

## Article

# The Emergence of Rationality in the Icelandic Sagas: The Colossal Misunderstanding of the Viking Lore in Contemporary Popular Culture

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**Abstract:** For a long time now, Old Norse literature has often been colonized and misappropriated by modern right-wing political groups for their own ideology, symbolism, and public appearance. A critical reading of Icelandic sagas, however, easily demonstrates that those public strategies are very short-sighted, misleading, and outright dangerous for our democratic society. To stem the flood of misinformation regarding the Viking world and its literature, this article joins a small but forceful chorus of recent scholars who are hard at work deconstructing this politicization of saga literature by way of offering new readings of those texts in which the very Viking ideology is actually exposed by the poets, rejected, and supplanted by new forms of social interactions predicated on a legal system and an operation with rationality in the public sphere.

**Keywords:** old Norse literature; Icelandic sagas; *Njál's Saga*; *Laxdaela Saga*; *Egil's Saga*; rationality; laws; conversion to Christianity



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## 1. Theoretical Introduction: The Emergence of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance

Although some differences continue to exist in the critical approaches to the fascinating phenomenon of the twelfth-century renaissance or reform, scholars have almost uniformly agreed that the long twelfth century witnessed an enormous transformation in many different areas of human life, whether in the relationship between the genders (courtly love but also marriage), in architecture (Gothic), in medicine (the Galenic school of thought brought to Europe through translations from Arabic to Hebrew to Latin), in the environment and agriculture (medieval warming period), or in social structure (rise of the class of “ministeriales” or low-ranking administrators, the full development of knighthood, feudalism) and public values and ideals (courtliness). Most intriguingly, this new era was deeply determined by the emergence of the personal ‘I,’ the individual awareness which slowly but steadily transformed the collective society of the early Middle Ages to the individualized society of the high Middle Ages and beyond. Poets increasingly presented themselves in specific autobiographical terms; architects, such as the Parlers, left busts of themselves in their cathedrals (St. Vitus, Prague; see also the sculptures in St. Mauritius in Halle a. d. S. (Conrad von Einbeck) and on the outside of St. Martin in Landshut (Hans von Burghausen)); scientific and medical authors, such as Roger Bacon, were proud of their own accomplishments (Fichtenau [1992] 1998; Brooke 1969; Constable 1996; Griffiths 2007; Dinzlacher 2017; van Nahl 2022).

It would be impossible in the space of an article to examine the wealth of current research on this monumental feature of cultural development, but a global consensus in that regard has already emerged, ever since Charles Haskins coined the phrase the “Renaissance of the Twelfth Century” in 1927 (Haskins 1927), and irrespective of the fact that many details still remain to be discussed pertaining to the origin of that transformation, the individual manifestation (Hanning 1977), and the local features of this innovative phenomenon (Jaeger 1985; Novikoff 2017). To draw on Haskins, above all, that new movement found its most vivid expressions in intellectual centers; in the creation of much more sophisticated

manuscripts and corresponding libraries; in the revival of Greek and Latin classics; the improvement of jurisprudence and historiography; in the many innovations in philosophy, the sciences, and medicine; and in the emergence of the university as a secular institution (Treadgold 1984; Southern 1995; Swanson 1999; et al.).

The worlds of the visual arts and of courtly literature speak a very clear language as to the emergence of a new culture, which was increasingly determined by rationality, critical self-reflection, and the formation of the individual self in its biographical uniqueness (Jackson 1967; Fajardo-Acosta 2010) but also a growing sense of contingency (van Nahl 2022). There are countless indications of this profound reform, whether we think of philosophy (Peter Abelard), medicine (Galenic teachings), the sciences, or literature and music (Holmes 1951, 1965). Of course, we would have to distinguish carefully among the individual situations in the various parts of medieval Europe but this would not change the overall picture which I want to draw from in this paper, especially because my purpose here is to explore to what extent the early indications of this profound paradigm shift can be also identified in the Nordic countries at the same time, as reflected in the saga literature.

