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THE ETHICS OF THE ICELANDIC SAGA AUTHORS AND THEIR  
CONTEMPORARIES

A comment on Hermann Pálsson's Theories on the Subject

For a long time there was almost universal agreement that the Icelandic Family Sagas (Íslendingasögur) were basically a heroic literature. Sigurður Nordal for example, writes in his Íslenszk menning in 1942:<sup>1</sup>

Um íslenszka menningu fer svo undarlega, að heiðnin ber fjölskrúðugasta blóma sinn löngu eftir kristnitökuna, í fornsögunum, og heita má, að gildi fornmennta vorra sé metið í réttu hlutfalli við hinn heiðna anda, sem mótar þær.

It might therefore almost be said that Hermann Pálsson dropped a bomb into the harmonious community of saga scholars in 1964 when he published his short article "Siðfræði Hrafnkels sögu", followed two years later by a book of the same title. There, Hermann claimed that Hrafnkels saga, one of the most "classic" sagas, was in fact dominated by Christian ethics, condemning the heroic norms of pride and revenge. Since then, Hermann has written a number of articles on this subject and attempted to find this same Christian attitude

<sup>1</sup>Sigurður Nordal: Íslenszk menning I (Rvk., 1942), 230.

in other sagas as well, notably Grettis saga.<sup>2</sup>

Hermann's writings deal in a more general way with the effect of Christian European literature upon Icelandic sagas. I will confine myself here to the problem mentioned above, thus risking oversimplification which would not do full justice to Hermann's theories, but I it is not in any case my intention to offer any final judgement on the correctness of Hermann's ideas. I call my paper a comment on his theories mainly because my reflections on the subject are very much inspired by him, even though I may not completely agree with his opinions.

#### II.

It is, of course, the well known and well honoured objectivity of the sagas which allows these two opposite readings of them. The sagas deal frequently with characters who quite clearly honour pride above humility, revenge above forgiveness. But, when telling these stories, the authors rarely give us any clue as to whether the ethical standards of their characters are to be accepted or rejected. Sigurður Nordal was in no doubt when he wrote in his study of Hrafnkels saga:<sup>3</sup>

Before Hrafnkell slays Einarr there are two courses open to him, both distasteful: either he must break the powerful oath he has sworn, or he must kill a servant he

<sup>2</sup>Hermann's works on the subject are listed in a note following my article "Dyggðir og lestir í þjóðfélagi Íslendingasagna" which appeared in Tímarit Máls og menningar 46:1 (avk. 1985), 17 -18. I apologise for an error in the list: Hermann's book Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's saga was published in 1971 and not 1981.

<sup>3</sup>Sigurður Nordal: Hrafnkels saga freysgoða. A Study. Translated by K. George Thomas (Cardiff, 1958), 48 - 49.

likes for a mere trifle. This dramatic situation is not uncommon in our ancient literature, both in the Eddic poetry and in the sagas; fate can drive men into such desperate corners that a foul deed can appear the better of two evils. Bolli must slay Kjartan his sworn foster-brother, Gísli Súrsson his brother-in-law Þorgrímr; Flosi must burn Njáll and Bergþóra in their home. Yet, knowing that their actions are evil, men who are truly great choose and act without hesitation.

Nor is Hermann Pálsson in any doubt either when he quotes these words of Nordal with the following comment:<sup>4</sup>

...it seems an odd way of looking at the crimes committed to regard them as signs of greatness. Gísli steals into his sister's bedroom under cover of darkness and murders her husband who is sleeping peacefully beside her; Bolli kills his cousin and blood-brother who refuses to defend himself; and Flosi sets fire to a house, deliberately burning to death an innocent old man, his wife, grandson and others who had never done him any harm. According to medieval morality these were reprehensible acts, and that is precisely now the saga authors must have expected their public to react to them.

These scholars, and most others who have discussed the matter, work from the assumption that ethics is something that people learn, more or less in connection with religion, and pass on from one generation to another until a conversion occurs and a new religion with new morality is accepted. According to this view the basic question is whether the Icelanders had been truly Christianised by the 13th century or not.

<sup>4</sup> Hermann Pálsson: Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's Saga (Copenhagen, 1971), 43.

