

Guðrún Nordal

*Ethics and Action in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*

Odense University Press, Odense, 1998, pp. 369

Sturla Þórðarson (1214–84) is supposed to have written his *Íslendinga saga* in the last years of his life, after compiling *Hákonar saga* and his own version of *Landnámabók*. *Íslendinga saga* is a chronicle about Icelandic events and personalities from the period 1183 to 1264, when the unique political order based on the Althing collapsed, and all the leaders of the land had sworn oaths of allegiance to the Norwegian crown. However, *Íslendinga saga* is not only a major source for a crucial chapter in the history of medieval Iceland but also a remarkable literary creation which merits critical attention. Notwithstanding its principal purpose, it shares some striking features with *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Víga-Glúms saga* and other historical fictions from the thirteenth century; such sagas offer vivid images of life in Iceland during the period c. 930 to c. 1050. Like his fellow-writers who used their narrative skills to depict a dimly remembered past, Sturla was keenly interested in the human condition, the difference being that he chose to describe people within his own ken. The disproportional emphasis on individual personal portrayals in *Íslendinga saga* is so marked that certain parts of it give the impression of being stories about characters in search of a plot.

The extant versions of

*Íslendinga saga* open with the death of the author's grandfather and namesake Sturla Þórðarson of Hvammur (1116–83) and then refers briefly to his three sons, Þórður (1165–1237), Sighvatur (1170–1238), and Snorri (1178/9–1241) who, at the age of three, was taken into fosterage by Jón Loftsson of Oddi (d. 1197) where he received his formal education. The three brothers figure prominently in *Íslendinga saga*, particularly Sighvatur and Snorri. It is tempting to speculate that Snorri was meant to be the central character of *Íslendinga saga* as a whole. Intellectually, he towered above his contemporaries and for several decades he was one of the principal political figures in the land. But, like most other Icelandic chieftains of the period, Snorri compromised himself and was also betrayed by friends, with the result that *Íslendinga saga* remains a story without a hero. Personal relationships in this work are very intricate indeed. Thus Snorri was killed by his former son-in-law, Gissur Þorvaldsson (1209–68) who happened to be the great-grandson of Jón Loftsson, Snorri's foster father. Moreover, Gissur was responsible for the deaths of Snorri's brother Sighvatur and three of Sighvatur's sons. Eventually, Gissur became Iceland's first and only earl (1258–68), serving under Kings Hákon Hákonsson (d. 1263) and Magnus Hákonsson (d. 1280).

In her comprehensive and aptly entitled study, Dr. Guðrún Nordal explores various aspects of *Íslendinga saga* in remarkable detail. She divides her book into four major sections: 'Family loyalties', 'Sexual morality',

'Motivations' and 'Personal conscience'. These are followed by a painstakingly thorough and elaborate 'Index of family relationships' of 105 pages. Numerous incidents, as well as historic events, are examined under a microscope, identified, classified and used as evidence about the culture involved. I find it very refreshing when she directs her scrutiny away from *Íslendinga saga* to point out analogues in myth and historical fiction. But she could have drawn attention to many more parallels between Sturla's work and other sagas than she actually does in her book. Considering the fact that Gissur Þorvaldsson claimed kinship with King Sverre Sigurdsson of Norway (d. 1202) it seems a strange omission on Dr. Nordal's part not to mention the impact that *Sverris saga* appears to have made on Gissur. On p. 209 she describes the execution on Gissur's orders of his cousin, Þórður Andrésson. Before his death, Þórður asked to be forgiven for his transgressions against Earl Gissur, who bluntly replied: "That I will do as soon as you are dead." (GN's translation). Here, as elsewhere, Gissur is following a lead from King Sverre who on two separate occasions refused to forgive his principal enemies, King Magnus and his father Erling, until they were dead.

A major element in *Íslendinga saga* is the extended power struggle that prevailed in the last decades of independent Iceland. The native culture was inherently hostile to the idea of heavily centralised power. Compared to Gissur, his opponents were lacking in a firmness of purpose; they were the product of their unsophisticated rural democracy,

which traditionally depended on a mutual understanding between each *goði* and the farmers supporting him. Gissur, on the other hand, claimed descent from a bastard daughter of King Magnus Berrfótt (d. 1103) and followed the example of King Sverre who fought his way to the throne with ruthless singlemindedness. Like Sverre, Gissur drew his moral conviction and authority from the royal blood that allegedly flowed through his veins, and so ultimately from God.

Hermann Pálsson