However, the association of Icelandic sagas with the renaissance of the twelfth century might appear to be spurious if not speculative at first, especially because many of those texts continue to represent the world of heroism as we know it from the early Middle Ages (Fulk 2010), such as the *Saga of the Volsungs* (Byock 1999) or the *Saga of the Jónsvikings* (Finlay and Jóhannesdóttir 2019), although in the latter we already learn much about a whole set of new laws being implemented to establish the foundation of a sophisticated community. In fact, a careful reading reveals a much more complex situation, at least in some of the sagas, where unbridled violence, blood feuds, and mutual slaughter are addressed critically and where the role of rationality and the importance of a legal system gained new relevance. The entire genre of sagas is too diverse to claim that they consistently mirror a fundamental paradigm shift leading up to the twelfth-century renaissance. Nevertheless, in contrast to much of older scholarship, it proves possible to identify a noteworthy development away from foundational myths, heroism, religious quests, and similar themes to a literary expression of a world increasingly determined by rationality (as to the role of heroism, see (Pálsson 2017); as to the fundamental conflict between a violence-based society led by Icelandic chieftains and a violence-restricting Christian world in the later centuries, see (Tulinius 2020)).

I would not want to insist that the thirteenth-century scribes—early oral versions of most of the sagas themselves were composed in the eleventh or twelfth centuries, but just as in the case of the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200) they were fully developed only later—intended to connect their world in concrete terms with the cultural developments in western and central Europe or harbored fundamental interests in associating their past literary works with the new philosophical or juridical discourses suddenly preeminent at many of the high medieval universities. However, rationality can easily be at play in all kinds of situations in which individuals have to make a decision in an ambivalent or contradictory condition (for a late medieval example, the fables by the Swiss poet Ulrich Bonerius, see (Classen 2022)). But we can observe, after all, a critical effort by the various poets to distance themselves from the traditional ideology of blood feuds, revenge, and slaughter in the name of heroism by way of exposing that cycle of violence as endless and devastating for everyone. Instead, as we will observe a number of times, there was, in general, a new focus on the employment of rationality, justice, and legal principles, certainly tenuous, but undoubtedly present in many of the situations described in the sagas. The global awareness of the past gone, also for Icelandic society; the interest in historicizing sagas as mirrors of a previous world; and the various reflections on legal issues and the formation of new communicative strategies, suggest a subtle but significant paradigm shift we can associate with the renaissance of the long twelfth century (as to religious conversion, new art forms, multilingualism, and contacts with foreign cultures, see the contributions to Eriksen (2016); regarding the intellectual transformations in Denmark, see the contributions to Münster-Swendson et al. 2016).

## 2. Academic Study of the Middle Ages and Popular Interest in the Middle Ages, an Unfortunate Disjuncture

The Middle Ages, as studied or engaged with today, face an odd problem, experiencing a resounding success in the public, on the one hand, and suffering, on the other, from a constant decline in academic, i.e., administrative support. Presentism is making steady progress to the grave disadvantage of any historical approaches, which also has profound political implications. In particular, Old Norse literature has found increasing favor among certain conservative or right-wing circles, which rally happily under the banner of the Viking culture as something pre-democratic, pre-modern, highly patriarchal, traditional, and associated opaquely with pagan culture (Kaufman and Sturtevant 2020). Saga literature and the renaissance of the twelfth century would thus be diametrically opposed, both in cultural-historical terms and ideologically. Little wonder that Scandinavian Studies or Old Norse Studies are facing considerable trouble today (Kvavik 1982; Poole 2010; Demade 2020), while at the same time the medieval world features surprisingly prominently in the Western urban and rural landscapes in a recreative manner (Pugh and Aronstein 2021).

