jóni kuflungi sögu sína. En þeir Bárðr ok Pétr voru náfrændr Eysteins erkibyskups, ok virðir Jón þá svá mikils í þessu máli at hann gerir í brott sveit þá alla frá fylgð við sik. En þeir Ögmundr tóku klæðin til sín, ok um þetta mál var kyrrt síðan. (*Sturlunga saga, I*, 2021, ch. 86, p. 173)
>
> (Then this news gets to Jón kuflungr, and the retainers were summoned by the trumpet, and both parties presented their version of the story to Jón kuflungr. Bárðr and Pétr were closely related to Archbishop Eysteinn, and Jón trusted them so much in this matter that he dismissed the whole group from his service. Ögmundr and his men took the clothes and the case remained undisputed from then on.)

56 The saga takes place during a period of civil wars between several royal pretenders in Norway. Ingimundr was in Norway during the reign of Sverrir Sigurðarson (1184–1202), but the supporters of the previous king Magnús Erlingsson continued to rival Sverrir. Their leader was a former monk, Jón kuflungr, allegedly an illegitimate son of King Ingi Haraldsson (1136–1161). Jón kuflungr ruled the region of Vík in Eastern Norway, and in the story of Ingimundr, it is he who is presented as the king. The rivalry between King Sverrir and Jón kuflungr is not important for Ingimundr's story, in which the king rather represents the monarchy as an institution.

57 […] hann […] vildi heldr missa en þá skilði á. (*Sturlunga saga, I*, 2021, ch. 85, p. 172) (He […] rather wished to lose [his property] than argue with them.)

58 […] [Ingimundr] bað hann þó vera láta kyrrt ok kvaðst eigi vilja at nakkvat hark stæðist af honum. (*Sturlunga saga, I*, 2021, ch. 85, p. 172) ([Ingimundr] still asked him to keep peace and said he did not want any struggles to be caused by him.)

This episode shows the king's justice in the conflict between his men and Ingimundr, caused by their greed and his vulnerability as a traveller who cannot rely on his kin or allies. The king could easily choose to punish the Icelanders and protect his own men, but he makes no differences between them and judges the case objectively. The Icelanders are morally superior to the courtiers – Ingimundr due to his moderation and Ögmundr due to his determination, and the king appreciates them and avoids marginalizing them. They thus regain their esteem and overcome their initial marginality.

Finally, the episode has a noteworthy epilogue. The saga describes how Ingimundr's return to Iceland fails and he perishes in Greenland, but his body is later found undecayed:

> Skip þeira kom í óbyggð á Grænlandi, ok týndust menn allir. En þess varð svá víst at fjórtán vetrum síðar fannst skip þeira ok sjau menn í hellisskúta einum. Þar var Ingimundr prestr. Hann var heill ok ófúinn ok svá klæði hans, en sex manna bein voru þar hjá honum. Vax var ok þar hjá honum ok rúnar þær er sögðu atburð um líflát þeira. En þetta þótti mönnum mikil merki, hvé guði hafði líkat atferð Ingimundar prests, er hann skyldi svá lengi legit hafa úti með heilum líkam ok ósköddum. (*Sturlunga saga, I*, 2021, ch. 86, p. 174)
>
> (Their ship was driven to the uninhabited part of Greenland and all the men perished. And this became known because fourteen years later, their ship was discovered and seven men were found in a cave. The priest Ingimundr was there. His body was whole and undecayed, and so were his clothes, but only bones were left of the other six men next to him. There was also wax with runes describing the circumstances of their death. Everybody thought that it was a great sign of how pleased God had been by Ingimundr's behaviour that he had lain outside for such a long time, and yet his body remained whole and undamaged.)

Such a description presents Ingimundr almost as a saint. That is not surprising in the context of the saga that portrays him as the key figure in the upbringing of a future saintly bishop, but it can also be compared with the previously discussed motif of divine intervention in the travel stories in the hagiographic sagas. This motif serves as the ultimate proof of the Icelandic clerics' spiritual excellence, which is not only appreciated by the Norwegian secular and ecclesiastical authorities, but its significance in God's eyes is demonstrated through miraculous occurrences, which leave no doubt as to Iceland's spiritual equality with the rest of the Christian world. In the context of Ingimundr's tale in *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*, with its significant elements of the travel story, I believe that this interpretation of the motif makes sense also here. The meaning of the narrative thus extends beyond the story of Guðmundr Arason's family and contributes to the construction of collective identity.

4.2 Ari Þorgeirsson: The jarl's sword and shield

4.2.1 The narrative type of the royal retainer's story

Another significant narrative type is the story of an Icelandic retainer at the Norwegian royal court, which foregrounds the connection between service to a monarch and increased social prestige. Royal service as a source of prestige is a widespread cultural concept in medieval Icelandic literature (Mundal 1997, 17–18). The likely reason why Icelanders associated the Norwegian king with a specific type of social status is that "where their power was personal, his had a more abstract and therefore more absolute provenance" (Long 2017, 241).

The essential quality accentuated in the narrative portrayals of royal retainers is their loyalty to the monarch, which is shown to be deeply appreciated and generously rewarded (Ármann Jakobsson 2003, 47–48; 2014, 280–281). In this context, however, the narrative type emphasizes the difference between active allegiance and passive subordination. The retainer is not presented as being forced into unconditional obedience to the king; instead, it is shown that he decides to remain faithful to the monarch of his own free will, motivated by his respect and admiration for him, as well as by his appreciation of the values represented by the king.

This is related to another central theme of the royal retainer's story: the contrast between purposeful courage and meaningless aggression. The story is centred around the protagonist's transformation from an aggressor into a courageous defender of the king. The Icelander, portrayed as a brave fighter, is an embodiment of confidence and fearlessness, but the narrative type shows that such an image of strength is not associated with a desire for independence exaggerated to the point of isolation. On the contrary, what distinguishes the noble warrior from a barbaric killer is his loyalty to a monarch that gives his courage a purpose and a direction, without which it would be nothing but brutality. It provides him with a sense of responsibility for the social order that unites society and transcends individual interests or conflicts. The essential difference is that courage in a monarch's service contributes to maintaining peace and order, whereas aggression motivated by personal gain disrupts them.

The structural pattern of the royal retainer's story consists of four main stages: (1) an introduction of the protagonist as a belligerent man, whose ferocity threatens social harmony; (2) the protagonist's decision to enter the royal service, whereby his ferocity is given a meaningful purpose; (3) the protagonist proves his worth in a task or mission; (4) the protagonist is appreciated by the monarch for completing his task. An optional fifth stage is the protagonist's death in battle together with the monarch or in protecting the monarch's life. Even then, however, the story should not be considered as being inherently tragic, because death by

the monarch's side is presented as a glorious deed motivated by a noble purpose. The narrative type can thus be regarded as an inherently optimistic story of the protagonist's transformation from a troublemaker into a defender of peace and order.

This narrative type can be found in some *þættir* in the kings' sagas. In *Hrafns þáttr Guðrúnarsonar*, for instance, the protagonist is outlawed in both Iceland and Norway because of his killings. Although he is aware of being in disfavour with the king, he insists on joining the king in battle and fights bravely on the king's behalf, thus showing his devotion to royal service. The king has a dream in which Saint Óláfr intercedes on Hrafn's behalf, so he decides to pardon him. Hrafn then stays with the king for the rest of his life and continues to show courage in his service but never disrupts social harmony again. The story thus foregrounds the Icelander's voluntary decision to remain loyal to the king, as well as the positive change in his behaviour, motivated by royal service. The motif of the saint's intervention accentuates the idea that the king is morally obliged to forgive the faithful and courageous man. The protagonist is shown to receive prestige and appreciation after changing his behaviour, which implies that his moral transformation is socially beneficial for him as well.

The narrative type also shapes a large section of *Fóstbræðra saga*, which contains two interconnected stories of Icelandic royal retainers. The sworn brothers Þorgeirr Hávarsson and Þormóðr Bersason are introduced as ruthless men, unpopular in Iceland because of their violent, overbearing behaviour that causes unrest in their district. When Þorgeirr sails to Norway and joins the retinue of King Óláfr Haraldsson, he earns the king's respect by demonstrating his qualities.[59] In royal service, he learns to put his courage to a meaningful use and proves himself in two missions: first a trade journey to Vindland, where the conditions for Norse merchants are difficult, and then a journey to join Jarl Rögnvaldr of Orkney in fights against raiders. King Óláfr warns Þorgeirr against returning to Iceland, but Þorgeirr leaves anyway and is soon killed in an armed clash. This implies that his position as a retainer gives him not only a purpose, but also protection by the king's luck, which he loses by disregarding the king's advice.

After Þorgeirr's death, his equally belligerent sworn brother Þormóðr joins King Óláfr's retinue as well. His mission is a journey to Greenland to avenge Þorgeirr on the king's behalf, because the king regards his retainer's death as his per-

59 Konungr lagði mikla virðing á Þorgeir, því at hann reyndisk í öllum mannraunum inn röskvasti maðr ok góðr drengr. (*Fóstbræðra saga*, 1943, ch. 8, p. 159) (The king held Þorgeirr in high esteem because he proved himself to be the bravest man and a worthy fellow in all trials.)

sonal loss. While Þormóðr is carrying out his mission, the king's luck protects him even when the king is not physically present.[60] Þormóðr is finally saved by the king's luck when he is pursued by his enemies in Greenland and almost dies of exhaustion and wounds but is rescued by a man who has seen King Óláfr in a dream. Þormóðr proves his worth by avenging his sworn brother in Greenland, returns to King Óláfr, and is praised for his accomplishment. Afterwards, Þormóðr follows the king even to exile and to battle because "he finds it better to die with him than to outlive him".[61] He dies together with the king in the battle of Stiklastaðir and is called "King Saint Óláfr's champion"[62] at the end of the saga. This underlines the idea that Þormóðr's identity is defined by his loyalty to the king, because in royal service, the fighter can use his bravery in a useful manner. Instead of being an aggressor and a threat to social harmony, he becomes a defender of the social order represented by the monarch (see Ciklamini 1988, 228; Arnold 2003, 159–172).

Here it will be shown how the structural pattern and thematic emphasis of the royal retainer's story shape the interpretation of recent history in the contemporary sagas. In the primarily biographical *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*, it contributes to the construction of a broader political meaning by turning the portrayals of side characters into a comprehensive narrative. Its function is thus comparable to that of the travel story of Ingimundr Þorgeirsson.

4.2.2 Þorvarðr and Ari Þorgeirsson as ideal royal retainers

The portrayal of Guðmundr's father Ari Þorgeirsson and his brother Þorvarðr in *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða* presents the two men as ideal royal retainers in the sense defined above. The story takes place during a period of civil wars in Norway, when the rulers' position was unstable and not everybody remained faithful to one faction, but these Icelandic brothers are portrayed as a model of genuine loyalty to King Ingi Haraldsson and his allies.[63]

60 […] rennir þá hugnum þangat, er var Óláfr konungr, ok vætti hans hamingju, at honum myndi duga. (*Fóstbræðra saga*, 1943, ch. 23, p. 240) ([he] then turned his thoughts to King Óláfr and hoped that his luck would help him.)

61 […] honum þótti betra at deyja með honum en lifa eptir hann (*Fóstbræðra saga,* 1943, ch. 24, p. 260).

62 […] kappa ins helga Óláfs konungs (*Fóstbræðra saga*, 1943, ch. 24, p. 276).

63 King Ingi Haraldsson ruled Norway in 1136–1161, partly in co-rule with his brothers and other pretenders. His successor was Magnús Erlingsson (1161–1184), son of Ingi's ally, Jarl Erlingr Ormsson. Both Ingi Haraldsson and Magnús with his father Erlingr faced the opposition of other royal pretenders.

Þorvarðr is first introduced as a violent man: he attacks and mortally wounds a royal retainer soon after his arrival in Norway (STU lxxvii). King Ingi nevertheless forgives Þorvarðr and accepts him into his retinue, where the young Icelander gets a chance to refine his behaviour and find useful purposes for his ferocity. The text does not provide much detail of Þorvarðr's life as a retainer, but it implies that he fought alongside the king in the battles of the civil war, which means that he used his belligerence to protect the monarch. The saga emphasizes his loyalty to King Ingi by stating that Þorvarðr returns to Iceland after the king's death in battle because he does not believe that any other monarch could be King Ingi's equal, but he encourages his brother Ari to join King Ingi's allies (STU lxxviii):

> Nú er þar til máls at taka er Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson kom út eptir fall Inga konungs ok lýsti því at hann vildi engum jarðligum konungi þjóna eptir Inga konung, því at honum þótti sem engi mundi hans jafningi verða. Ok þess bað hann Ara, bróður sinn, ef hann kæmi til Nóregs, at hann byndist eigi við þann flokk er fellt hafði Inga konung, kallaði ván at flokkr myndi hefjast í Vík austr at leita eptir hefndum ok bað hann ráðast í þann flokk ok setjast í rúm sitt. (*Sturlunga saga, I*, 2021, ch. 78, p. 143)
>
> (Now it will be said that Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson returned to Iceland after King Ingi's fall and proclaimed that he did not wish to serve any earthly king after King Ingi, because he felt that none of them would be his equal. And he told his brother Ari that if he ever came to Norway, he should not join the faction that had killed King Ingi. He said he expected that a force would arise in Vík in the east to seek vengeance and asked him to join that faction and to stand in his place.)

