

REVIEW

Patricia Pires Boulhosa

*Icelanders and the Kings of Norway:
medieval sagas and legal texts.*

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THIS well researched and well documented volume appears in the Brill series on *The Northern World: North Europe and the Baltic c.400-1700 AD: peoples, economies and cultures*. The author, Patricia Pires Boulhosa, graduated in both law and history from the Pontifical University of Sao Paulo, and later spent two years in Reykjavík, before embarking on a Ph.D at Cambridge, now successfully completed, on the subject of this book.

The author challenges the traditional view – traditional at least since the nineteenth century – which emphasises the independence of Iceland in the centuries following the settlement, and which consequently views the events of the 1260s, when the Icelanders submitted to Norwegian rule, as a radical break with the past. Here it is argued that the relationship with the Norwegian kings was never as clearly defined as the traditional view suggests, but was always complex and subject to change. Hence the thirteenth-century submission should be viewed as ‘the result of a continuous political process, rather than a rupture.’ The main underpinning of the argument is founded on a close study of legal texts regulating and describing relations between Icelanders and the kings of Norway, notably the *Ólafslög* – that is, the law ascribed to St Olaf (k.1030), though only known from later centuries – and the documents of the submission of 1262-4.

The book divides into four chapters. The second of these consists of a searching and convincing textual analysis of the *Ólafslög* in order to elucidate relations between Iceland and Norway. For example, it is noted that the rate of compensation payable to an Icelander in Norway is based on that of a Norwegian *holdr*, strongly suggesting that the first settlers of Iceland had a high-born status – ‘an *oðal* mentality’ – as depicted in the Sagas. Boulhosa claims that her analysis of the *Ólafslög* ‘reveals that Norway occupied a special place within the Icelandic mentality, a space which was linked to Icelandic ancestry, but which also indicates that the Norwegian king had a certain control over the Icelanders.’ Chapter three analyses the documents of the submission of 1262-4, particularly *Gizursáttmáli* and *Gamli sáttmáli*, questioning the ways in which they have previously been assessed and understood.

The first chapter concerns methodology, and boldly reviews the most fundamental questions as to how to approach the Icelandic sagas and interpret their evidence. Are they to be regarded as literature or as history? The author suggests that the modern distinction between history and fiction is unhelpful when applied to medieval texts. She also suggests that attributions of authorship, such as regarding Snorri Sturlason as the author of *Heimskringla* and *Egils saga* are equally unhelpful, and that the sagas are best seen as anonymous works, ‘as complex social products of a manuscript culture’; as political statements, at least in some degree, subtly altered and tailored over the centuries, not least in the matter of relations between Iceland and Norway. There is, therefore, emphatic recognition of the value of the sagas to historians. Properly interrogated the sagas can provide evidence which supplements and helps to explain the legal texts. In the final chapter the author tests her analysis of the submission as a gradual process by examining relations between Icelanders and the kings of Norway as portrayed in the sagas contained in the fourteenth century *Möðruvallabók*.

There are three appendices. The first gives the text of the *Ólafslög*; the second gives the texts of the documents of the submission, fourteen in all, as discussed in chapter three. The third gives the texts of passages in the sagas which describe the relations between Harald Finehair and the Norwegians who left for Iceland, noting key words and phrases. There is also an impressive bibliography and a short but useful glossary.

This is a work of closely-argued, painstaking scholarship. It is not an easy book to read, but it is one which explores and seeks to answer

fundamental questions, and is likely to remain a point of reference for many years to come.

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