The most infamous example in recent history was the curious figure of Jacob A. Chansley who, along with a large number of other frenzied and misguided rioters, violently stormed the U.S. Capitol on 6 January 2021 in order to block Republican Vice-President Mike Pence from announcing Democrat Joe Biden as the official winner of the 2020 Presidential elections, despite the fact that virtually all courts and all election officials in the USA had confirmed the validity of the election results ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021\\_United\\_States\\_Capitol\\_attack](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021_United_States_Capitol_attack), accessed on 31 August 2022). This direct attack on the American democratic process, fueled by an obvious hatred of democratic ideals and values, freedom and justice, has been widely reported in the news media, both in print and online (e.g., the article by ArLuther Lee on 7 January 2021 in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, <https://www.ajc.com/news/protester-in-viking-headaddress-idd-as-trump-supporter-not-antifa/V7J5GFFVHZANRD2JFIC5PEBBYE/>; last accessed on 18 July 2022). This criminally minded man, Chansley, pompously dressed up as a fake Viking and played on the presumed character of the fiercely independent and mighty Icelandic or Swedish hero from the Middle Ages. As Dorothy Kim now poignantly formulates, “The Viking past contributes to a medieval toolkit of language, allusion and symbolism used to transmit white supremacist messages” (Kim 2019; cf. also Heller 2007). Indeed, the world of Old Norse literature often must stand in today for the strategy of right-wing groups both in North America and Europe trying to hold on to their traditional white, patriarchal, and Christian hegemony in face of a quickly changing world with many different, i.e., nonconformist or simply unexpected players of non-Western backgrounds.

But many other individuals and groups have for a long time already sported Viking symbols, such as “Odin’s raven, Thor’s hammer, rune letters, and the Valknut, as well as the Nazi SS symbol based on runic letters,” as Judith Gabriel Vinje reports in the 3 November 2017 issue of *The Norwegian American* (<https://www.norwegianamerican.com/viking-symbols-stolen-racists/>; cf. (Kaufman and Sturtevant 2020); for a list of the major symbols, see <https://www.trafford.gov.uk/residents/community/community-safety/docs/extreme-right-wing-symbols.pdf> [both accessed on 31 August 2022]). The quest for the autochthonous itself, that is, the return to a pre-democratic world in which raw male power ruled, curiously matters profoundly today among some circles once again, maybe more than ever before, possibly as a global protest against post-modern civilization, Western political systems, and a general sense of malaise with our contemporary situation in which the white, male, and Christian dominance is simply at stake as the result of global changes in demographic, economic, and social terms—the revival of Neo-Nazis, supremacists, racists, and other radical groups discontent with the power structure of modern society (for an exhaustive list of all those groups in the USA, see <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/neo-nazi> [accessed on 31 August

2022]; cf. also Meylan and Rösli (2020), third section, with a focus on the ideological misappropriation of Viking mythology among North American extremist groups).

Concomitantly, the contemporary world faces various almost existential crises, including global warming, COVID-19, military and economic conflicts between the Western world and China, Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East, overpopulation in Africa and India, the steady decline of modern democracy, especially in the USA, etc. Not surprisingly, some sections of popular culture have therefore increasingly found refuge in an imaginary world of an assumed, fancied Middle Ages (Pugh and Aronstein 2021, eds.), and then also in a militarized history, according to certain political perspectives (Elliott 2017). Of course, this fantasy concept of medieval society has not at all translated into a resurgence of the scholarly discipline, a phenomenon that has been lamented about already for quite some time (Murdoch 2020). Games and entertainment are some of the key elements which most intensively connect the current generation with the Middle Ages (Moberly and Moberly 2019), and this at the grave cost of a growing ignorance about that age and its documents, if not the egregious misuse of medieval images, narratives, symbols, ideas, and values for modern ideological purposes. The critical and discriminating perspective toward medieval texts and objects thereby tends to be lost, which negatively impacts the study of Old Norse literature particularly, especially when it is employed for modern political ends (Birkett and Dale 2019).