Ari obeys his brother, sails to Norway, and joins King Ingi's ally, Jarl Erlingr Ormsson, in three battles until their adversary is defeated – this is the mission in which Ari proves his worth. The ruler's appreciation of his retainer's loyalty is accentuated by the formulation that "Jarl Erlingr honoured Ari greatly for his support"[64] and by a celebratory stanza by Þorvarðr that is quoted in the text to highlight the significance of Ari's service to the rulers.

Jarl Erlingr and his son Magnús then defeat another enemy with Ari's help. Ari briefly returns to Iceland, but he soon joins Jarl Erlingr again. Later, Ari intends to return to Iceland once more, but Erlingr's other retainers dissuade him (STU lxxviii):

> Ari bjó skip sitt of várit til Íslands ok voru albúnir til hafs. En þeir er helzt voru öfundarmenn Ara lögðu honum til ámælis at hann legði svá fylgð sína við Erling jarl at fara frá honum er jarl þyrfti helzt manna við ok ófriðar at ván. En er Ari heyrði þessa umræðu þá

64 Erlingr jarl lagði mikla virðing á Ara fyrir fylgð sína (*Sturlunga saga, I*, 2021, ch. 78, p. 144).

> lét hann þegar bera föt sín af skipi ok ræðst þá enn til hirðvistar með konungi ok jarli. (*Sturlunga saga, I*, 2021, ch. 78, p. 146)
>
> (In the spring Ari prepared his ship to sail to Iceland and they were fully ready to put out to sea. But those who envied Ari most reproached him for showing only such loyalty to Jarl Erlingr that he would leave him when the jarl was in the greatest need of men and a fight was imminent. And when Ari heard their talk, he had his belongings brought back from the ship and joined the king's and the jarl's retinue again.)

This shows that Ari's responsibility to the retinue has become stronger than his personal concerns about his family and property in Iceland. His identity as a retainer and his loyalty to the ruler are his priority, so he chooses to stay with Jarl Erlingr, although he knows that he will probably have to risk his life for him, which is what finally happens. In an unexpected attack by the enemy, Ari sacrifices his life to save Erlingr, whose praise of his courage and extraordinary loyalty is then quoted in direct speech (STU lxxviii):

> En Ari hljóp á milli jarls ok ófriðarmanna, sem hann setti sik skjöld fyrir jarl, ok sneri í mót hernum ok gaf svá jarli líf at hann fann sik fyrir, því at hann var áðr ekki sárr. En þá var hann skotinn gaflaki í óstinn ok nistr svá við garðinn, ok lét Ari þar líf sitt. En jarl komst undan ok var skotinn í lærit áðr hann komst yfir garðinn. [...] Ok er jarl komst yfir garðinn ok í nakkvat hlé þá spurði hann hvar Ari Íslendingr væri, en þeir sögðu at hann dvalðist þar eptir við garðinn líflátinn. Jarl svarar: „Þat er víst at þar fór sá maðr er oss hefir bezt fylgt, ok höfum vér engan jafnhvatan eptir. Ok varð hann einn búinn til af yðr at gefa sjálfviljandi líf sitt fyrir mitt líf. Nú man ek eigi hans frændum launat fá þann skaða sem þeir hafa beðit fyrir mínar sakir." (*Sturlunga saga, I*, 2021, ch. 78, pp. 147–148)
>
> (And Ari cast himself between the jarl and the attackers to serve as a shield for the jarl. He turned against the troop, and thus he saved the jarl's life by giving up his own, because he had not been wounded before, but now his neck was pierced by a javelin that pinned him to the fence, so Ari lost his life there. But the jarl escaped, although he was shot in his thigh before he got to the other side of the fence. [...] And when the jarl got behind the fence and was somewhat safe, he asked where Ari the Icelander was, and they told him that he had stayed by the fence and had lost his life. The jarl replied: "It is certain that we have lost the man who has served us best, and we have nobody else as bold as him. Out of all of you, he was the only one ready to voluntarily give his own life for mine. I will never be able to repay his kinsmen for the loss they have suffered for my sake.")

Significantly, the scene is unambiguous about the sacrifice being Ari's deliberate act, not an accident in the chaos of battle. It is described how he intentionally positions himself in front of Jarl Erlingr as a shield, and it is underlined in the jarl's speech that Ari gave up his life voluntarily (*sjálfviljandi*) to protect his lord. This depiction of Ari's devotion to the ruler as an active choice emphasizes the main theme of the royal retainer's story: service to a monarch is not presented as a passive subordination, but as an act motivated by courage and loyalty, which is

rewarded with glory even after the fighter's death. This focus is also reflected in the text's style: the episode is narrated in unusual detail and more emotionally than is typical of the terse saga style. Moreover, the episode ends with a reference to a memorial poem that Þorvarðr composes about his brother because he wishes to "depict his courage in poetry that will be spread far and wide".[65] This remark emphasizes Ari's prestige, because such celebratory poetry is usually reserved for the praise of kings and jarls, so it suggests that Ari gained a share of aristocratic glory by his alliance with the Norwegian rulers.

Through the narrative type of the royal retainer's story that shapes this episode, the saga with an ecclesiastical protagonist is connected to the other, predominantly secular sagas that construct the narrative image of medieval Icelandic collective identity. It expresses various concerns related to the Icelanders' relationship with the Norwegian monarchy. Firstly, it shows that allegiance to a monarch is not a loss of freedom, but rather an honourable decision that can increase the Icelander's prestige. Secondly, it illustrates the monarch's positive influence on the Icelander's behaviour, as loyalty to the ruler transforms socially disruptive belligerence into socially beneficial courage. Both ideas can be figuratively applied to Icelandic society as a whole: by a voluntary alliance with the monarchy, it can overcome its marginality and moderate the disruptive violence that threatens social cohesion. The narrative type thus endows the individual story with a socially significant meaning.

4.3 Aron Hjörleifsson: The outlaw

Aron Hjörleifsson was one of the participants in the conflict between the secular chieftains and Bishop Guðmundr Arason in the first decades of the thirteenth century. His story is narrated in two texts, *Íslendinga saga* and *Arons saga Hjörleifssonar*, which was probably composed four or five decades later (see 1.1). The former foregrounds the political context of the conflict in Iceland and Aron's role as a warrior, whereas the latter is more biographical and adds a section depicting the second half of Aron's life, which he spent at the Norwegian royal court.

The two sagas contain both similarities and differences in their description of events and characters (Glendinning 1969, 41; Porter 1971, 137; 1993, 21–22). The textual relationship between them has long been an object of a scholarly debate, in which different and often contradictory opinions have been presented (see Úlfar Bragason 2013, 129–131). Björn M. Ólsen (1902, 254–272) poses several hypotheses

65 […] láta hreysti hans koma í kvæði þau er víða væri borin (*Sturlunga saga, I*, 2021, ch. 78, p. 148).

but concludes that neither saga directly copies the other, so they must be independent of each other and based on oral traditions. Conversely, Jón Jóhannesson (1946, l) suggests that some subject matter in *Arons saga* can be derived from *Íslendinga saga*. John Porter (1971) argues, however, that direct textual influence is unlikely and that the similarities in wording rather imply that both sagas shared some written sources, possibly some records or documents (*bréf*) – such as those mentioned in the prologue to *Sturlunga saga* or the *Miðsaga* version of *Guðmundar saga* (1971, 144–160). Nevertheless, the author of *Arons saga*, an educated fourteenth-century Icelander, must have been familiar with the existing contemporary sagas (1971, 152, 159). According to Úlfar Bragason (2013, 130), this means that even if he did not use *Íslendinga saga* as a direct textual source, he probably composed his text in the context of the narrative presented in *Íslendinga saga* and expected the recipients to understand *Arons saga* in this context as well. That is much more important for the present study than the exact textual relationship between the two sagas.

Considering that *Arons saga* was probably composed with the knowledge of *Íslendinga saga* and partly derived from the same sources, whether written or oral, it seems likely that the differences between them are a result of the narratives' different emphases, rather than the authors' lack of information. As Porter (1971, 159) has pointed out, both authors clearly used their sources selectively, modifying the meaning of the resulting narratives. On the surface level, some of the differences can be explained by the fact that *Íslendinga saga* clearly favours the Sturlungar, albeit without excessively idealizing them, while *Arons saga* is biased towards Aron and the bishop, as its composition was probably motivated by the increasing veneration of Guðmundr Arason as a saint and the attempts at his canonization (Porter 1971, 144). It thus makes sense that *Arons saga* modifies the scenes that shed a negative light on Aron or create sympathy with his opponents, while it includes several scenes that morally discredit the Sturlungar and their allies, which are either completely left out in *Íslendinga saga* or narrated from a different perspective (Porter 1971, 146–148; Ciklamini 1988, 236). The account of Aron's life is thus endowed with moral significance as a model story of a Christian champion (Ciklamini 1988; Úlfar Bragason 2013, 138–139).

On a deeper level, both sagas express more complex interpretations of history, which determine how the events are narrated and how the characters are portrayed. In this respect, Úlfar Bragason (2013) has argued that *Arons saga* is favourable towards the king, who is portrayed as Aron's benefactor, possibly because Aron's kinsmen were among the new Icelandic aristocracy at the time of the saga's origin. *Sturlunga saga*, by contrast, in his opinion expresses the Icelanders' dissatisfaction with royal rule (2013, 143–144). In the present study, however, it is argued that *Sturlunga saga* is not an anti-monarchic narrative, so it will

be suggested here that the two texts do not express contradictory interpretations of the relationship between Iceland and Norway, they just differ in emphasis.

Íslendinga saga presents the conflict in which Aron participates in a broader political context. Aron is only a side character in it, so his story does not form a fully developed narrative pattern and its meaning is limited to an illustration of individual personal qualities, while other characters carry the central meaning of the narrative. In *Sturlunga saga* as a compilation, Iceland's relationship with the monarchy is thematized in some of the preceding and following sections, such as the stories of the Þorgeirsson brothers or of Snorri Sturluson, whereas the section that includes Aron's story is focused on internal Icelandic power relations. That may be the reason why the compiler did not include an account of Aron's career at the royal court, although he may have known it from the orally transmitted communicative memory.

Conversely, *Arons saga* presents a coherent biography consisting of two contrasting but interrelated narrative patterns, which endow the text with meanings pertaining to the interpretation of Iceland's relationship with Norway. That is the object of the following analysis.

4.3.1 The narrative type of the outlaw's story

Arons saga Hjörleifssonar is the only contemporary saga that is predominantly structured by the pattern of the outlaw's story. This narrative type is known from several sagas of Icelanders, with which *Arons saga* has been compared in research (Aðalgeir Kristjánsson 1965; Heller 1966; Porter 1971, 161–165; Danielsson 2008). These so-called outlaw sagas are *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, and *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*; the same structural pattern also shapes some sections of other sagas (Ahola 2014, 105–138).

The typical outlaw's story deals with the protagonist's struggle to survive while he is excluded from society; it usually ends with his heroic last stand and violent death. It inherently thematizes marginality, with which outlawry as a literary motif is associated: in the sagas, outlaws dwell in remote, uninhabited places, and they are often connected with the supernatural, prophetic dreams, and witchcraft. The structural pattern of the outlaw's story, defined by Joonas Ahola (2014, 189), consists of (1) the offense committed by the protagonist, (2) an attempt at arbitration, (3) the sentence of outlawry, (4) the pursuit of the outlaw by his adversaries, (5) the protagonist's death, and frequently (6) a revenge for the killing.

Beside this structural pattern, the outlaws' stories share some specific narrative principles. They are characterized by an increased focus on one individual protagonist, whereas the narrative focus in other sagas of Icelanders usually shifts

between both rivals. There are three main techniques that are employed in the outlaws' stories to accentuate their inherently tragic tone and to create sympathy with the protagonist. Firstly, the narrative emphasizes the protagonist's mental and physical suffering, unlike the conflict story, which tends to highlight the protagonist's heroism by implying that he is not affected by pain, fear, or grief. Secondly, the outlaw's story employs dreams to illustrate the protagonist's mental state, whereas they usually serve as a means of foreshadowing in the conflict story. In *Gísla saga*, Gísli describes his dreams about two ominous women in his verse, which provides the audience with an insight into the insecurities that lurk behind his seemingly unshakeable courage (see Poilvez 2012, 126–129). Thirdly, accounts of sorcery or supernatural occurrences emphasize the protagonist's tragedy in the outlaw's story, whereas in the conflict story they mostly serve as explanations of events for which no natural causes can be found. Gísli Súrsson is affected by a sorcerer's spell that prevents him from receiving aid; in *Grettis saga* and *Harðar saga*, the protagonist is cursed by a revenant. The spell or curse underlines the tragedy of the outlaw's fate, as he is expelled from society despite being a courageous and capable man. Due to all these elements, the outlaw sagas differ from most other sagas of Icelanders in the portrayal of their protagonist, making him appear more vulnerable than the typical central characters of the conflict stories, and yet more morally ambiguous than the ideal peaceful chieftain.

Arons saga is structured by the narrative pattern of the inherently tragic outlaw's story but combines it with the contrasting, optimistic travel story. The former shows the protagonist's exclusion from society, whereas the latter portrays an outsider who is gradually integrated into society. The two narrative types thus correspond to the aforementioned principles of tragedy and comedy, defined by Northrop Frye (1957, 35–52). The combination of these narrative types endows *Arons saga* with meanings that transcend the individual story and can be understood as comments on the situation of Icelandic society as a whole. The travel story also contextualizes the whole saga as a narrative of contact between Iceland and Norway.