In an article in the first issue of Tímarit Máls og menn-  
ingar this year, I attempted a different approach to the  
problem.<sup>5</sup> I abandon the view that moral attitudes are prin-  
cipally concomitants of religion. Instead, I assume that  
moral attitudes have a social function, and, above all, one  
can expect them to serve the interests of a ruling class or a  
dominant group in the society. If this is right, one can  
expect the Icelandic sagas to carry ethics which would have  
served the interests of the 12th and 13th century aristocracy  
of Iceland. In accordance with this view I will not use the  
distinction heathen vs. Christian. Instead I will contrast  
the tough values of heroism, pride, revenge, and the soft  
values of modesty, humility, peacefulness.

Which kind of values, then, would have served the  
interests of the Icelandic aristocracy? In the Icelandic  
commonwealth farmers were - at least formally - free to  
choose to which chieftaincy (goðorð) they belonged, within  
the quarter of the country in which they lived. There were no  
self-evident ties between an individual chieftain (goði) and  
an individual farmer (þingmaðr). If the farmers had not had  
to rely on their chieftain for anything, if their only  
necessary intercourse had been to pay him tax (þingfarar-  
kaup), and occasionally ride with him to the assemblies, it  
is difficult to imagine that the farmers would have bothered  
to choose to which chieftaincy they belonged. The farmers  
would have been able to disregard their legal duty to be  
þingmenn. The chieftain had to have a function which was not  
only important for the local or national community but also  
for each individual farmer. This function was mainly the

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<sup>5</sup>Gunnar Karlsson: "Dyggðir og bestir", 2 - 12.

protection of the þingmenn against hostilities. Such a role would only be justified in an atmosphere of persistent warfare, and such an atmosphere would suggest that the tough values, rather than the soft ones are honoured.

Furthermore, as the chieftains had no army of professional fighters to keep up law and order or protect their followers among the farmers, every chieftain had to rely on the farming community around him. Strictly speaking, the chieftain was completely unable to protect his followers; he was just the organising leader of self-protection, which was in fact carried out by the farmers themselves. It was therefore absolutely vital for the chieftain's authority that ordinary farming people, farmers, farmer's sons and labourers, did not run away to save their own lives before the fight began. It was necessary for him to have followers who were willing to risk their lives in battle. Thus the organisation of the society needed some degree of militancy.

On the other hand, militancy can hardly ever reign alone. Firstly, it clashes with some strong impulses: the natural instinct of people to prefer life to death, at least for themselves and people they feel affection for or identify with. Secondly, lack of respect for human life inevitably causes trouble, and, if it goes too far, becomes a threat to the social order which the chieftains were supposed to preserve. There is no doubt, in my view, that killings and warfare are on the whole looked upon as deplorable in the sagas. And secret killings, mord as they were called, were condemned very severely. They were the very opposite of heroism.

Based on these arguments, it was my conclusion in the article in Tímarit Máls og menningar that the worship of tough values in the sagas can be explained as a socially or politically useful ideology. At the same time this ideology would almost inevitably carry with it its opposite. One could even be tempted to see the tension between the two sets of values as an important urge behind the writing of the sagas.

In the same volume of Tímarit Vilhjálmur Árnason, a philosopher, offers somewhat similar interpretation of the ethics of the sagas. He also stresses the connection between the social structure and the morality which the sagas display. He writes:<sup>6</sup>

Sá sem var attstór og vinmargur þjó við öruggari lífs-skilyrði og réttaröryggi en ella, en forsenda þess var að sá ninn sami geti ávalit reitt sig á attmenn sína og vini í öllum viðskiptum sínum við aðra. Í sífku þjóðfélagi hlaut áreiðanleikinn að vera mikilvægasti mannkosturinn, því sú manneskja sem ekki var hægt að reida sig á var einskis nýt. Hugrekkið, aðalsmerki hetjunnar, er uppistaðan í þessum áreiðanleika. Það fellur í hlut hetjunnar að halda við sóma og oröstír attlar sinnar sem var meðlimum hennar lífsnaudsyn í samfélagi sjálftektar.