In fact, we are almost in the midst of a culture war that pits the traditionally Christian Churches against a new pagan culture that derives much strength from curiously conceived notions of heroism as allegedly ingrained in Old Norse sagas (Zernack 2011; Zernack and Schulz 2019; van Nahl 2020). In general, Viking lore, language, and culture appeal to many modern individuals and groups, especially those who like to dress up in costumes and play Middle Ages (e.g., <https://www.totalwar.com/blog/total-war-vikingverse-old-norse/> [accessed on 31 August 2022]) and/or enjoy functionalizing that world for their ideological purposes far removed from historical reality as documented in chronicles, sagas, and art-historical objects and buildings.

### 3. Misnomers, Curious Heroes, Modern Misconceptions

But what kinds of heroes do we encounter when we engage critically with the Icelandic sagas? Were they the true role models for the younger modern generation? Do they possibly serve as valid substitutes for the idealized Western cowboy in his heroic struggle against evil individuals, or similar figures in the popular imagination (Helgason 2007; Wawn 2007)? To what extent would it be possible to translate the medieval messages contained in those sagas into meaningful statements of relevance today? Or would all this constitute a terrible hoax far removed from any scholarship, i.e., critical thinking about those medieval sources?

One interesting case from Middle High German literature proves to be the hero Siegfried in the anonymous *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200; cf. *Nibelungenlied: Mittelhochdeutsch–Neuhochdeutsch* 2008), who was traditionally regarded as an ideal, as an innocent victim, and hence as a tragic figure. We have, however, recently realized that the opposite is really the case, with Siegfried revealing a shocking degree of ignorance about his role in the world of the courts, betraying significant foolishness in his interaction with the members of the Burgundian court, and proving to be a violent, deceptive, arrogant, and disloyal braggadocio, rapist, liar, and untrustworthy character (Classen 2003). Would we have to take the next step and view some of the Old Norse heroes through the same critical lens? We can easily identify countless figures in the sagas who operate as bloody killers, furious berserks, hatred-filled avengers of previous slayings, etc. But we would misread this genre if we cast it naively as homogenous in the characterization of the individual protagonists.

### 4. Rationality in the North?

The claim to be developed here concerns the dimension of rationality which we can actually observe quite often in saga literature in which many of the protagonists operate in rather pragmatic, reasonable, and politically astute manners. I am not going to argue that



here we find the long-lost cousins of the representatives of the twelfth-century renaissance, only a bit removed geographically to the northwest of continental Europe. But we can nevertheless notice that rational decision-making processes enter the picture and underscore the extent to which these literary works mirror a profound transformation of Iceland during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries into early modern states with laws and regulations, a solid political system, and a social framework determined less and less by blood feud, revenge, and tribal warfare (Felce 2018). As Jesse L. Byock has demonstrated, Icelandic society developed in the course of time from the early settlement period to the growth of chieftains, leading over to a consensual government, while accepting the Christian faith in the year 1000 (Byock 1988; cf. also Sawyer and Sawyer 1993; van Nahl 2022).

Although Iceland was one of the various launching pads for Vikings who went on raiding campaigns along the many different north European coastlines and into the *hinterlands* (Price 2020), local society developed in rather impressive terms, leaving traditional forms of feudalism and royal government behind, and embracing pre-modern forms of democracy (Miller 1990; Pálsson 1999, p. 67; Scheel 2020; Classen 2021, pp. 57–60).

We can only surmise why some sections of our modern, particularly Western society adulate the Viking world, not in the terms of the settlers and lawmakers, but with respect to their looting and pillaging far away from home. There must be spurious opinions hard to pinpoint about some kind of particular form of “freedom” pursued by those medieval raiders, who were, ultimately, basically pirates, criminals, and robbers, often leaving behind nothing but ruin, fires, and scores of dead people (Barracough 2016; cf. also her blog from Barracough 2019). Deeply rooted racism, neo-Nazism, and fear of non-Germanic races characterize these modern movements, and it is most regrettable that they go so far as to misuse even their medieval sources, reading ideological messages into them that barely ever existed.