4.3.2 Aron Hjörleifsson's escape and journey

Arons saga begins with a conflict between the Sturlungar and Bishop Guðmundr Arason, who remains in the background and is represented by his two champions, Aron Hjörleifsson and Eyjólfr Kársson (ASH ii–ix). This section is structured by the narrative pattern of the conflict story with its focus on the gradually increasing enmity between the two parties. The hostilities culminate with the kill-

ing of Sighvatr Sturluson's oldest son Tumi, followed by a revenge when Eyjólfr is killed and Aron is severely wounded in the battle of Grímsey in 1222.

This initial section is followed by the outlaw's story (ASH ix–xv). Aron is not formally outlawed yet, but after the lost battle he must flee and hide from his pursuers. A typical feature of the outlaw's story is the focus on the individual protagonist and on the courage of those who help him during his escape. The selflessness of these helpers is underlined, as some of them are even willing to face the anger of their kinsmen or chieftains for Aron's sake. When Aron is imprisoned by Ormr Jónsson of Svínafell (ASH xi), Ormr is reproached by his brother Þórarinn for mistreating a young, wounded man who is seeking shelter. Þórarinn even proclaims himself willing to defend Aron with weapons if necessary. The narrative expresses a positive evaluation of Þórarinn's selfless help: it is stated that Þórarinn gained lasting good reputation (*orðrómr*) by this deed, and stanzas praising him are quoted in the chapter (ASH xi).

Aron, who has now been formally outlawed by Sturla Sighvatsson at the legal assembly, then hides with various kinsmen and with his friends, the sons of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson (ASH xi–xii). At this point he is again aided by selfless strangers, who defend him in a fight, although they have no obligations toward Aron and are followers of Þorvaldr Snorrason, an enemy of Hrafn's sons (ASH xii). They state that helping Aron is a matter of honour, because it would be a shame not to assist a defenceless man.[66] Their defence is praised in stanzas included in the narrative, and their chieftain Þorvaldr is even said later to approve of their honourable behaviour, despite his personal enmity toward Aron's allies.

The narrative also refers to supernatural signs, which are typical of the outlaw's story. In the outlaw sagas, such elements – curses and ominous dreams – usually have negative implications and underline the tragedy of the outlaw's fate. In *Arons saga*, by contrast, the dreams and supernatural signs are positive for the protagonist, so they foreshadow the upcoming modification of the tragic tone of the narrative type. Before the aforementioned fight, Aron tells his helpers about a dream in which Bishop Guðmundr hid him under his cloak (ASH xii). This dream can be perceived as a sign of the bishop protecting Aron even at a distance, both in a spiritual sense and in the sense of granting him luck for the fight.

One of the dramatic peaks of the saga is a scene where Aron, outnumbered and surrounded by Sturla Sighvatsson and his followers, manages to fight his way out, runs away and is saved by a snowstorm that conceals him from his pur-

66 „Ámæli mun til okkar falla […] ef vit skiljumst báðir við hann svá búit." (*Arons saga Hjörleifssonar*, 2021, ch. 12, p. 398) (We will be reproved […] if we both abandon him in this situation.)

suers (ASH xiv–xv). The narrator's direct commentary implies that Aron freed himself due to his own courage, but that the snowstorm may have been caused by a divine intervention:

> Ok er þat allra manna mál at Áron þykkir manna sköruligast hafa undan komizt við slíka garpa sem eiga var. […] Áron hefir nú harða útivist, vötn öll ill yfirferðar, ok kemr frost í sárit. […] Má þat sýnast skipat með guðs miskunn at þegar Áron komst ór mannhringinum rak á kafahríð svá sterka at þegar skiliði með þeim. Höfðu menn þá hríð lengi í minnum. (*Arons saga Hjörleifssonar*, 2021, chs. 14–15, pp. 405–407)

> (And people say that Aron seems to be the bravest of men, when he escaped, although he had to deal with such warriors. […] Aron now faces difficulties in the wilderness, struggling to cross all the rivers, and frost gets into his wound. […] It may seem arranged by God's grace that when Aron escaped from the ring of men, such a heavy snowstorm broke out that he was immediately separated from them. People remembered that storm for a long time.)

This scene clearly illustrates Aron's physical suffering when he wanders through the wilderness, severely wounded and exhausted. When he finally finds shelter at a friend's farm, he lies down, spreads his arms, and sings prayers in the manner that he learned from Bishop Guðmundr (ASH xv). This motif emphasizes Aron's mental suffering, as he is completely helpless and cannot expect any other relief than God's mercy; his religious faith, however, makes his struggles more bearable.

At this point, the expectations built up by the structural pattern of the outlaw's story lead the audience to awaiting Aron's death. Instead, however, the narrative shifts into the structural pattern of the travel story when the protagonist is saved from his outlawry by undertaking a journey to Norway (ASH xv). The saga thus modifies the inherently tragic outlaw's story by combining it with an optimistic narrative type. The outlaw's story highlights the protagonist's marginal position, which is then gradually deconstructed in the travel story.

In line with the typical structure of the travel story, Aron first arrives in Norway as a young man in trouble, lacking both property and allies. As such, he is comparable to the inexperienced newcomers in the *útanferðar þættir*. Another typical element is a conflict with a Norwegian aristocrat. Aron joins the retinue of Jarl Skúli Bárðarson at first; the text mentions three possible reasons (ASH xv). Firstly, Skúli rules the third of Norway around Þrándheimr, where the ship lands. Secondly, Skúli is known to be friendly toward Icelanders. Thirdly, he appreciates Aron's courage and invites him to his retinue. The latter two reasons imply that Skúli probably intends to broaden his Icelandic power base by gaining the support of Aron's Icelandic patrons, although Aron himself is not powerful. A conflict occurs, however, when Aron wishes to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem as he has promised, but Skúli refuses to give him leave. In this sense, Skúli represents the typical overbearing Norwegian aristocrat from the travel stories: instead of ap-

preciating Aron's determination, he insists on demonstrating his power. As an explanation for Skúli's obstinacy, the saga mentions that "he believed that Aron was not worse off near him than further from him".[67] This may refer to Skúli's intention to keep his Icelandic retainers within reach in order to secure that they would not neglect his interests.

Aron decides to fulfil his promise to God and undertake the pilgrimage despite Skúli's prohibition (ASH xv). The journey to Jerusalem serves as an opportunity for the young man to prove his worth. When Aron returns to Norway, he visits King Hákon Hákonarson first, probably because he fears Skúli's wrath. The king welcomes him kindly and asks Skúli to forgive Aron's disobedience, since he made the pilgrimage for the salvation of his soul. Skúli, however, refuses to accept Aron back into his retinue because he does not trust him.[68] It is not directly stated in the text that the reason for this mistrust is related to the strife between Skúli and Hákon, but the circumstances imply that it is likely. Aron's unforgivable breach of loyalty is probably not the pilgrimage itself, but rather his decision to visit Skúli's rival, King Hákon, immediately after his return.

When Skúli rejects Aron, King Hákon accepts Aron into his own retinue, arranges a good marriage for him, and provides him with land and a source of income (ASH xv–xvi). The saga thus emphasizes the monarch's crucial role in the protagonist's re-integration into society. In this context, the narrative illustrates two types of rulers and their different approach to contact with Icelanders. Skúli Bárðarson attempts to establish a political connection with Aron, but his effort is thwarted by his distrust and his demand of unconditional obedience. King Hákon, by contrast, succeeds because he appreciates the Icelander's determination and respects his freedom to make his own decisions. The episode thus expresses the idea that the relationship between Icelanders and the Norwegian monarch should not be based on blind obedience, but rather on mutual respect. This applies not only to the account of Aron Hjörleifsson's life, but also to the whole Icelandic society's situation during and after the Sturlung Age.[69]

67 […] honum þætti Áron eigi kominn verr nær sér en firr (*Arons saga Hjörleifssonar*, 2021, ch. 15, p. 408).

68 [Skúli] kvað Áron svá tafli teflt hafa við sik „at okkur sambúð mun skömm vera." (*Arons saga Hjörleifssonar*, 2021, ch. 15, p. 410) ([Skúli] said that Aron had played such a game with him "that our time together must be short.")

69 Among the *útanferðar þættir*, a similar contrast between two rulers' approach to the Icelandic protagonist is found in *Hreiðars þáttr* or *Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds* (Harris 1972, 17–18; Vésteinn Ólason 1985, 64–65). It thus seems to have been an established motif, which corroborates the hypothesis that it reflects general ideas that transcend the meaning of the individual stories.

The rest of the saga shows that Aron stays at the royal court for almost thirty years until his death in 1255, faithfully serving King Hákon and receiving esteem in return. The king personally visits Aron when he falls ill, which "seems to men to be the greatest honour".[70] When Aron dies, the king gives a speech at his grave, praising his secular qualities, such as courage and travelling experience. The following direct commentary by the narrator refers to Aron's spiritual merits, including his devoted service to Bishop Guðmundr (ASH xxii). The saga thus implies that Aron's loyalty and courage brought him both secular esteem and spiritual grace, and that he had powerful protectors in both spheres – King Hákon and Bishop Guðmundr. In the outlaw's story, the bishop provides Aron with divine protection and mental strength. In the travel story, the king helps Aron overcome his marginal position and gain the social prestige that he deserves due to his personal qualities. If Aron's story is interpreted as a comment on the development of Icelandic society as a whole, this implies that institutionalized power – the Church and royal rule – can help Iceland overcome its marginality and attain a more prestigious position in the Norse cultural region.

The way in which the protagonist's life is narrated thus contributes to an interpretation of his story in a broader social and literary context, endowing the text with a deeper coherence. *Arons saga* has been criticized in research for its fragmentary structure, especially in its second half, which is indeed episodic on the level of plot (Porter 1971, 161–162). Here it has been shown, however, that the saga's meaning connects the episodes into a coherent narrative. The text is focused on the scenes that are essential for the structural pattern of the travel story: the Icelander's arrival in Norway, his conflict with a Norwegian aristocrat, and his subsequent integration into the royal court with the king's assistance. The rest of his life in Norway is only briefly outlined, because it is less significant for the meaning of the narrative, while the funeral scene sums up the whole saga's message. While it can be difficult to find "a dominant and purposeful theme in the saga of Aron's life" (Porter 1971, 162) on the story level alone, the present analysis has revealed how specific elements were selected from communicative memory in the process of narrativization with an emphasis on certain themes: the overcoming of marginality and the ideal relationship between Icelanders and the monarchy. These themes transform "the saga of Aron's life" into a complex narrative commentary on Icelandic history.

The potential of Aron's story to construct such complex meanings is probably the reason why a side character from *Íslendinga saga* becomes the central protagonist in *Arons saga*, although Aron Hjörleifsson was certainly less politically sig-

70 […] hefir mönnum þat þótt in mesta sæmð (*Arons saga Hjörleifssonar*, 2021, ch. 22, p. 420).

nificant than most other protagonists of the contemporary sagas. Part of the motivation may have been the intention to portray a 'Christian hero', as has been suggested in the research outlined above. It is, however, unlikely that such a portrayal of an individual would have motivated the composition of a new saga if its meaning had not extended even further beyond the story – especially since Aron's life was already partly depicted in a written text and he was only a side character in Guðmundr Arason's story as well. Instead, the writing of *Arons saga* was presumably motivated by the intention to develop a figurative interpretation of Aron's life as a narrative representation of collective identity. As the character type of the outlaw, Aron could perfectly embody the Icelanders' inherent marginality – that is why this aspect of his life, which is only briefly outlined in *Íslendinga saga*, is foregrounded in *Arons saga*. At the same time, due to Aron's successful integration into the royal court, his story could be regarded as a narrative of overcoming this marginality. For this reason, the second half of his life, which is almost completely ignored in *Íslendinga saga*, is narrated as a typical travel story in *Arons saga*. If the original recipients understood *Arons saga* in the context of *Íslendinga saga*, these differences between the two texts may have drawn their attention to *Arons saga*'s deeper meaning.

4.4 Snorri Sturluson: The court poet

Even more sophisticated intertextual connections can be found between *Íslendinga saga* and *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, especially in the story of Snorri Sturluson. Both texts were written by the same author, Sturla Þórðarson the younger, whose detailed knowledge of the material enabled him to build up a complex image of history across the boundaries of the sagas. The two power struggles – between multiple rivalling chieftains in Iceland and between King Hákon Hákonarson and Skúli Bárðarson in Norway – are presented as being closely intertwined, although each saga is focused on one of them. In *Íslendinga saga*, this connection is built up more consciously, as the text repeatedly refers to events or situations described in *Hákonar saga*. The recipients, who are doubtlessly supposed to know *Hákonar saga*, are thus reminded to keep the Norwegian power struggle in mind as a background to the political relations in Iceland. Some Icelandic key events are also briefly referred to in *Hákonar saga*, while *Íslendinga saga* explains more thoroughly how the political rivalry in Iceland influenced the Icelanders' decisions to join the Norwegian power game. Due to such intertextual connections, both texts together present a more coherent image of the past than each of them could present separately. Intertextuality is thus not just a literary

phenomenon; it also contributes to an interpretation of history by showing that Icelandic and Norwegian power relations were regarded as being inseparably connected.