### III.

In these articles in the Tímarit no study is made of any particular saga texts to see what kind of values are revealed there. I made a small attempt to do this at Sturlustefna, a

<sup>6</sup>Vilhjálmur Árnason: "Saga og siðferði. Hugleiðingar um túlkun á siðferði Íslendingasagna." Tímarit máls og menningar 46:1 (Rvk. 1985), 32.

conference held in Reykjavík in honour of the 13th century historian Sturla Þórðarson on the 28th and 29th of July last year. There I gave a lecture entitled Síðanát Íslendingasögu, where I tried to detect the moral values in Sturla's great contemporary history, Íslendingasaga.<sup>7</sup>

Sturla proved to be at least as reluctant to express his opinions about the deeds of his characters as any other saga author. The acts which he seems most willing to condemn are in cases when harm is done to clergymen, but this may be merely perfunctory. Offences against churches and clergy were almost the only acts for which people were punished by an institution in this society. They were the only possible crimes in a modern sense.

Nevertheless, it is obvious in Íslendingasaga that the tough values were respected in the society described by Sturla. Admiration is expressed, more or less explicitly, if men defend themselves bravely or meet their deaths with pride. For example, an old man killed in the battle at Órlygsstaðir gets this laudatory tribute: "Árni Auðunarson lézt þar við mikinn oróstr." Those who defended Gissur Þorvaldsson's home at Flugumýri are praised with the words: "Ok svá sagði Þorsteinn Guðmundarson síðan, at hann kvaðst þess hvergi komit hafa, at menn hefði jafnfrækuliga varizt. Ok allir hafa vörn þá ágatt, er varð á Flugumýri, bæði vinir ok óvinir."

In the same way, it is thought to be shameful to flee from one's enemies in Íslendingasaga. Although it is frequently done, when men choose not to flee they offer pride as

<sup>7</sup>This lecture will appear in the next volume of Gripa, published by Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi.

a reason for not doing so. It is a reason which is taken as valid by other people in the saga, and it seems clear that the author intends his readers also to take it seriously.

Pride is also an important factor in other instances. While it is clear that compensation (i.e. wergeld) for offences is to be preferred to none, it is also made clear that compensation is a bit shameful, revenge being the only perfectly honourable response. Sturla Sighvatsson's home, Sauðafell, was attacked and raided in an unusually brutal manner, even by the standards of the time, by two brothers, Þórór and Snorri from Vatnsfjörör. Sturla accepts compensation for the raid. This leads one of the brothers, Þórór, to give this comment: "Víst er féggjald mikit, . . . en vel ann ek þeim, er við tekr. Óni ek betr við þenna hlut en at taka þetta fé fyrir þvílíkar tilgerðir, ef ek þóttunast vera þvílíkr maðr sem Sturla." In fact Sturla did not content himself with the compensation: he had both the brothers from Vatnsfjörör killed the following year.

Even pride of the kind which we would tend to call vanity is a living force among the 13th century aristocracy. No less a man than Snorri Sturluson is said to have taken part against the Haukdælir family on one occasion, because he disliked how people in their district had mocked his poetry. Sturla Þórðarson offers this explanation for the party-division in the dispute in question, without, it is true, expressing his opinion on the validity of Snorri's reason. But the fact that he offers the explanation at all shows that it was not thought entirely unjustifiable at the time to take stands on grounds such as mockery.

On the other hand it seems very clear to me that the warfare which Sturla describes was on the whole deplorable to him. He hardly ever says so, but he conveys his meaning through his narrative so clearly that one cannot be in any doubt. Firstly, he describes battles and wounds with such minute accuracy that it is bound to raise the disgust of all normal people:<sup>8</sup>

Björn spreitti frá sér panzaranum, er honum var oroit heitt. En er hann kom aftr, sáu þeir Guðlaugr, at hann var berr um hálsinn. Hljóp Guðlaugr fram ok lagði til sjarnar með spjóti því, er þeir kölluðu Grásíðu ok sögðu átt nafna Gísla Súrsson. Lagit kom í óstinn, ok snerist Björn upp at kirkjunni ok settist niðr.

Guðlaugr gekk til Loftis ok saðoi honum, at Björn var sárr orðinn.

Loftr spyrr, "Averr því olli.

"Vit Grásíða," svarar hann.

"Hvé mjök mun hann sárr?" saðoi Loftr.