## 5. The Establishment of Law and Rationality

To approach my topic as objectively and critically as possible, I will turn exclusively to the documentary evidence available to us, the sagas themselves, where we can observe a rather amorphous situation with the Icelanders beginning to settle and to establish their own country without having their own laws yet. The situation could be regarded as chaotic, at first sight, but both here and in many other historical narratives from later times, such as during the founding of the early American colonies, society quickly formed established laws. There is no need to debate the degree to which the sagas contain examples of brutality, violence, crime (however defined), hostility, and war. Often, blood feuds occupy the minds of the protagonists, but simultaneously we also observe a significant transformation of Icelandic society, facing the critical need to set up rules and regulations, hence a legal system, which ultimately brought to an end the flood of aggressive and bloody acts.

It would be difficult to associate the Icelandic sagas with the “Renaissance of the Twelfth Century” in its philosophical, literary, or scientific dimensions, since the pragmatic context was so different from continental Western Europe, for instance. Nevertheless, as Kari Ellen Gade confirms, the development of a centralized kingship aligned with the Christian Church had a huge impact on the culture of Iceland:

The increased monarchical power and the growing influence of the Church in the 12th and 13th centuries brought about a change in the structure of the society. The old family community was dissolved, and the legal power that had been vested in the extended family was superseded by newer forms of royal legislation taken mainly from Roman canonical law. Collective responsibility was replaced by individual responsibility, and only the criminal was punished ... Efforts were made to restrict blood feuds, and the old system of self-help was gradually replaced by public prosecution, although a form of self-help still remained in force in the sense that the execution of a sentence passed in court was usually left to the plaintiff. (Gade 1993, p. 116)

Law and order are predicated on the principle of rationality, on the concept of reason as the highest criteria in the exchange with and communication among people. However, laws are ineffectual if they cannot rely on a central power to enforce judgments. The Icelandic Althing was not an institution that exerted that kind of power, and for a very long time, the final outcome of legal cases was determined by individual arbitration or military might. As [Sandvik and Sigurðsson \[2005\]](#) ([Sandvik and Sigurðsson \[2005\] 2007](#)) underscore:

The court system was fundamentally ineffective in dispute resolution because there was no central executive able to enforce a sentence. That was left to the plaintiff with what help he could muster and very possibly against a strong coalition of the offender's kinsmen and friends—and the situation would be worse if two chieftains were drawn into contention. Negotiation and arbitration were thus the best way to settle conflicts. (p. 227)

The sagas often tell a somewhat different story, of course, but they still allow us to gain a fairly realistic picture of the legal conditions on the ground because the poets normally tended to embed their accounts in a specific historical context. If we use the category of rationality as a benchmark for cultural, and civil development, then we might be in an excellent situation to correlate some of the Icelandic sagas with the global “Renaissance of the Twelfth Century.”

## 6. The European North and the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century

Although most scholars tend to associate this global transformation with the introduction of Aristotelian philosophy via Arabic translators into Western Europe, and hence with the renewed discourse at many different universities, here I would like to claim that the situation in Icelandic society also changed, as reflected by critical decision-making processes as reported in the sagas. Peter Dinzelsbacher confirms: “this period saw the first approaches towards a non-theological world-view that, in the long run, was to bring about one of these shifts of paradigms which would lead to the desacralized, scientific conception of the world as characteristic of modern Western society” ([Dinzelsbacher 2017](#), p. 85). If we leave out the religious component—rationalization is not necessarily linked with the religious dimension and does not require a movement toward secularization—we are on solid ground to trace elements of the intellectual “revolution” far into the northern parts of Europe (cf. [van Nahl 2022](#)). The critical question would be, of course, to what extent the intellectual innovations at the level of twelfth-century universities on the continent also extended to the world to the north. In other words, how much did the intensification of socialization in Iceland, above all, affect the law-making process, the development of a political structure, and the rationalizing communication among individuals and groups ([Vogel 2014](#); [Sanmark 2017](#))? The evidence of the short selection of saga literature carries considerable weight, especially because the surviving manuscripts, mostly from the thirteenth century or later, reflect the situation on the ground in the previous centuries. As sagas, the various texts stand between the literary and the factual dimension and could be perceived through a historical and a legal lens, as well as through a fictional one, which makes them additionally valuable for our investigation (see also the contributions to [McTurk 2005](#)).