4.4.1 The narrative type of the court poet's story

The narrative type of the court poet's story was, like the travel story, primarily developed in *þættir* contained in the kings' sagas. Both narrative types also share a similar structural pattern. The typical court poet's story portrays an Icelander who arrives at the royal court, lacking both property and appropriate courtly manners. His behaviour is usually excessively self-assured, even impudent, which irritates the courtiers and often alienates the skald from the king. Eventually, however, the Icelander proves his abilities – in this case his poetic art and often also diplomatic eloquence, so he earns the king's favour and a prestigious position. The central element of the structural pattern is thus again the transition from alienation to acceptance. This pattern accentuates the notion of a positive, conciliatory relationship between Icelanders and Norwegian kings that ends in mutual respect despite some initial disagreement or distrust.

All the narrative types that are centred around the protagonist's journey show a specific type of social advancement that depends on individual skills, rather than on family or social ties, and that an Icelander can achieve only abroad (Morawiec 2017, 51). In comparison with the travel story, however, the court poet's story presents a more self-confident image of the Icelander (Finlay 1997, 164–165). The character type of the skald best represents "the figure of the young, upwardly mobile Icelandic male who wants to venture into the big, wide world" and who masters the "courtly and elitist art of skaldic poetry" despite his meagre, provincial origin and often coarse personality (Clunies Ross 1997, 551). Some sources directly comment on the special favour enjoyed by court poets,[71] others illustrate it by their portrayal of skalds. They show that the skald's special position at the royal court gives him privileges that allow him to bypass the standard hierarchy of the retinue (Finlay 1997, 166). He is presented as being formally subordinate to the monarch but often acting as the king's mentor; it is sometimes implied that he can be intellectually superior to him. The king tolerates the court poet's behaviour that would not be acceptable otherwise – a skald can for in-

71 For example "af öllum hirðmönnum virði konungr mest skáld sín" (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, 1933, ch. 8, p. 19) (of all his retainers, the king respected his skalds most).

stance criticize the monarch much more openly than anyone else (Ármann Jakobsson 2003, 45–47).

The overall image of the skalds' role at the royal courts can be loosely based on the historical reality of the Saga Age, when the rulers of the preliterate Norse kingdoms depended on poetry for promoting their ideology and power (Morawiec 2017, 51–52). Poetry was crucial for the kings' reputation because praise or criticism in poetic form could be ingrained in collective memory and outlive the monarch (Sayers 2021, 43–44). It is therefore likely that poetry was indeed an important social means for ambitious Icelanders in the tenth and eleventh centuries (Finlay 1997, 161). As for later development, it has been argued that the thirteenth-century *þættir* may have rekindled an awareness of skaldic poetry as a political tool in real life (Gade 2000, 69–70). A more moderate approach suggests that poetry no longer actually shaped political relations in the thirteenth century, but the *þættir* may have provided certain formal codes of behaviour, which could be consciously imitated by the Icelanders and the monarchs (Wanner 2008, 72–73). That seems to be more likely, as will be shown below.

In any case, the literary image of the court poets is most probably exaggerated beyond the skalds' real privileges at the royal courts in any period of history. The narrative type is centred around "the traditional and cultural implications of the role of skald" (Finlay 1997, 161), which probably played an important role in cultural memory because they could serve as a means of deconstructing the Icelanders' perception of their own marginality in their relationship with Norway. The court poet's story accentuates the Icelander's active initiative to establish contact with the king and earn social prestige even more than most travel stories. This aspect was doubtlessly essential for the construction of collective identity because it figuratively referred to the whole Icelandic society's relationship with the monarchy.

An example that aptly illustrates this narrative type is *Stúfs þáttr*.[72] Its protagonist travels to Norway to collect his inheritance and meets King Haraldr Sigurðarson. The king enjoys their conversation and appreciates Stúfr's wit and eloquence. Stúfr alludes to a joke about the king's father's nickname, but the king is not offended and accepts the humour. The king then asks Stúfr to recite poetry and is impressed by how many poems he knows. In return, Stúfr asks the king to grant him three wishes: to give him a letter confirming his claim to the inheritance, to let him compose a praise poem, and to accept him into his retinue. The king comments that it is unusual for men to present their requests so directly, but he eventually

72 The content and structure of the shorter redaction in *Morkinskinna* and the separate longer redaction are similar.

grants him all three wishes. Stúfr then becomes a popular royal retainer and court poet. In this case, the initial disagreement between the king and the Icelander is not fully developed. The possibility of a conflict is implied when the Icelander makes inappropriate jokes and boldly presents his requests to the king, but he is forgiven before the conflict even begins. The story thus shows that the skald can speak to the king more daringly than others, and it emphasizes the Icelander's active approach to establishing contact with the king. He does not wait for the king to offer him a place in the retinue but asks for it himself. He then proves that he is worthy of such a position, so his ambitious request is shown to be justified. The *þáttr* thus accentuates the Icelander's success in actively increasing his social prestige.

Other court poets' stories place more emphasis on a disagreement between the king and the skald, which can be both caused and resolved by poetry or other verbal means. In *Óttars þáttr svarta*, the protagonist first stays at the court of King Óláfr Eiríksson of Sweden and composes a love poem about the king's daughter Ástríðr. Later in Norway, this poem incurs the wrath of King Óláfr Haraldsson because Ástríðr is now his wife. The king has Óttarr imprisoned and intends to have him killed. On the advice of the court poet Sighvatr Þórðarson, Óttarr composes a praise poem about the king. He then presents the poem to the king, who grants him a pardon as a reward. Despite the initial conflict, the optimistic ending of the story thus emphasizes the Icelander's ability to overcome the alienation.

In some cases, the optimistic tone of the court poet's story is exaggerated to the point of humorous light-heartedness. In *Þórarins þáttr stuttfeldar*, the protagonist becomes involved in rivalry between two courtiers and composes derisive stanzas about them, but the conflict does not lead to any long-term hostilities and the skald is rewarded by the king for a more serious poem. The protagonist of the famous *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*[73] is openly cheeky and deliberately ignores the social norms at the royal court but gets away with his eccentricities due to his charming wit and extraordinary eloquence. The king tolerates his rude sexual jokes, complaints about the lack of food for the retainers, rivalry with the experienced court poet Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, success in outwitting an overbearing Norwegian magnate, and other ploys.

73 *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* is extant in two redactions, incorporated in *Morkinskinna* and *Flateyjarbók* respectively; the *Flateyjarbók* redaction has been described as coarser and more explicit (Tirosh 2017, 3, 8–9; Sayers 2021, 34–40). The research referenced here is mostly based on the *Morkinskinna* redaction; Hermann Pálsson's study works with the *Flateyjarbók* redaction but is applicable to both; my own interpretation is applicable to both redactions as well.

Sneglu-Halla þáttr can be regarded as a parodic imitation of the more serious court poets' stories (Hermann Pálsson 1992, 149–150).[74] Everything in the story, including the conflicts, is presented as a game (Ármann Jakobsson 2014, 177–178); "the tone of the narrative is such that everything appears comic rather than serious" (2014, 178).[75] The *þáttr* thus clearly parodies the narrative type's already exaggerated image of the court poet who can get away with almost anything. Typical motifs of the court poet's story, such as the skald's freedom to criticize the king, his rivalry with other courtiers, or the contrast between his humble origin and the aristocratic nature of court poetry, are wittily mocked in *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*.[76]

Its existence does not, however, undermine the validity of the narrative type. It rather corroborates it because the presupposition of a conscious parody is a clear awareness of the story type that is being parodied. Nor is *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* likely to seriously challenge the ideas expressed in the typical court poets' stories; it may rather mock the fact that some of them seem to go a bit too far in their exaggeration of the skald's privileged position. Even this parodic *þáttr* can still "reflect the kind of relationship that Icelandic elites hoped to enjoy with the Norwegian throne" (Sayers 2021, 45). Nevertheless, it simultaneously reveals this image as a narrative construct. Due to its self-reflective nature, it thus presents the court poet's story and other narrative types as means of a conscious construction of cultural memory.

Some narratives that portray skalds lack the form of a coherent *þáttr* and consist of multiple episodes scattered throughout a king's saga, and yet they contain all the defining features of the court poet's story. An illustrative example is the portrayal of Sighvatr Þórðarson in *Óláfs saga helga* and *Magnúss saga góða* in *Heimskringla*. These sagas not only quote Sighvatr's stanzas, but also depict episodes from the poet's career in royal service. *Óláfs saga* shows how Sighvatr first

74 Hermann Pálsson uses the terms "skopsögur" (1992, 149) (comic tales) and "ýkjusaga" (1992, 154) (a tall tale).

75 Similarly, William Sayers (2021, 27) speaks of a "gaming context" that clearly marks Halli's verbal exchange with the king as a joke and precludes serious defamation.

76 *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* has also been interpreted as a genuinely positive, albeit comically exaggerated, narrative image of authentic Icelandicness that could serve as a source of collective identity (Tirosh 2017). From this perspective, Halli can be viewed as "independence personified" (2017, 11), "worthy of imitating" (2017, 12) – because, unlike his rival Þjóðólfr, he does not show any "uneasiness with his meager background" (2017, 14). I believe, however, that this interpretation does not accord with the overall message of the narrative type. In the context of the typical court poets' stories, and considering the frivolous tone of the *þáttr*, it seems unlikely that Sneglu-Halli could be regarded as an embodiment of how the thirteenth-century Icelanders actually wished the skalds of the past to be remembered, let alone as "an Icelandic role model" (2017, 19). Instead, *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* indeed seems to be a deliberate satirical imitation of the court poet's story.

arrives at the royal court with the intention of reciting a celebratory poem to King Óláfr Haraldsson. The monarch rejects him, but Sighvatr recites a stanza anyway, and the king rewards him and accepts him into his service. This episode thus highlights the skald's self-confidence and active approach to forming a relationship with the king, as well as his determination when he is not discouraged by the monarch's initial lack of interest. In another episode, Sighvatr is presented in a diplomatic role in a negotiation between King Óláfr Haraldsson and King Óláfr Eiríksson of Sweden. During a long-term conflict between the two monarchs, Óláfr Haraldsson plans an armed attack on Sweden, but Sighvatr brings about a reconciliation with the help of a Swedish jarl. This shows his active role in Scandinavian politics, in which he can use his eloquence in other ways than just composing poetry.

In *Magnúss saga*, Sighvatr is portrayed as a counsellor of King Óláfr's son Magnús. When Magnús Óláfsson punishes his father's former opponents too harshly and treats the farmers ruthlessly, he risks that his own people might turn against him. Sighvatr composes the poem *Bersöglisvísur*, in which he encourages the young king to be kinder and to follow the law. The king takes his advice seriously and becomes a popular monarch, nicknamed Magnús the Good. This episode shows that the skald is also the king's advisor and mentor, from whom the king is willing to accept even open criticism. That is yet another way in which the Icelander can use his intelligence and verbal skills to directly influence Scandinavian politics.[77]

Apart from the kings' sagas, the structural pattern of the court poet's story shapes some episodes in the skalds' sagas. For instance, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* contains a story of a conflict and reconciliation brought about by verbal exchanges alone, similar to *Óttars þáttr svarta*. Gunnlaugr offends Jarl Eiríkr Hákonarson by reminding him of his father's disgraceful death and is expelled from Norway. He then visits multiple kings and noblemen in other countries and earns their favour by composing praise poetry about them, which implies that he is more concerned with gaining social prestige than with loyalty to one individual

77 A comparably political role of another skald, Þórarinn loftunga, and his poetry in the service of King Knútr inn ríki and his son Sveinn has been analysed in detail by Jakub Morawiec (2020; 2021). He shows how Þórarinn's poetry contributed to building up the image of the king's supreme authority as God's representative on earth (2020, 40–49) and of Knútr as a formidable and courageous conqueror who nevertheless maintains peace in his dominion and protects it once he has gained power over it (2021, 44–56). Morawiec convincingly argues that this reveals Þórarinn's awareness of and participation in the construction of the king's complex royal ideology. At the same time, the portrayal of Þórarinn in *Heimskringla* and *Knýtlinga saga* emphasizes his success gained in royal service despite an initial disagreement with the king (2020, 34–35).

ruler. However, he also praises Jarl Eiríkr in his speech and verse despite their disagreement. When the jarl hears about it, he allows Gunnlaugr to return to Norway, gives him a warm welcome, and assists him with his journey back to Iceland.

Although the main theme of the skalds' sagas is a love triangle, not the protagonist's position as a court poet,[78] this episode seems to be shaped by the "familiar *þáttr* pattern" (Finlay 1997, 166; see also Whaley 1997, 665–667). It is likely that "the author developed the story along conventional lines in order to align his hero with the outspoken, inelegant but courageous figures familiar in stories of poets in foreign courts" (Finlay 1997, 166).[79] This corroborates the idea that the structural and thematic pattern that characterizes these stories does not define a genre but a narrative type that crosses the boundaries of genres: the episodes share the same structure and meaning, whether they are incorporated into a king's saga, a skald's saga, or a contemporary saga.[80]

As will be shown here, the contemporary sagas can use the narrative type of the court poet's story as a means of justifying or concealing some political aspects of the relations between Icelanders and Norwegian rulers. First and foremost, however, the structural pattern of the court poet's story serves as a means of interpretation and evaluation, transforming individual stories into narratives with a more universal meaning. By connecting recent events to an idealized memory of the distant past, it enables the texts to reflect contemporary attitudes to Icelandic identity and to the political relationships between Iceland and the Norwegian kingdom. In this context, the most significant aspect of the court poet's story is its emphasis on the Icelanders' active role in establishing their contacts with the kings, their assertive behaviour at the royal court, and their diplomatic skills and active participation in Scandinavian politics.