Guðlaugr sýndi honum spjótit, ok var feitín ofarliga á fjuðrinni. Þóttust þeir þá vita, at þat var banasár.

Secondly, Sturla usually describes battles from the viewpoint of the attacked and not attackers. The raid at Sauðafell is described almost exclusively from the viewpoint of the household there. When the raiders meet their revenge three years later, Sturla characterises each one of them mentioning for example that Snorri from Vatnsfjörðr was only eighteen years old. That he was only fifteen when he attacked Sauðafell, on the other hand, had been left unnoticed.

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<sup>8</sup>Sturlunga saga. Jón Jónhannesson, Magnús Finnboðason og Kristján Eldjárn sáu um útgáfuna. I (Rvk., Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946), 282. - All previous quotations from Íslendingasaga are taken from my lecture at Sturlustefna and will be referred to in its publication in Gripa.

Thus, Íslendingasaga provides clear evidence of a tension between two sets of values. It is written in a society and about a society which worships values associated with militancy, while carrying in it a strong condemnation of those values.

#### IV.

I now intend to bring into this study some remarks on the ethical views in the other main group of contemporary sagas, the Bishops' sagas. These sagas are very important for the present study, because they ought to display a mentality as far away from heathen tradition as possible. If we can discover there acts or attitudes characteristic of the tough values, without any marked disapproval, on the part of the saga-writer, we can be fairly certain that these values were inherent in the society in which these sagas were produced.

Starting with the miracles (jarsteinir), we are offered an insight into a world very different from that of either Íslendingasögur or Sturlunga saga. The Icelandic saints are never invoked for aid in situations which would be typical of what I have been calling tough values, such as battles, etc. Instead, almost all miracles deal with common problems like diseases, accidents, sick livestock, lack of food or clothes, lost articles. By comparison, let us look at a miracle from one of the Íslendingasögur. A minor character in Njáls saga is Ámundi the blind, an illegitimate son of Njáll's illegitimate son, Hǫskuldr, who was killed by Lýtingr. At an assembly, Lýtingr refuses to pay him compensation for his father,

because he has already paid Hjáll and his sons. But Ámundi, being illegitimate, had got nothing of this. And the story goes on:<sup>9</sup>

"Eigi skil ek," segir Ámundi, "at þat muni rétt fyrir guði, svá nær hjarta sem þú hefir mér hoggvit; enda kann ek at segja þér, ef ek væra heileygr báðum augum, at hafa skylda ek annathvært fyrir fœður minn fábætr eða mannefndir, enda skipti guð með okkr!" Eptir þat gekk hann út, en er hann kom í búðardyrrin, snýsk hann innar eptir búðinni; þá lokusk upp augu hans. Þá mælti hann: "Lofaðr sé guð, dróttinn minn!" Sér nú, hvat hann vill." Eptir þat hleypr hann innar eptir búðinni, þar til er hann kemr fyrir Lýting, ok hæggr þxi í hefðu honum, svá at hon stóð á hamri, ok kippir at sér þxinni; Lýtingr fell áfram ok var þegar dauðr. Ámundi gengr út í búðardyrrin, ok er hann kom í þau spor in sœmu, sem upp hefðu lokizk augu hans, þá lokusk æptr, ok var hann alla ævi blindr síðan.

I remind you of this powerful episode to point out what could be the subject of the miracles, if the people who wrote them, or told them to the writers, had been occupied by heroic norms. The explanation of their absence depends partly on what we find in the vitae, the actual biographies of the bishops.

Guðmundar saga Arasonar in Resensbók contains an episode in which the two sets of values are compared. The episode clearly favours the soft values. After a funeral at Vellir in Svarfaðardalur, where Guðmundr served as a priest, two dogs began to fight:<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Íslensk fornrit XII. Brennu-Hjáls saga. Einar Ól. Sveinsson gaf út (Rvk, 1954), 273.

<sup>10</sup> Guðmundar sögur biskups I. Ávi Guðmundar biskups. Guðmundar saga A. Stefán Karlsson bjó til prentunar. (Copenhagen, 1263), 81-82. (Editiones Arnarnagnæana. Series B, vol. 5).