## 7. Case Study: *Njáls Saga*

Let us begin with what is probably the best-known case, the famous late thirteenth-century *Njáls Saga*, where the protagonist regularly proves to be the “savior” of his friend Gunnar by giving him excellent legal advice ([Cook 1997](#); for an edition, see [Helgason 1962](#)). The purpose here cannot be to review the vast scholarship on this and other sagas or to trace the specific issues debated and negotiated at the various Althing meetings within the text; however, we need to focus on the facts themselves, i.e., in the Althing, Gunnar is entitled and empowered to prosecute the case there by way of summoning “neighbors as witnesses” (p. 41). Oaths are sworn and testimonies are given, and thereupon the other

side is asked to present its case, all of which thus proceeding according to legal measures established in a rational fashion.

However, in that situation, the opponents, Hrust and Hoskuld, have to give in because Gunnar had insisted on a duel to decide the case. They then pay the demanded amount, knowing too well that they would not have the necessary power to resist Gunnar, but this causes bad blood, although even Njál agrees with Gunnar that this case was settled well.

In a later case, when Brynjolf has slain Atli, both Gunnar and Njál cooperate to find a way to compensate for this crime in a peaceful manner: “Njal then set the price at a hundred ounces of silver, and Gunnar paid it at once” (65), although others disagree with that, either because the price seems to be too high or because the two men are accused of being too friendly with each other. However, they avoid the eruption of violence and succeed in holding off others from following that dangerous path down to Armageddon of the pre-rational world. The Icelanders were still somewhat behind their continental contemporaries, not building new cities, cathedrals, castles, city halls, and the like, and they did not have universities or advanced schools. But they were in close contact with their many trading partners all over Europe, they operated with money, and they were fully aware of the relevance of effective and strong laws. Thus, we can easily identify the workings of Njál and his friend Gunnar as early attempts to catch up with the modern approach globally defined by an increased application of rationality. Both men face hard times because they are surrounded by men willing to kill those on the other side in revenge for their killing, but the two manage to control their social environment for an extensive period, preventing the spilling over of bloody violence as much as they can ([Sigurðsson and Småberg 2013](#)).

Njál operates more in the background, and in his place, at least for a long time, we observe Gunnar stepping into the limelight to decide legal cases: “The defence which I present in this case is that I named witnesses and in the presence of neighbours declared Orkel an outlaw on account of the bloody wound which he inflicted on me with his spur. I forbid you by law, Geir the Godi, to prosecute this case and the judges to judge it, and I hereby declare the initiation of your suit invalid” (96). He faces opposition, however, and yet then agrees on a settlement which satisfies both sides because wise men arbitrate the case and because even Gunnar’s kinsmen “contributed enough money so that all the slayings were paid for at once, at the Thing” (97).

But throughout the entire saga, we also gain a clear sense of the continuous struggles, conflicts, and hard times that these two protagonists face because the establishment of a globally accepted legal system proves to be difficult, challenging, and at times almost impossible to achieve. To carry out cold-blooded murder, or to kill out of revenge, constitutes a huge barrier to peaceful settlements, though careful negotiations and mutual efforts to appease the opponents are also at work: “Then he [Hjalti] talked things over with Gunnar’s opponents and brought it about that everyone agreed to make peace, and then each side gave pledges to the other” (112).