78 For a discussion of the relationship between the skalds' sagas and *þættir*, see Finlay 1997.

79 The motif of a journey abroad, including some of the typical elements of court poets' stories – primarily the protagonist's active effort to seek prestige and to establish contact with a monarch – plays an important role in other skalds' sagas as well; for analyses see Whaley 1997, 667–670; Morawiec 2017, 38–48.

80 The overall plot of the skalds' sagas does not share the optimistic tone of the court poets' stories, as it is typically characterized by a tragic ending (Morawiec 2017, 51). The tragedy is, however, a consequence of the protagonist's conflict with his Icelandic rival, whereas episodes depicting the Icelander's contact with the royal court highlight his successful effort at actively increasing his prestige even in the skalds' sagas. I therefore do not quite agree with Morawiec's opinion that the skalds' sagas question the cultural concept of esteem gained abroad (2017, 51).

4.4.2 Snorri Sturluson's first journey to Norway

The account of Snorri Sturluson's life in *Íslendinga saga* begins with an outline of how the ambitious young chieftain establishes his position by acquiring property through marriage, inheritance, or agreement, and by demonstrating his authority in legal cases and arbitration. He is initially supported by his powerful foster-brother, Sæmundr Jónsson of the Oddaverjar, who is openly described in the text as the noblest (*göfgastr*) man in Iceland at the time (STU cliv). Eventually, however, the relationship between the two ambitious chieftains inevitably turns into rivalry. Snorri is reluctant to directly attack his foster-brother, so he uses petty conflicts and lawsuits as a pretext for trying to gain superiority over him. In one of such scenes (STU clxxv), Sæmundr's awareness of the threat to his status is emphasized in a dialogue:

> Þá er Sæmundr kom i búð sína þá talaði einn hans maðr at enn færi sem optar at Sæmunðr hefði enn einn virðing af málum þessum. Sæmundr svarar: „Hvat tjóir slíkt at mæla, því at bræðr þessir draga sik svá fram at nær engir menn halda sik til fulls við þá." (*Sturlunga saga, II*, 2021, ch. 175, p. 108)
>
> (When Sæmundr entered his booth, one of his companions said that it had again turned out as usual and Sæmundr had again been the only one to gain honour from the case. Sæmundr answered: "What is the point of saying such things, when these brothers are so eager to increase their power that almost nobody can fully hold his ground against them?")

This direct emphasis on the rivalry between Snorri and Sæmundr implies that their competition for power is an important component of the story. When Snorri wins a legal case against one of Sæmundr's kinsmen, the open commentary continues with the formulation that "Snorri gained esteem from this case, and this case increased his esteem more than anything else in this country".[81] Such a comment highlights Snorri's paradoxical situation: his strategy of improving his status through legal competition has proven successful, but he has also reached its limits. If he wishes to further increase his power, he can hardly do so in Iceland (*hér á landi*) by legal means alone. That leaves him with two options: to start an open armed conflict with Sæmundr, or to travel to Norway and increase his prestige by seeking an alliance with the Norwegian rulers. Snorri chooses the latter.

The connection between Snorri's first journey to Norway and his rivalry with Sæmundr is emphasized in the saga by the fact that the account of their legal confrontation is immediately followed by a description of Snorri's first contact with a Norwegian aristocrat on the one hand, and of a dispute between Sæmundr and

81 Snorri hafði virðing af málum þessum. Ok í þessum málum gekk mest virðing hans við hér á landi (*Sturlunga saga, II*, 2021, ch. 175, p. 109).

Norwegian merchants on the other hand. Snorri, still in Iceland, is said to have actively established contact with Jarl Hákon galinn (STU clxxv):

> Hann orti kvæði um Hákon galin, ok sendi jarlinn gjafir út á mót, sverð ok skjöld ok brynju. […] Jarlinn ritaði til Snorra at hann skyldi fara útan ok lézt til hans gera miklar sæmðir, ok mjök var þat í skapi Snorra. En jarlinn andaðist í þann tíma, ok brá þat útanferð hans um nökkurra vetra sakir, en þó hafði hann ráðit för sína þegar tími væri til. (*Sturlunga saga, II*, 2021, ch. 175, p. 109)

> (He composed a poem about Hákon galinn and the jarl sent him gifts in return, a sword, a shield, and a coat of mail. […] The jarl wrote to Snorri and asked him to come to Norway, promising that he would enhance his esteem. That was much to Snorri's liking, but the jarl died at that time, so Snorri's journey was delayed by several winters, yet he had decided to undertake the journey as soon as the time was right.)

This account clearly states that Snorri intends to establish contact with a powerful Norwegian aristocrat who can "enhance his esteem", and its placement in the saga implies that the reason is Snorri's rivalry with Sæmundr. Significantly, the text draws attention to Snorri's poetry, thus revealing that its continuation will be shaped by the narrative pattern of the court poet's story.

Next, the saga turns to Sæmundr's conflict with the Norwegians. He blames them for causing his son's death in a shipwreck and requests compensation from the Norwegian merchants who are in Iceland at the time. They refuse to pay, because they have nothing to do with the matter, so Sæmundr confiscates some of their property. The merchants respond by killing Sæmundr's brother Ormr, his son, and two other men (STU clxxvi). The description of these events is intertwined with the account of Snorri's decision to travel to Norway and of his journey in the summer of 1218. This implies that the journey is interpreted in the saga as part of his effort to gain superiority over the Oddaverjar; their disadvantaged position in Norway can help him become the first Icelandic chieftain to establish the new type of a direct political relationship with the Norwegian rulers.

Nevertheless, although Snorri's journey is presented as a political move, its depiction in *Íslendinga saga* is shaped by the narrative type of the court poet's story. Snorri's poetry and the reward that he receives for it is the main focus of the description of his first year in Scandinavia:

> Þá er Snorri kom til Nóregs voru höfðingjar orðnir Hákon konungr ok Skúli jarl. Tók jarl forkunnar vel við Snorra, ok fór hann til jarls. […] Snorri var um vetrinn með jarli. En um sumarit eptir fór hann austr á Gautland á fund Áskels lögmanns ok frú Kristínar er átt hafði áðr Hákon galinn. Snorri hafði ort um hana kvæði þat er *Andvaka* heitir, fyrir Hákon jarl at bæn hans, ok tók hon sæmiliga við Snorra ok veitti honum margar gjafir sæmiligar. Hon gaf honum merki þat er átt hafði Eiríkr Svíakonungr Knútsson. Þat hafði hann þá er hann felldi

> Sörkvi konung á Gestilsreini. Snorri fór um haustit aptr til Skúla jarls ok var þar annan vetr í allgóðu yfirlæti. (*Sturlunga saga, II*, 2021, ch. 176, pp. 112–113)
>
> (When Snorri arrived in Norway, King Hákon and Jarl Skúli had become the rulers. The jarl gave Snorri a very warm welcome and Snorri stayed with him. […] Snorri spent the winter with Skúli. The following summer he went east to Gautland to visit the lawman Áskell and Lady Kristín, who had been married to Hákon galinn. Snorri had composed a poem named *Andvaka* about her for Jarl Hákon at his request. She gave Snorri an honourable welcome and many honourable gifts. She gave him the banner that had belonged to the Swedish king Eiríkr Knútsson, who had carried it when he defeated King Sörkvir at Gestilrein. In the autumn Snorri returned to Jarl Skúli, spent another winter with him, and was very well treated.)

The emphasis on poetry partly covers up Snorri's political relationship with Skúli Bárðarson, Jarl Hákon's successor and King Hákon Hákonarson's co-ruler, but it does not entirely conceal it. It primarily serves as an interpretative framework for the whole episode, a reference to the cultural concepts associated with the court poets' stories, such as the Icelander's intellectual excellence and active initiative to establish his contact with the Norwegian monarchs.

After having established this framework, the saga turns to the political matters (STU clxxviii). Jarl Skúli uses the Norwegian merchants' conflict with the Oddaverjar as a pretext for suggesting a military expedition to Iceland, probably in order to strengthen his influence there and involve the chieftains in his power struggle with King Hákon. However, Snorri averts the expedition by convincing Skúli and Hákon to establish political cooperation through peaceful negotiation instead. He promises to promote royal rule in Iceland with the help of his brothers:

> En þó voru Nóregsmenn miklir óvinir Íslendinga ok mestir Oddaverja af ránum þeim er urðu á Eyrum. Þó kom því svá at ráðit var at herja skyldi til Íslands um sumarit. […] Snorri latti mjök ferðarinnar ok kallaði þat ráð at gera sér at vinum ina beztu menn á Íslandi ok kallaðist skjótt mega svá koma sínum orðum at mönnum mundi sýnast at snúast til hlýðni við Nóregshöfðingja. Hann sagði ok svá at þá voru aðrir eigi meiri menn á Íslandi en bræðr hans er Sæmund leið, en kallaði þá mundu mjök eptir sínum orðum víkja þá er hann kæmi til. En við slíkar fortölur slævaðist heldr skap jarlsins, ok lagði hann þat ráð til at Íslendingar bæði konunginn at hann bæði fyrir þeim at eigi yrði herferðin. Konungrinn var þá ungr, en Dagfinnr lögmaðr var ráðgjafi konungsins. Hann var inn mesti vin Íslendinga. Ok var þat af gert at konungr réð at eigi varð herförin. En þeir Hákon konungr ok Skúli jarl gerðu Snorra lendan mann sinn. Var þat mest ráð þeira jarls ok Snorra. En Snorri skyldi leita við Íslendinga at þeir snerist til hlýðni við Nóregshöfðingja. (*Sturlunga saga, II*, 2021, ch. 178, pp. 121–122)
>
> (But the Norwegians were fierce opponents of Icelanders and mainly of the Oddaverjar because of the confiscation that had taken place at Eyrar. It thus happened that an armed attack on Iceland was planned for the summer. […] Snorri strongly dissuaded the rulers from the expedition and recommended them instead to establish friendship with Iceland's most influential men. He said that his words could soon persuade the people to willingly accept the Norwegian rulers' authority. He also said that with the exception of Sæmundr, nobody

> was more influential in Iceland than his brothers, and he promised that they would follow his advice when he returned. The jarl was mollified by his intercessions and advised the Icelanders to ask King Hákon to intercede on their behalf, so the expedition would be revoked. The king was young at the time, and the lawman Dagfinnr, his counsellor, was a great friend of Icelanders. And it turned out that the king decided to cancel the expedition. King Hákon and Jarl Skúli made Snorri their vassal, and this was mainly the jarl's and Snorri's initiative. Snorri was meant to convince the Icelanders to accept the Norwegian rulers' authority.)

This scene depicts the transition from a conflict to an agreement with the help of the protagonist's verbal skills, which is a key component of the court poet's story. As has been shown here, the skald's diplomatic intervention into politics is a typical element of this narrative type as well; the skald usually excels not only in poetry, but also in eloquence and negotiation skills. Above all, the text emphasizes the Icelander's active role in his relationship with the Norwegian rulers, which is the central theme of the court poet's story. Everything from Snorri's journey to Norway to his effort at averting the military expedition and his suggestion to promote Norwegian rule in Iceland is presented as his own decision, and it is stated that the establishment of a formal political relationship was "mainly the jarl's and Snorri's initiative".

This formulation also accentuates Skúli's role in the matter. The text implies that at this point, Skúli wields more power in practice than the underage King Hákon, who relies mainly on his counsellors. In this context, it is also noteworthy that the plural form "Norway's rulers" (*Nóregshöfðingjar*) is used twice in the account of Snorri's promise to promote the monarchy in Iceland, which suggests that he does not necessarily refer to King Hákon, but maybe rather to Skúli. This foreshadows the latter section of Snorri's story, in which he gets fatefully involved in the conflict between Skúli and King Hákon.

At this point, however, the saga foregrounds the peaceful agreement and Snorri's active approach to it. It admits that the Norwegian rulers, mainly Skúli, show interest in direct political contact with Icelanders, but Snorri is not presented as passively tolerating their expansive intentions. On the contrary, the text implies that Snorri actively initiates the connection between Icelandic and Norwegian politics and suggests a solution that can be beneficial for both parties. He presumably perceives it as an opportunity to secure the Sturlungar's position in Iceland, as suggested by yet another reference to their rivalry with Sæmundr Jónsson and by the aftermath of this episode (STU clxxviii), which depicts Snorri's return to Iceland and accentuates the Oddaverjar's disapproval of his alliance with Skúli:

> Jarlinn hafði gefit honum skipit, þat er hann fór á, ok fimmtán stórgjafir. Snorri hafði ort um jarl tvau kvæði [...]. En er Snorri kom í Vestmannaeyjar þá spurðist brátt inn á land útkváma hans ok svá með hverjum sæmðum hann var út kominn. Ýfðust Sunnlendingar þá

> mjök við honum ok mest tengðamenn Orms Jónssonar. Þótti þeim sem hann mundi vera settr til af Nóregsmönnum at standa á móti, svá at þeir mætti engu eptirmáli fram koma um víg Orms. Var mest fyrir því Björn Þorvaldsson er þá bjó á Breiðabólstað ok þótti vænn til höfðingja. Sunnlendingar drógu spott mikit at kvæðum þeim er Snorri hafði ort um jarlinn ok sneru afleiðis. (*Sturlunga saga, II*, 2021, ch. 178, pp. 122–123)
>
> (The jarl had given him the ship that he sailed on and fifteen valuable gifts. Snorri had composed two poems about the jarl. […] And when Snorri arrived in Vestmannaeyjar, the news of his arrival and of the honour he had received soon spread across the country. The southerners, especially Ormr Jónsson's kinsmen, became very angry with him. They believed that the Norwegians had commissioned him to prevent them from successfully prosecuting Ormr's killer. This idea was most supported by Björn Þorvaldsson, who then lived at Breiðabólstaðr and seemed to be a promising chieftain. The southerners ridiculed the poems composed by Snorri about the jarl and twisted them.)

