

PAUL SCHACH

ANTIPAGAN SENTIMENT IN THE ICELANDIC SAGAS
(SUMMARY)

For many years saga research in Europe and the United States was dominated by the romantic fixed-prose doctrine of Heusler and Liestøl. According to this doctrine, the Íslendingasögur mysteriously came into existence at the time the events occurred, and were then handed down by word of mouth for two to three centuries, virtually unchanged except for a mysterious stylistic refinement, until they were finally recorded "mit der Genauigkeit des Phonographen." "Saga style" was described as "absolute Prosa," and one spoke of discovering "das Urphenomen der Sagastruktur."

Since the sagas, according to the romanticists, created themselves during the Saga Age, they obviously had to be pagan in spirit. Whatever Christian elements or influences occurred in the sagas were obviously "unecht," late accretions, scribal or editorial interpolations.

A careful reading of the sagas, however, reveals that the authors were keenly aware of the discrepancy between the cultural milieu in which the sagas were written and their cultural reference, the Saga Age. Repeatedly, ancient customs and beliefs are explained in terms of contemporary beliefs and institutions. References to Christianity are far more numerous than the romanticists would have us believe, and Christian practices are praised as consistently as pagan customs are condemned or, at least, excused on the basis that "Christianity was still young." Furthermore, the sagas contain numerous anachronisms and such close parallels

to contemporary (thirteenth-century) events that more than one saga has been interpreted as a roman a clef.

Obviously the sagas are, for the most part, the creation of the thirteenth century, written by Christian authors for a Christian audience. It will be the purpose of this paper to survey the entire corpus of Íslendingasögur to discover the attitudes of Icelanders of the thirteenth century toward their pagan forbears. These attitudes, not infrequently ambivalent, are the sources of much of the irony and paradox that make the sagas so delightful to read. It will be shown that the meaning of a saga (as opposed to the surface plot or action) often derives from an antipagan bias on the part of the author.