Njál assists with advice and money, and Gunnar can thus pay off the other side, which earns him much honor and respect. However, envy and animosity do not stay far behind. We observe a constant up and down in the narrative development, depending on the individual scene, sometimes arbitration successfully working, sometimes another slaying happens which deeply troubles society, as much as Njál tries his best to step in and to maintain peace. Noteworthy proves to be that he leads those negotiations, but he never acts all on his own: “Njál worked at getting those who had to take action for the slayings of Starkad and Thorgeir to agree to a settlement, and a district assembly was called and men were appointed to arbitrate” (132). Those who intervene, undermine, or block those efforts are called “troublemakers” (168), whereas others call for the strengthening of the law, as in the case of Thorgeir, who calls for a unification in the name of the new Christian religion: ““It appears to me that our affairs will reach an impasse if we don’t all have the same law, for if the law is split asunder, so also will peace be split asunder, and we cannot live with that” (181; cf. [Sayers 2007](#)). We certainly observe also Njál’s strategy to strengthen his own

position and that of his family within society at large, but it would be inappropriate to identify that as manipulative.

We witness, thus, through this literary medium, the rise of rationality in legal terms, that is, global efforts to move away from individual power structures and to establish a universal system of laws to which all would be subject indiscriminately. Although slaying in the wake of a blood feud continues, they are then overcome by means of settlement through Njál's intervention, the result being long-term peace in the entire country (183). At least in that moment, the narrative continues and so does the slaying, despite the best intentions and well-worked-out laws.

Even Njál faces news that is the worst for him when he has to learn of the slaying of his fourth son, Hoskuld, born out of wedlock, and yet he addresses the case with sobriety and rationality, pointing out immediately that the root cause was evilness, which now has to be eliminated by means of mutual agreements and arbitrations (207). But the old man cannot stop the mutual insults, the animosity between the competing parties, and when the settlement is then rejected, the family's doom has been sealed (211), and the burning of Njál and part of his family is about to begin.

Despite the protagonist's death, the legal system continues to grow, and ordinary trials are organized which highlight the transformation that the Icelandic society went through. Again, witnesses are called upon, notices are given, charges are raised, and demands of punishments are formulated (252). We also learn that by that time Iceland has been divided into individual court districts and that each suit can only be brought to trial in the pertinent court (254), which signals the increased sophistication of the entire legal system. In fact, the narrative then goes into extensive details concerning the actual trial, with the witnesses speaking up for the prosecution and the defense, attorneys making their cases, to use modern parlance, and with a final judgment: "Now we have all sworn oaths and made a correct finding and agreed on it we have found against Flosi and we find him guilty as charged. We nine neighbours give our finding thus stated in the East Quarter Court, in the presence of Jon, as Mord called on us to do. This is the finding of all of us" (263).

Unfortunately, new slayings break out, and the vehement blood-shedding threatens to destroy all legal efforts up to that point. The narrator assures, however, that eventually, the two sides come together and agree on settlements, which appear to be holding, as tenuous as they might be. Payments are made for the burning of Njál and his wife Bergthora, as well as for the killing of the other members of the family. The outcome is then the ending of violence and blood feud: "All this was then agreed on by handshake, and never broken" (277). Others, by contrast, sink back to military operations, and some killings continue, which indicates the thin veneer of all culture both there and in other parts of medieval Europe. Nevertheless, the conclusion of the saga leaves nothing for guessing: "They made a full reconciliation. Flosi gave Kari the hand of his brother's daughter, Hildigunn, who had been the wife of Hoskuld the Godi of Hvitanes" (310).