Here the text returns to the conflict between the Oddaverjar and the Norwegian merchants, but the narrative is once again shaped by an emphasis on Snorri's poetic activity. It is implicitly but rather convincingly suggested that Skúli's gifts are a reward for Snorri's poetry, while it is much more likely that the gifts were in fact intended to strengthen Snorri's loyalty to Skúli – not only in the establishment of Norwegian rule in Iceland, but also in the internal Norwegian political struggles. Through the poetic parody that Snorri's opponents use to ridicule him, they thus discredit his political alliance with the Norwegian rulers as well.[82]

Nevertheless, there is nothing in the text to imply that the Icelanders collectively condemn Snorri's support of the monarchy as a betrayal of the 'Icelandic nation'; it is mainly the Oddaverjar and their allies who disapprove of Snorri's political contacts in Norway. It is, however, unlikely that Snorri's aim was to prevent Ormr's family from receiving compensation; he presumably intended to gain political superiority over the Oddaverjar in a much broader sense. The likely reason why the Oddaverjar and the Haukdælir opposed his cooperation with the Norwegian rulers was therefore neither their opposition to the monarchy, nor the individual case of Ormr's killing, but rather the competition for power in Iceland. The most powerful Icelandic clans probably resented having missed the opportunity to enhance their power by such a direct contact with the monarchy, just because they were stuck in petty conflicts with the Norwegian merchants.

The renewed emphasis on poetry at the end of the episode contributes to the construction of the whole account of Snorri's first journey to Norway as the court poet's story, which has an interpretative function because of its confident image

82 This element is also present in the court poets' stories in the kings' sagas. In *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, for instance, Halli and his rival Þjóðólfr ridicule each other's poems, while the real purpose is to discredit one's rival and challenge his social position (Hermann Pálsson 1992, 154–155).

of the Icelander. This image then also shapes the perception of the following section of the account of Snorri's life, which is structured by the contrasting, inherently tragic narrative type of the jarl's story.

4.4.3 The narrative type of the jarl's story

The narrative type of the jarl's story portrays a jarl who is too ambitious to accept his subordination to the king, so his greed for power leads to a conflict between them. Its structure is similar to that of the conflict story, beginning with gradually developing rivalry and continuing with an open power struggle and finally an armed clash. Social cohesion is then renewed after the jarl's defeat, when the king's power is consolidated. Unlike the conflict story, however, the jarl's story is not focused on mediation and reconciliation. When the conflict takes place on the highest level of the social hierarchy and the king is one of its participants, there is no supreme authority that could arbitrate, and the internal disunity caused by the strife threatens the whole kingdom's stability. The jarl's defeat and death are therefore presented as necessary preconditions of the renewal of social stability. For this reason, the jarl's story can be regarded as the most tragic of all the narrative types.

The jarl's story was established in texts dealing with the thirteenth century, which are characterized by an increased typological difference between kings and jarls. In the kings' sagas about earlier times, both kings and jarls are typically portrayed as the same character type – the traditional Norse ruler, who is primarily a military leader, appreciated for his battle prowess, strategic skills, and extraordinary eloquence that enables him to motivate his warriors (Bagge 1996, 20–33, 65, 86–88; Coroban 2018, 108). The political relations between jarls and kings depicted in these sagas can vary – sometimes they cooperate, sometimes they compete for power, and sometimes a jarl replaces the king. Conversely, the portrayal of thirteenth-century kings is shaped by the newly introduced ideal of *rex iustus*: the monarch as a representative of divine will, a guardian of justice and peace, and a protector of the weak (Bagge 1996, 118–119, 147–155; Coroban 2018, 108–109). Alongside this new royal ideology, the focus on the concept of unconditional obedience to the monarch and on centralized royal rule was intensified (Orning 2008, 69–108; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2011, 84–85). In narratives that are predominantly shaped by this ideology, the jarl usually represents the old type of ruler, and his conflict with the king can be understood as an image of the social transformation. That is why the jarl's story foregrounds the contrast between the character types of the king and the jarl.

The best example of the jarl's story is the account of the relationship between Jarl Skúli Bárðarson and King Hákon Hákonarson in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, which builds up a contrast between the portrayal of Skúli and Hákon. Skúli is depicted as the traditional Norse warrior-aristocrat, and the text presents an ambivalent image of this character type. It highlights his positive qualities, such as courage, decisiveness, battle prowess, cleverness in politics, and diplomatic skills. Nevertheless, it also shows his excessive greed for power, which leads to his rivalry with the king that threatens social stability in the whole realm. King Hákon, by contrast, embodies the ideal of *rex iustus*, the peaceful representative of centralized power. In the saga, Skúli's defeat figuratively reflects the replacement of the old type of ruler with the new one.

4.4.4 Snorri Sturluson's second journey to Norway

In the latter section of the account of Snorri Sturluson's life, his story is so closely intertwined with Skúli's that it is shaped by the inherently tragic narrative type of the jarl's story, established in the account of the rivalry between Skúli and Hákon in *Hákonar saga*. This conflict is not presented in *Íslendinga saga* in its entirety, but it is alluded to, and Snorri's connections with Skúli are repeatedly emphasized. This accentuates the story's intertextual relationship with *Hákonar saga*.

Snorri returns to Iceland in 1220 as Skúli's ally and formally as King Hákon's vassal, but despite such a reinforcement of his position, his situation in the Icelandic power struggle is not easy. Apart from his original rivals, the Oddaverjar, he now also competes with his extremely ambitious nephew, Sturla Sighvatsson. When the Oddaverjar are weakened by the death of Sæmundr Jónsson in 1222, Sturla uses the opportunity to gain some of their power by marrying Sæmundr's daughter Sólveig (STU clxxxix). The tension between Snorri and Sturla gradually escalates into open enmity (see 3.2.5), and in the prolonged power struggle, Sturla uses the strategy previously used by Snorri: he travels to Norway in 1233 in order to gain more powerful allies than those he can get in his homeland (STU ccxxii, ccxxvi).

In the meantime, the conflict between the king and the jarl, depicted in *Hákonar saga*, is intensified. In the winter of 1232–1233, Skúli is suspected of preparing an assault on Hákon. After a confrontation at the assembly in Björgyn in the autumn of 1233, Skúli eventually accepts an agreement on the king's terms (HSH clxxxviii–cxciii). The tension is clearly not terminated by this formal reconciliation, as the text admits that "those who believed they knew both rulers' thoughts

said that there was never full trust between them again".[83] The saga blames the disagreements on evil men's calumny, but in fact there were probably other reasons. Until 1229, Skúli believed that he had no sons, so he accepted the plan that his daughter's sons with Hákon would inherit the kingdom, but then he found out that he had an illegitimate son, Pétr. The saga states that in 1236, he requested the right for his son to inherit his part of the country, which the king rejected (HSH ccvi). Another reason for Skúli's dissatisfaction may have been the new division of the country between him and Hákon (HSH ccxi), which was probably established when he was given the title of duke in 1237. The title itself must have been intended as a conciliatory gesture, but it probably had little real significance (Bagge 1996, 110–111).

Mistrust and forced agreements are important components of the jarl's story, because they accentuate the impossibility of a genuine, lasting reconciliation between the opposing parties. *Íslendinga saga* refers to these events in connection with Sturla Sighvatsson's arrival in Norway in 1233 and his contact with Skúli's kinsman Álfr Erlingsson of Þornberg (STU ccxxvi):

> [Álfr] tók allvel við Sturlu ok bað hann þar bíða þess er hertoginn kæmi norðan ok sagðist vilja koma honum í vináttu við hertogann. Sagði Álfr Sturlu at hertoginn mundi gjöra hann at inum mesta manni, slíkt afbragð sem hann væri annarra manna, en kallaði hertogann vera inn mesta vin Íslendinga ok þó mestan Sturlunga. Sturla vildi ekki annat en fara suðr til Björgynjar á fund Hákonar konungs, en þá var sundrþykki mikit með þeim mágum, ok drógu þeir þá lið saman, slíkt er þeir fengu. Þeir fundust um haustit í Björgyn ok sættust, ok þótti hertoganum sér þá heldr erfitt veita sættin. […] Fann Sturla Hákon konung í Túnsbergi, ok tók hann allvel við honum. Dvalði hann þar lengi inn síðasta vetr er hann var í Nóregi, ok töluðu þeir konungrinn ok Sturla jafnan. (*Sturlunga saga, II*, 2021, ch. 226, pp. 241–242)

> ([Álfr] gave Sturla a very warm welcome and asked him to wait there for the duke[84] to return from the north. He said that he wished to establish friendship between him and the duke. He also said to Sturla that the duke would make him a highly important man, because Sturla was so much more excellent than other men, and he called the duke a true friend of Icelanders and mainly of the Sturlungar. Sturla insisted on going south to Björgyn and meeting King Hákon. There was then a sharp conflict between Hákon and his father-in-law Skúli, and they both gathered as many men as they could. In the autumn they met in Björgyn and were reconciled, but the duke felt that the agreement was difficult to accept for him. […] Sturla met King Hákon in Túnsberg, and the king gave him a very warm welcome. Sturla spent most of his last winter in Norway there, and the king and Sturla often talked to each other.)

83 […] þat hafa þeir menn sagt er vita þóttusk hvárstveggja skaplyndi at aldri hafi síðan orðit fullr trúnaðr milli þeira (*Hákonar saga, II*, 2013, ch. 193, p. 23).

84 Skúli was in fact not a duke at this time, but he was clearly best known by that title when the saga was written.

The text shows that Álfr is quite eager to persuade Sturla to accept an alliance with Skúli, thus implying that the support of powerful Icelanders is regarded as an important factor in Norwegian politics. Álfr calls Skúli "a true friend of Icelanders and mainly of the Sturlungar", probably referring to Skúli's alliance with Snorri.[85] That may imply that the reason for Sturla's rejection of the alliance with Skúli is the strife between Sturla and Snorri at the time (see 3.2.5) and Sturla's intention to enter into an alliance with King Hákon against Skúli and Snorri. This is supported by the direct reference to the conflict between Skúli and Hákon and to their confrontation in Björgyn, which reminds the audience that by choosing an alliance with the king, Sturla joins the Norwegian power struggle. All these aspects emphasize the connection between the political conflicts in Iceland and Norway.

This is further accentuated in both *Íslendinga saga*'s and *Hákonar saga*'s account of King Hákon's negotiations with Sturla Sighvatsson. They show that the king is eager to establish an alliance with Sturla at the time of an intense rivalry with Skúli, but he cannot expect the Icelander's unconditional devotion, so he must appeal to Sturla's own interests in the Icelandic power struggle. It is thus underlined that the connection between Icelandic and Norwegian politics goes in both directions. These texts, just like the account of Snorri's first agreement with the rulers, admit the king's interest in ruling Iceland, but there is nothing to imply that the Icelandic chieftain is opposed to it. Instead, he is presented as an active participant in the arrangements, who thinks of his own political gains. Both sagas also highlight the king's efforts to reduce violence in Iceland, thus foregrounding the positive impact of centralized rule:

> Hákon konungr var ok mikill vin Sturlu, því at þat var mjök talat at þeir Sturla hefði þau ráð gjört at hann skyldi vinna land undir Hákon konung, en konungr skyldi gera hann höfðingja yfir landinu. Hafði Hákon konungr þar mest varaðan Sturlu við at hann skyldi eigi auka manndráp á landinu ok reka menn heldr útan. (*Sturlunga saga, II*, 2021, ch. 295, p. 347)
>
> (King Hákon was also a true friend of Sturla, because many people said that the king and Sturla had decided that Sturla should make the country submit to King Hákon, who would then let him rule the country. King Hákon had then mainly warned Sturla against adding to the killings in Iceland; he should rather expel men from the country.)
>
> Konungr hafði Sturlu í boði sínu ok talaði við hann marga hluti. Lét konungr illa yfir því er Sturla sagði honum ófrið mikinn af Íslandi. Konungr spurði hversu mikið fyrir mundi verða at koma einvaldi á landit ok lét þá mundu verða friðbetra ef einn réði mestu. Sturla tók

85 A very similar account is found in *Elzta saga Guðmundar biskups* (ccl), which mentions Álfr of Þornberg, Skúli's friendship with Icelanders and with the Sturlungar, and the conflict between Hákon and Skúli. The idea that Skúli is friendly towards Icelanders is also expressed in *Arons saga* (xv).