...ok bituz sua. <sup>akaft</sup> at menn matto eige skilea. þa. ok var  
 heilt uatne þa ok togapiR isundr. ok barðir ok letu  
 eigi laust at helldr. Þa gengr G(uðmundr) prestr at  
 hundunum ok blezar þa. ok mélti uio þa. at þeir late  
 laust. ok þege j nafne faupur ok sonar ok anda heilags.  
 Þa lata hundarnir layst þegar ok þagna. ok gengr sins  
 uegar huak.

In spite of this, the saga-complex built around the per-  
 son of Guðmundr Arason seems to contain a great deal of  
 approval of tough values, which may in part be explained by  
 the tough and warlike life he had been destined to lead.  
 Another part of the explanation may be that the bulk of his  
 biography is not written as a bishop's saga but forms a part  
 of Sturla Þórðarson's Íslendingasaga.<sup>11</sup>

This latter explanation is valid about the most out-  
 standing example of tough thought on behalf of the bishop.  
 Guðmundr had fled with his followers to the northerly island  
Grímsey. There his enemies came and killed ten or eleven of  
 his men, castrated two priests, captured the bishop and  
 brought him with them. Then, the story says, Guðmundr asked  
 God to avenge him, "því at ek má eigi, vesalíngur minn." The  
 story adds: "Þat er sögn manna, at þrfr tígir manna ok tveir  
 menn létist af þeim, er farit höfðu at biskupi með þeim Sig-  
 hvati, þá er þeir fóru ór Grímsey."<sup>12</sup> This is probably to be  
 understood as an approval of Guðmundr's appeal, in spite of  
 the author's seeming reservation: "Þat er sögn manna..."

<sup>11</sup>Stefán Karlsson discusses the saga complex of Guðmundur Ara-  
 son in a paper presented at this conference.

<sup>12</sup>Sturlunga saga I, 203.

There are other indications that Guðmundr Arason's God is a revengeful God, willing to punish people who refuse to do the bishop's will. In a rather complicated story in Prests-saga Guðmundar góða, Guðmundr takes up a case against a certain Oddr and has him sentenced to outlawry. In the ensuing quarrel, a son of one of Oddr's friends, Jón, is accidentally killed. On this the author comments:<sup>13</sup>

Nú fór Guðmundr við þat af mannamóti, at guð hefndi óvinum hans, ok léf Jón þar son sinn fyrir Odds sakir. ...En guð gatti svá Guðmundar, at hann hafði til þessa hvárki lagt orð né verk.

Divine retribution appears in more cases: A horse, which the owner refuses to lend to Guðmundr, falls into a stream and dies.<sup>14</sup> A priest who refuses to house and feed Guðmundr and two men accompanying him has his whole farm burnt down.<sup>15</sup> Kolbeinn Tumason, the chieftain in the district where Guðmundr's seat is, dies when a stone is thrown at him in a battle against the bishop's men. Íslendingasaga says about this:<sup>16</sup> "Ekki varð víst, hverr steininum hafði kastat." A younger version of this story, the so-called Niðsaga or Text 6, has more to tell:

Ekki varð víst, hverr steini þeim hafði kastat, er Kolbeini varð at bana, ok eingi maðr veit þat enn í dag, en þat er frásögn þeirra manna, er þar voru, at or lopti ofan sá þann stein fljúga.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Sturlunga saga I, 132.

<sup>14</sup> Sturlunga saga I, 146 (Prestssaga).

<sup>15</sup> Sturlunga saga I, 274 (Íslendingasaga).

<sup>16</sup> Sturlunga saga I, 249.

<sup>17</sup> Þissupa sögur, gefnar út af hinu íslenska bókmenntafélagi I (Copenhagen, 1858), 569.

Such toughness is naturally not the monopoly of God in Guðmundr's sagas. His friends, Guðmundr's followers, "börðust alldjarfliga" against Kolbeinn Tumason, according to Íslendingasaga; the younger Kesensbók says "uel ok djarfliga".<sup>18</sup> When they had fled to the samli island Hálmey, Kesensbók says:<sup>19</sup> "Hofðu þeir fyrir mennirnir þat mïok j Rada giord. at þeir mundu leggja a lïfs hattu. mykla. ad hefna byskups suiurdinga. og sinna." The idea of revenge is obviously always close at hand. Even Guðmundr himself, when he had Údr sentenced, "leitaðist ...um hug sér, hvert hann skylui leita til framgöngu síns máls, þess er honum yrði eigi at svfivirðu ..."<sup>20</sup> For the future saint the advocacy is, partly at least, a matter of pride.