> þessu líkliga ok kallaði lítit mundu fyrir verða ef sá væri harðyrkr ok ráðugr er við tæki. Konungr spurði ef hann vildi taka þat ráð. Hann kvezk til mundu hætta með konungs ráði ok forsjá ok eiga slíkra sæmða ván af konungi sem honum þætti verðugt ef hann fengi þessu á leið komið. Konungr sagði svá at eigi skyldi með manndrápum vinna landit, en bað hann taka menn ok senda útan eða fá ríki þeira með öðru móti ef hann mætti. Sturla var oftliga fyrir konunginum um vetrinn, ok töluðu þeir um þetta mál. (*Hákonar saga, II*, 2013, ch. 196, pp. 24–25)
>
> (The king invited Sturla to his court and discussed many matters with him. He was displeased when Sturla told him about the fierce fights in Iceland. The king asked how difficult it would be to establish monarchy in the country, and he said that there would be better peace if one man decided on most matters. Sturla agreed and said that it would not be difficult if the man who took up the task was determined and resolute. The king asked him whether he wished to take up the task himself. Sturla answered that he would try it with the king's approval and support, and that if he succeeds, he expects to receive as much honour from the king as he feels he deserves. The king told him not to conquer the country by killing his opponents, but rather by capturing them and expelling them from the country, or by gaining their domains by other means if he could. Sturla was often with the king that winter, and they talked about this matter.)

As it turns out, however, Sturla's methods after his return to Iceland are far less peaceful than the king would have wished;[86] Sturla violently opposes Snorri, his son Órækja, and their ally Þorleifr Þórðarson (see 3.2.5). He partly follows the king's advice when he eventually expels all three opponents from Iceland, but then he turns to violence again in his decisive clash with his foremost rivals, Gizurr Þorvaldsson and Kolbeinn Arnórsson. This conflict leads to the death of Sturla, his father, and several brothers in the battle of Örlygsstaðir in 1238 (see 3.2.5). The sagas' emphasis on the king's peaceful instructions implies that Sturla causes his own downfall by disregarding the monarch's advice and immoderately turning to violence. The king's influence is thus depicted positively, and the tragic ending is presented as the Icelander's fault.

Snorri Sturluson is in Norway with Duke Skúli at the time of Sturla's death. In the narrative, his fate is linked to Skúli's conflict with King Hákon (STU ccci):

> Um vetrinn eptir Örlygsstaðafund voru þeir með Skúla hertuga í Niðarósi Snorri Sturluson ok Órækja, son hans, ok Þorleifr Þórðarson, en Þórðr kakali var í Björgyn með Hákoni konungi. En um várit fengu þeir skip er átti Guðleikr á Skartastöðum, vinr Snorra, ok bjöggu þat til hafs með ráði hertugans. En er þeir voru búnir ok höfðu lagt út undir Hólm, þá komu

86 Þetta sumar kom Órækja Snorrason af Íslandi ok sagði þaðan mikinn ófrið af Sturlu frænda sínum, ok virði konungr svá sem Sturla hefði harðara at farit en hann hafði honum ráð fyrir gert. (*Hákonar saga, II*, 2013, ch. 206, p. 36) (That summer Órækja Snorrason came from Iceland and brought news about his kinsman Sturla's fierce violence. The king believed that Sturla had behaved more ferociously than he had advised him.)

> menn sunnan frá konungi ok með bréfum, ok stóð þat á at konungr bannaði þeim öllum Íslendingum at fara út á því sumri. Þeir sýndu Snorra bréfin, ok svarar hann svá: „Út vil ek.“ Ok þá er þeir voru búnir hafði hertuginn þá í boði sínu áðr þeir tóku orlof. Voru þá fáir menn við tal þeira hertugans ok Snorra. Arnfinnr Þjófsson ok Óláfr hvítaskáld voru með hertuganum, en Órækja ok Þorleifr með Snorra. Ok var þat sögn Arnfinns at hertuginn gæfi Snorra jarlsnafn, ok svá hefir Styrmir inn fróði ritat: „Ártíð Snorra fólgsnarjarls,“ en engi þeira Íslendinganna lét þat á sannast. (*Sturlunga saga, II*, 2021, ch. 301, p. 355)
>
> (Snorri Sturluson, his son Órækja, and Þorleifr Þórðarson spent the winter after the battle of Örlygsstaðir with Duke Skúli in Niðarós, while Þórðr kakali was in Björgyn with King Hákon. In the spring, they took the ship owned by Snorri's friend Guðleikr of Skartastaðir and prepared it for departure with the duke's approval. But when they were prepared and had sailed out past Hólmr, the king's men came from the south with letters stating that the king forbade all Icelanders to leave Norway that summer. They showed Snorri the letters and he replied: "I will sail." And when they were ready, the duke invited them to his court before they took leave. There were few men present when the duke talked to Snorri – Arnfinnr Þjófsson and Óláfr hvítaskáld were there with the duke, and Órækja and Þorleifr with Snorri. And Arnfinnr later said that the duke gave Snorri the title of jarl, and Styrmir the Learned has written "the anniversary of Snorri the Secret Jarl's death,"[87] but none of the other Icelanders confirmed it.)

The king forbids Snorri and his companions to return to Iceland, possibly because he fears that Snorri could easily gain power on Skúli's behalf after the death of the king's chief Icelandic ally, Sturla Sighvatsson. However, Snorri decides to disregard the ban, thus showing his allegiance to Skúli, who clearly regards him as an important ally. It is even implied that Skúli may have secretly granted Snorri the title of jarl, which would mean that Snorri was intended to become the sole leader of Iceland in the case of Skúli's conquest of the throne. Snorri is thus presented as a direct participant in the Norwegian power struggle, one of the leading characters in the jarl's story. Skúli plays a decisive role in Snorri's political career: if Skúli rules Norway, Snorri will rule Iceland; if Skúli falls, it will lead to Snorri's downfall as well. The Norwegian and Icelandic power struggles have become so closely intertwined that they can no longer continue independently of each other. That is, however, not depicted as a negative development – it is only Snorri's decision to support the losing side that leads to his fall.

Hákonar saga (ccxiv) does not mention Snorri's title of jarl, but otherwise it presents a similar image. It sets the episode in the context of Skúli's rivalry with Hákon by referring to their plans to meet and negotiate, which are pervaded by mistrust. A reference to the defeat of the Sturlungar suggests a connection be-

87 Styrmir Kárason the Learned was a priest, *lögsögumaðr*, and later the prior of the Viðey monastery. He probably wrote this note in a calendar belonging to a church, so that the death would be commemorated during mass.

tween Sturla Sighvatsson's death and the king's decision to forbid Snorri to return to Iceland – this means that the king's loss of his most powerful Icelandic ally is regarded as an event that can affect the power balance in Norway:

> [Hákon konungr] sendi orð um vetrinn norðr til hertugans at þeir skyldu finnask um sumarit í Björgyn ok bað hann fara norðan með léttiskipum ok óhægja eigi bóndum til þessar ferðar. Íslenzka menn, þá sem með hertuga váru, bað konungr ekki út fara fyrr en þeir hefði ráð fyrir gert með hverjum erendum þeir skyldu fara, því at áðr um haustit hafði spurzk at þeir höfðu barizk í Skagafirði, Kolbeinn ungi ok Gizurr, við Sturlunga ok Sturlungar höfðu fallit. […] Hann frétti at hertugi hafði gefið orlof Snorra Sturlusyni ok Órækju syni hans ok Þorleifi til Íslands ok fengit skip þat er hann átti hálft en hálft Guðleikr af Skartastöðum. Þegar sem konungr frétti þetta þá gerði hann norðr bréf ok bannaði at þeir færi. Þessi bréf kómu til þeira er þeir lágu við haf, ok fóru þeir eigi at síðr í banni konungs. (*Hákonar saga, II*, 2013, ch. 214, p. 43)
>
> (In winter [King Hákon] sent a message north to the duke that they should meet in Björgyn the following summer and asked him to arrive from the north on light ships and not to trouble the farmers with the journey.[88] The king asked the Icelanders who were staying with the duke not to leave Norway before it was decided what their mission should be, because the previous autumn the news had arrived of a battle in Skagafjörðr, in which Kolbeinn the Young and Gizurr had fought against the Sturlungar, and the Sturlungar had been defeated. […] He [the king] found out that the duke had given Snorri Sturluson, his son Órækja, and Þorleifr permission to return to Iceland and to use the ship that he owned together with Guðleikr of Skartastaðir. As soon as the king found out about this, he sent letters to the north and forbade them to depart. They received these letters when they were ready to sail and left Norway despite the king's ban.)

The mention of the Icelanders' "mission" (*erendi*) presumably refers to the king's provisions concerning his political relations with Icelanders after Sturla's fall, possibly the king's intention to prevent Snorri from gaining power in Iceland on behalf of Skúli, and instead to persuade him to act on behalf of the king. Snorri's choice to disregard the king's ban is a sign of his determination to support Skúli, so he is again presented as a participant in the jarl's story.

Hákonar saga eventually turns to the culmination of the conflict between Skúli and Hákon, the final section of the jarl's story. Skúli finally stops hiding his plan to dethrone Hákon and publicly claims the crown (HSH ccxix–ccxxi). This leads to violent clashes, in which Skúli first wins a battle against King Hákon's allies (HSH ccxlvii–ccxlviii) but then loses the decisive battle of Oslo in the spring of 1240 and flees from it (HSH cclxvi–cclxxii). After the battle, King Hákon gives mercy to those of Skúli's adherents who give themselves up to him (HSH cclxxiii); Skúli hides in a monastery but is killed by Hákon's men on 24 May 1240 (HSH cclxxx). This is a typical ending of the jarl's story: a reconciliation is unattainable

88 This implies that the king is afraid of an armed clash if Skúli arrives with a larger force.

once the jarl has crossed a line in the power struggle, so the only possible option is the jarl's defeat by violent means. The king magnanimously spares his defeated opponent's soldiers, but the defiant jarl must be killed because he has seriously threatened the internal unity of the kingdom.

Íslendinga saga refers to Skúli's fall only briefly (STU cccv),[89] but this sufficiently contextualizes the rest of Snorri's story. When he has ended up on the losing side in the power struggle, the structural pattern of the jarl's story leads to the expectation of his fall. The saga reveals the king's command that Snorri must be either sent to Norway or killed by the king's new chief Icelandic ally, Gizurr Þorvaldsson (STU cccx):

> Var þar á at Gizurr skyldi Snorra láta útan fara, hvárt er honum þætti ljúft eða leitt, eða drepa hann at öðrum kosti fyrir þat er hann hafði farit út i bani konungs. Kallaði Hákon konungr Snorra landráðamann við sik. Sagði Gizurr at hann vildi með öngu móti brjóta bréf konungs, en kveðst vita at Snorri mundi eigi ónauðigr útan fara. Kveðst Gizurr þá vildu til fara ok taka Snorra. (*Sturlunga saga, II*, 2021, ch. 310, p. 368)
>
> (It was written there that Gizurr should make Snorri travel to Norway, whether Snorri agreed with it or not, or else, if there was no other way, he should kill him for having left Norway despite the king's ban. King Hákon proclaimed Snorri guilty of high treason. Gizurr said that he did not wish to disregard the king's letter in any way, but he said he knew that Snorri would never travel to Norway unless he was forced to do so. He said he intended to go and capture Snorri.)

The preceding narrative has already clearly connected the king's ban of Snorri's return to Iceland with Snorri's support of Skúli, so the reference to the ban in this chapter must be understood in this context. It is thus Snorri's involvement in Skúli's efforts to dethrone King Hákon that can be regarded as the main reason for the accusation of high treason.[90] This connects the king's command concerning Snorri to the jarl's story. Nevertheless, the king's preferred solution is for Snorri

89 Þetta sumar kom Eyvindr brattr ok Árni óreiða út með bréfum Hákonar konungs, ok var þeim lítt upp haldit. Þeir sögðu ok ófrið þann er verit hafði um vetrinn í Nóregi ok fall Skúla hertuga. (*Sturlunga saga, II*, 2021, ch. 305, p. 359) (This summer, Eyvindr brattr and Árni óreiða arrived in Iceland with King Hákon's letters, which were little regarded. They also brought the news of the war that had occurred in Norway the previous winter and of Duke Skúli's fall.)

90 Admittedly, according to *Hirðskrá*, vassals who leave Norway against the king's will are traitors and forfeit their rights and property (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 72). *Hákonar saga* shows, however, that the king is not so uncompromising in practice. He is, for instance, willing to forgive Snorri's son Órækja for the same misdeed: "Hann kom á vald Hákonar konungs í Björgyn, ok gaf hann honum skjótt upp reiði sína er hann hafði á honum fyrir þat er hann fór út í banni hans." (*Hákonar saga, II*, 2013, ch. 285, p. 119) ([Órækja] gave himself up to King Hákon in Björgyn and the king soon gave up the wrath [Órækja] had incurred by leaving Norway despite his ban.)

to come to Norway, where they could possibly be reconciled.[91] Snorri's death is presented first and foremost as a consequence of internal Icelandic competition for power. Gizurr is furthering his own interests when he uses the king's command as a welcome excuse to get rid of his major rival. Accordingly, Gizurr makes no attempt at the peaceful solution suggested by the king and has Snorri killed on 23 September 1241 (STU cccx). This again shows how closely intertwined Icelandic and Norwegian politics have become: when Snorri is weakened by his choice of the defeated party in the Norwegian power struggle, his chief opponent in Iceland uses it as an opportunity to eliminate him. Snorri's conflict with King Hákon is thus not interpreted in the narrative as a sign of enmity between Iceland and Norway, but rather as an episode in the process through which both countries were connected.

However, what is most important for the interpretation of these events is that despite the tragic tone of the jarl's story, Snorri is never portrayed as a passive victim. Both he and Sturla Sighvatsson are depicted as active participants in Norwegian politics, who voluntarily decide to join the conflict between King Hákon and Skúli Bárðarson, well aware of the potential gains and possible risk. They are willing to negotiate with the rulers and serve their interests, but they never blindly obey Hákon or Skúli. This interpretation is achieved not only by the individual scenes depicting their contact with the rulers in *Íslendinga saga* and *Hákonar saga*, but also by the interplay between the narrative type of the court poet's story and the jarl's story in the former and latter section of the account of Snorri's life in both sagas. The court poet's story foregrounds the Icelander's confident initiative to establish his contact with the royal court, and this positive image then modifies even the perception of the less optimistic jarl's story. The emphasis on the Icelandic chieftains' important and active role in Norwegian politics then influences the whole evaluation of the relationship between Icelanders and the monarchy, from which the medieval recipients of the sagas could derive a positive self-image.

4.5 Constructing a memory of contact

The texts analysed in this chapter pay much attention to the beginning of Iceland's direct political contact with the Norwegian monarchy, presumably because this relationship was still in the process of negotiation at the time of their origin and compilation. The Icelanders' perception of their own marginality probably

91 The king expressly says to Órækja Snorrason that "eigi mundi faðir hans dáit hafa ef hann hefði komit á minn fund" (*Hákonar saga, II*, 2013, ch. 285, p. 119) (his father would not have died if he had come to meet me).

became an increasingly pressing issue due to the current political development, so they presumably felt the need to reaffirm their position within the Norse and Christian cultural region more than ever before. This doubtlessly influenced the way in which they chose to narrativize their recent history, in particular the selection of themes that are foregrounded in the narratives.

It has been argued here that the sagas were primarily intended to deconstruct the notion of Iceland's social marginality by presenting it as equal to the more central areas in terms of important intellectual, cultural, or spiritual aspects. Another, closely related theme is the emphasis on the Icelanders' active initiative to establish and negotiate their relationship with the monarchy. They are presented as being open to acknowledging royal power but refusing to be passively subordinated to the king. The sagas also express the idea that contact with Norway can contribute to developing the positive aspects of Icelandic identity, as opposed to isolation, which would hinder Iceland's dynamic social and cultural evolution. These themes connect the contemporary sagas, including the bishops' sagas, with the narratives of the distant past, thus reinforcing the sense of continuity in the presentation of Icelandic history.

This thematic continuity is also reflected in the narrative types shared by the contemporary sagas and the sagas or *þættir* about the distant past. This typological similarity creates parallels between recent historical persons and comparable characters from the Saga Age. The recent narratives are thus integrated into the audience's cultural memory, so that they transcend their meaning as accounts of specific individuals' lives and participate in the construction of collective identity.

The main narrative type in the depiction of contact between Icelanders and the Norwegian royal court is the travel story. Its structural pattern is centred around a transition from the protagonist's initial low status in Norway and alienation from the court to his social integration and prestigious position. An important element of the travel story is the Norwegians' prejudice against Icelandic newcomers. This prejudice is based on a sense of regional, rather than national identity; it is comparable to the way in which the inhabitants of central regions or cities have tended to mock villagers from remote regions in many cultures throughout history. The provincial origin of Icelanders is, however, counterbalanced by their skills and personal qualities, which are eventually discovered and appreciated by the king. The travel story thus shows not only the protagonist's actual travels, but also his 'journey' from alienation to acceptance.

In the construction of collective identity, this narrative type reflects some of the insecurities related to the medieval Icelanders' geographical and economic peripherality, but it shows that they can be overcome. It expresses the idea that Icelanders prefer contact with Scandinavia to isolation from it and believe in their potential for a positive relationship with the monarchy despite possible ini-

tial difficulties. In the sagas of the Icelandic saintly bishops, this otherwise secular narrative type accentuates their function as identity-building texts. The protagonists, just like their secular counterparts, face conflicts in Norway but eventually reach a satisfactory reconciliation and prove their mental strength, integrity, and spiritual excellence. These hagiographic sagas thus deconstruct Iceland's social marginality not only by portraying native saints, but also by showing specific examples of the protagonists overcoming alienation on their journeys abroad.

The image of Icelandic identity in contact with the monarchy is further developed in the royal retainer's story, which pays less attention to the Icelanders' marginality and more to the inherently hierarchical nature of their relationships with the rulers. The narrative type is therefore focused on the boundaries between service and freedom, loyalty and subordination, or courage and aggression. The compatibility of service and freedom is foregrounded by an emphasis on the protagonist's voluntary decision to enter the ruler's service, or even to sacrifice his life for him. The retainer is rewarded for his loyalty with a unique type of prestige that is more absolute and permanent than the changeable personal status offered by Icelandic society, so the royal service improves his reputation and social position. Moreover, it also increases his personal integrity, as his belligerence receives a meaningful purpose and his disruptive ferocity is transformed into socially beneficial courage.

The focus on voluntary loyalty is related to the theme of the Icelanders' active initiative in important situations, which is established already in the narratives of early Icelandic history and receives even more significance in the contemporary sagas. Despite its inevitably hierarchical nature, the Icelanders' relationship with the monarch is thus not presented as a loss of freedom. When this narrative type is employed in the story of Þorvarðr and Ari in *Preststssaga Guðmundar góða*, it adds an important political dimension to the saga, turning an individual biography into a text that contributes to the construction of collective identity.

The image of the Icelander's confidence and active initiative reaches its peak in the court poet's story. Whereas the travel story highlights the Icelander's initial marginality, the court poet's story emphasizes his extraordinary intellectual skills, his freedom in deciding to enter a king's service, his ability to negotiate the conditions of his relationship with the monarch, and his special privileges at the royal court. This narrative type probably exaggerates the skalds' privileges far beyond historical reality – in any case that of the thirteenth century – but it is all the more important for the narrative construction of collective identity. Its excessively glamorous image of the Icelander at the royal court contributes to a socially relevant interpretation of real-life relationships between Icelanders and the Norwegian monarchy.

Moreover, apart from portraying the protagonist as something like a medieval celebrity, the court poet's story also accentuates the skald's diplomatic role in Scandinavian politics. This element of the narrative type seems to accord quite well with the thirteenth-century historical reality, and it emphasizes the Icelanders' active participation in Norwegian power relations during the Sturlung Age. The Icelanders are thus not presented as powerless pawns caught in the intricacies of the high political game, but rather as determined politicians seeking to promote their position and willing to take risks.

The emphasis on the confident image of the Icelander is most obvious in the narrative portrayal of Snorri Sturluson. Whereas the skalds in the kings' sagas usually arrive at the royal court poor and socially insignificant, Snorri is an influential, wealthy chieftain already before his arrival in Norway. This removes the initial contrast between the poet's sharp intellect and low social position. In this case, however, the modification of the narrative type does not change its overall tone but rather strengthens it. The structure and themes of the court poet's story enable the presentation of Snorri as an active participant in establishing the political relationship between Iceland and the Norwegian monarchy despite his tenuous political success; the narrative thus rejects any notion of passive subordination.

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All these narrative types shaped the meaning of the sagas' accounts of recent history. The facts that existed in communicative memory were given, but the way of narrating them was open to choice. The process of narrativization enabled the selection of what would be foregrounded, what would be forgotten, and which persons and events would be incorporated into cultural memory. That depended on what the preferred interpretation of history was.

There is little doubt that an effort to interpret the past motivated the portrayal of some noteworthy side characters in the sagas. The brothers Ingimundr, Þorvarðr, and Ari Þorgeirsson were doubtlessly known in communicative memory for their kinship with the saintly bishop Guðmundr Arason, but also for their own accomplishments. During the transition to cultural memory, the bishop's life inspired the production of several sagas due to his importance as a historical personage and as an identity bearer. The historical significance of the brothers could not compare with that of Guðmundr, so they did not receive their own saga. However, their stories served as suitable material for the construction of collective identity because they could illustrate important aspects of the Icelanders' contact with the Norwegian rulers. That is probably the reason why *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða* does not just mention the brothers in passing as the protagonist's kinsmen, but the accounts of their lives are developed into brief but carefully structured stories that follow some of the predominant narrative types. Due to the collective knowledge of these

narrative types among the original recipients of the saga, the structure of these stories could reveal the deeper layers of their meaning.

The narrative types play an essential role in shaping the meaning of the sagas' main storylines as well; they enable sophisticated interpretative strategies, especially if two contrasting narrative types are combined in the account of a protagonist's life. It has been shown here how the optimistic tone of the travel story can be further emphasized in combination with an inherently tragic narrative type, such as the outlaw's story in *Arons saga Hjörleifssonar*. The outlaw's story represents the tragic state of social marginality, but then the saga modifies this narrative type through a combination with the travel story, thus accentuating the unexpectedly optimistic ending and the deconstruction of the initial marginality. The protagonist's marginality as an outlaw is contrasted with the prestige he enjoys at the royal court, and the tragedy of isolation is contrasted with the benefits of integration. The protagonist's physical transfer to Norway is followed by his appointment to a respectable position, which represents a mental and social incorporation into the centre. The pilgrimage to Jerusalem can be regarded as a completion of this process, as it establishes the Icelander's contact with the centre of the Christian world. Such a gradual transition from absolute marginality to the ultimate integration underlines the central ideas of the travel story.

An optimistic narrative type similarly modifies the meaning of a tragic narrative type in the story of Snorri Sturluson. The account of Snorri's first journey to Norway is structured by the pattern of the court poet's story. His first international contacts are depicted with a focus on poetry composed for Scandinavian aristocrats, which was probably not actually politically significant, but it receives much attention in the saga because it builds up the interpretative framework of the narrative type. The protagonist is alienated from the monarchs when they plan a military expedition to Iceland, but a reconciliation follows when Snorri averts the armed clash by his diplomatic eloquence and clever negotiation, typical of the narrative image of skalds. On the surface of the narrative, the prestige and gifts received by Snorri are also presented as a reward for his poetry. At the end of the episode, the text again emphasizes Snorri's poem and its parody, thus drawing attention to the court poet's story as the framework of the whole narrative's meaning. When the account of Snorri's first contact with the monarchy is fitted into the structural pattern of the narrative type that presents the most self-confident image of Icelandic identity, the text accentuates his voluntary decision to enter the Norwegian power game and his assertive negotiation with the rulers. It thus expresses the idea that the Icelanders' relationship with the monarchy is not based on passive obedience but on open debate.

This part of Snorri's story is followed by the latter section, shaped by the contrasting narrative type of the inherently tragic jarl's story, because Snorri's fate is inseparably intertwined with the fate of his Norwegian ally, Skúli Bárðarson. Snor-

ri's tragic end is presented as a result of his decision to support Skúli, the defeated party in the Norwegian power struggle, instead of the victorious King Hákon. Nevertheless, although the jarl's story contrasts with the optimistic tone of the court poet's story, it does not negate its meaning. The court poet's story, with its focus on the Icelander's active approach to establishing political alliances with the monarchy, shapes even the meaning of the second part of the narrative about Snorri. He is thus not presented as a passive victim, but rather as a player in the political game who deliberately enters the power struggle, actively chooses a side, and willingly accepts the inevitable risk. On a more universal level, this implies that Icelandic society is not viewed as a passive victim either; the political contact with Norway is presented as the Icelanders' own initiative. The tragic ending of Snorri's story could have given the Icelanders an opportunity to create a narrative image of their opposition to Norway if such a narrative had been desirable for the construction of their collective identity. Instead, however, the existing portrayal of Snorri serves as a figurative image of the Icelanders' active role in their relationships with the Norwegian kingdom, while the inevitable difficulties are not concealed.

These examples show how the meaning can be modified when recent historical events are fitted into the structural patterns of the narrative types. The resulting texts are not essentially historically inaccurate, but they are not neutral records of events either – they offer a balanced combination of fact and interpretation, which is enabled by their narrative nature. The textuality and intertextuality of the sagas contribute to an interpretation of history and a construction of collective identity from the perspective of the time of their origin. Apart from intra-literary connections, the sagas thus also reflect their extra-literary contexts. They describe the past but figuratively comment on present concerns, which affect the selection of themes and narrative types. This means that the memory of the past is shaped by its relationship with the present, but the present identity is simultaneously derived from the remembered past.

Due to this constant interaction between memory and identity, it makes little sense to divide one from the other or to categorize the sagas as either *history* or *fiction*. The original audiences doubtlessly perceived both the secular and hagiographic contemporary sagas as history in the broad medieval sense but also understood them as interpretations of the past and sources of collective identity. Moreover, some of the sagas contain elements of divinity and miracle, which in the medieval understanding transcend the boundary between reality and belief. All these aspects of the sagas construct their meaning together, contributing to their function as narrative images of the medieval Icelanders' worldview and perception of their own position in the world. The same applies to the texts analysed in the following chapter, which may appear to be more strictly historiographical, but textuality and intertextuality are just as important for their meaning.