It would not be right, though, to leave the sagas of Guomundr Arason at that. The opposite view towards warfare is of course to be found there too. The most interesting evidence of this attitude is perhaps a story about Þorgeirr Hallason, Guðmundr's grandfather, found in the Prestssaga. At the Althing one year a fight broke out, and Þorgeirr's son, Þorvarðr, was hurt. Afterwards, some men wanted the assembly to be prolonged so that the cases arising out of the battle could be settled. Then Þorgeirr Hallason gave the following speech:<sup>21</sup>

"þat er víst, að þessu máli verð ek eiul samþykkr, at gera öllum mönnum svá mikit mein ok vanhag, at auka þingit, ok uggi ek, at við þat mundi vaxa vandredí ok

<sup>18</sup> Sturlunga saga I, 248; Guðmundar sögur I, 157.

<sup>19</sup> Guðmundar sögur I, 193. - The sentence is not in the more original Íslendingasaga (Sturlunga saga I, 287).

<sup>20</sup> Sturlunga saga I, 131 (Prestssaga).

<sup>21</sup> Sturlunga saga I, 119-20.

ófriðr, en þverra eigi. Nú hafa þat kennt inir vitrustu menn, at lagja skyli öll vandræði, en æsa eigi. Nú hefir minn sonr orðit fyrir áverka, ok þykkir mér hann gildir maðr fyrir sér, ok mun ek þó eigi sjá þann hlut til handa honum eða mér at gera almúginum vandræði í, heldr mun ek biða ok leita mér ráðs ok fara heima at sinni."

This act does not match the generosity of Sifðu-Hallr in Njáls saga who offered to forgo compensation for his son when he was killed at the Althing.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless it does provide evidence of high regard for peacefulness.

While reading the sagas of the early bishops of Skálholt, Hungrvaka, Þorláks saga helga and Páls saga byskups, one is tempted to think that the sagas of Guðmundr Arason are an exception among the Bishops' sagas. The heroes of those sagas are depicted exclusively as modest, peaceful and standing far above the struggles of the laity. I take as an example a description of bishop Magnús Einarsson in Hungrvaka:<sup>23</sup>

Þá reyndisk ok brátt hverr ágatismaðr hann var í sínu stórlýndi ok forsjá þessi fyrir sína hönd ok annarra, af því at hann spærði aldri fjárhluti til meðan hann var byskup, at setta þá sem áar váru sundrþykkir, ok lagði þat jafnan af sínu til er þeira var í milli, ok urðu af því þingvar deildir með mönnum meðan Magnús var byskup. Hann hélt þinu sömu lífilleli sínu við alþýðu sem áor, þótt veri byskup, ok var hann af því vinselli en flestir menn áorir, ok hafði þar marga stóra hluti til þess gærl.

<sup>22</sup>Íslensk fornrit XII, 411-12.

<sup>23</sup>Byskupa saggur: Udgivet af Det kongelige nordiske oldskriftselskab ved Jón helgason. I. hefte (Copenhagen, 1938), 101.

And this, from Þorláks saga:<sup>24</sup>

Þorlákr byskup samþykkti þá ok selti er. adr voru Reidir ok sundr þykckir ok sagdi þeim þat sem saghtt var ok satt er. at Reidin máár mik Rettsyni manna medann hon fylgir. sem Páll postoli. segir. At æigi aa samann Rettlæti guds ok Reidr mannsins. Ok j odrum stað. Sigræzstu æigi af jllu. heldr sigræðu illt med goðu. þat er at sigra Reidina med polinnædi ok qæzsku.

There is a clear difference between this picture of an optimal bishop and of the promising lay chieftains described in Sturlunga saga, where they are characterised for example as "ákafamaður mikill í skapi." "ófsamaður mikill og vænn til höfðingja." "vitur maður og heldur ággjarn og þótti líkligur til mikils höfðingja." "ófsamaður mikill og þótti líkligur til höfðingja."<sup>25</sup>

Jóns saga helga offers a picture of its hero for the most part similar to these in the bishops' sagas from the South. Jón, too, is characterised by his tenderness and modesty: "tók hann hvers manns máli hlífaliga, með miklu lífilæti."<sup>26</sup> Still, one version of the saga contains an episode which seems to reveal that the author was not completely opposed to the idea of revenge. While bishop Jón was still a deacon he stayed for a while at the Norwegian King's court. There, Gísl Illugason, another Icelfander at the court, killed a Norwegian courtier, who had killed his father in Iceland when Gísl was a child. Gísl was captured, but the Icelfanders at the court, under the leadership of Teitr, the son of bishop Ísleifr,

<sup>24</sup> Byskupa sggur 2. hæfte. Útgívet af Jón Helgason (Copenhagen 1976), 207-08 (Editiones Arnamagnæane. Series A, vol. 13,2).

<sup>25</sup> These examples are all taken from deigi Þorláksson: "Stéttir, auður og veld á 12. og 13. öld." Saga 85 (1982), 66.

<sup>26</sup> Byskupa sggur i, 234.

forcibly freed him. The King became furious and a speech given by Jón for Gísl's defence did not placate him. Then Gísl gave himself up to avoid a battle and was hanged by the King's men. But before Gísl was hanged Jón put over him a coat which the King had given to him. It was law in Norway then, says the saga, that a man should hang in the gallows until he fell down himself. When Gísl had hung for two days Jón went to the gallows, walked around it three times, and said prayers. In the end the noose was cut and Gísl fell from the gallows alive and well.<sup>27</sup> There is no condemnation of Gísl's act of revenge in the story, and the fact that Jón saves his life may be seen as justifying his action.

My last example here is taken from the youngest bishops' saga cited in this study. This is Árna saga biskups, which takes place during the last decades of the 13th century and is probably written between 1304 and 1320. This saga, like Jóns saga, contains a story of a man who avenges his father. The saga says that the bishop became angry with the man (Guðlaugur), because he avenged himself upon his enemy (Harleinn) when he was riding on a horse quite close to the bishop himself:<sup>28</sup>

H(erra) biskop varð af ij sokum framast reyður þessum sama Guðlauge. Var su hin fyrre, að hann þottest að riðlhogge hafður nalega, og mikil von a að a hann munde komed nafa högged, ef af hönum Marteine hefde stocked, þar sem driugum lagu samann axler þeirra. Enn su annur að hönum þotte fyrer syna navist hafa teked vered freckt til ohappsins, þviad Hart(einn) hafde ei varast umm sater.

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<sup>27</sup> biskupa sögur 1, 221-25.

<sup>28</sup> Árna saga biskups. Þorleifur Hauksson bjó til prentunar (Rvk., Árnastofnun, 1972), 39.

Of course the Bishop did not like to be put in danger or stained with blood himself, but the saga contains no condemnation of the act of revenge as such.

These examples from the Bishops' sagas seem to indicate that the right to revenge was still firm in the mentality of Icelanders, even the Icelandic clergy, in the 13th and 14th centuries. I am therefore tempted to think that the absence of tough values in the miracles is not due to their absence among the clergy that wrote them down. A more plausible explanation seems to be that the miracles depict the world, the problems and interests, of common people who were less imbued with militancy than the more aristocratic classes of the clergy, the chieftains, and their followers.

V.

The evidence of Íslendingasaga and the Bishops' sagas seem to support the assumption that I put forward in Tímarit Máls og menningar. The tough values of the heroes of Íslendingasögur lived on among the 13th century aristocracy of Iceland and formed a constant tension with the inevitable wish for peace. This conclusion of course neither proves nor disproves Hermann Pálsson's theory that some of the Íslendingasögur are written against these tough values. It may even well be that people disagree as to whether my findings make Hermann's theory more or less plausible. On that question any informed reader is as good a judge as the author. Still, if I am to be the first to express my opinion, I must say that I feel the evidence provided by the contemporary sagas indi-

cates that acts characteristic of the tough values were not looked upon as entirely reprehensible by 13th century Icelanders. Their ethical views, it would seem, were more complex than that.