Superficially, *Njál's Saga* seems to be dominated by constant bloodshed and by heroic acts leading to further killing. But would it be true that the poet intended to portray Icelandic society as a world determined by violence and raw military prowess where power and weapons ruled, nothing else? Undoubtedly, wherever we turn in this saga, blood revenge rears its ugly head, but overall, both Njál and other wise men make valiant and far-reaching efforts to overcome that violence by means of law, arbitrations, and negotiations. They utilize rationality to the extreme within a violent world and manage to hold out against that violence to some extent. In face of the constant killing, the regular efforts to establish peace leave a strong impact, even if it has to be paid for with money (161).

We must not forget the historical dimension reflected in this literary work, so the poet looked backward and obviously intended to describe the evil consequences of the heroic age in which hostility was the rule of the day. While many protagonists resort to acts of violence, they are matched by wise men and councilors such as Njál and Flosi who try to rein in that aggression and to substitute it with arbitrations and settlements. The former, above all, whose name carries the entire saga, consistently insists on peace-weaving



because, as he emphasizes, “it will not do to be without law in the land. But there is much truth in what you say, and those of us who know the law should shape it” (165). And Njál is also fully aware of the great need to bring all people together in a “national” assembly at which the foundation of the new law can be discussed and ultimately agreed upon. He represents, in short, a new individual within Icelandic society, a harbinger of the twelfth-century renaissance, though without having been influenced by the import of Aristotelian philosophy, for instance (Tulinus 2019; cf. also Sauckel 2018; Gropper 2020).

Significantly, Njál is not the only one among his people and finds solid support among other wise men who contribute to the formation of new laws and settlements through which past violent acts can be contained and handled constructively: “By the advice of the wisest men it was concluded that the case should be settled by arbitration; six men were to arbitrate the case. It was to be done at once, at the Thing” (97). Altogether, as we can observe throughout the *Njál's Saga*, the events presented here mirror the growth of the legal system based on laws, arbitration, a court system, trials, and globally accepted judgments. While previous scholarship has long recognized this phenomenon, we really need to situate it within a more global transformation of high medieval society determined, and this also in Iceland, by more rational forms of interaction both in private and in public (Pencak 1995; Ziolkowski 1997). As our examples have indicated so far, and as further explorations of other sagas can certainly confirm (see also below), brutal heroism centered on the individual only with almost complete disregard for the needs of society at large was not sustainable, neither on the continent nor in Iceland. This does not mean that we can automatically identify specific elements characterizing the renaissance of the twelfth century in philosophical, artistic, or literary terms in saga literature as well. Nevertheless, the emergence of a more civilized society—I do not mean this in the way as superficially argued by Norbert Elias in his famous study *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (Elias 1939; On the Process of Civilization)—in Iceland indicates the integration and acceptance of the central need for law and order for the community to survive (Mitchell 1991; see also the contributions to Morawiec et al. 2020).

## 8. Conversions and Toleration as Signals of Modernity and Rationality: The *Laxdaela Saga*

Comparing the *Laxdaela Saga* with the evidence we have observed so far, we might have to realize that some of the sagas contain really predominantly heroic events, with much revenge taking, personal enmity, heroic battles, and slaughter, all the reflections of unfettered emotions boiling over in some individuals who then feel motivated to take actions without any particular critical examination of their own behavior (Magnusson and Pálsson 1975). But even here, certainly a contemporary epic poem, there are clear indications of a changing worldview. The discussion of the conflict between Kjartan and King Olaf Tryggvason provides a great opportunity to shed light on the thickset of heroic struggles. In considerable contrast to our common expectations, despite the deep tensions between both men, each representing a different religion, the king only invites Kjartan to consider conversion:

“... I have a feeling, Kjartan, that you will have a better faith when you leave Norway than you had when you arrived. Go now from this meeting, in peace, wherever you want to go; I shall not force you to become Christians on this occasion, for God has said that he does not wish anyone to come to him under duress.” (147)

Kjartan and his companions are deeply moved and accept this invitation, which eases the tensions and injects a new sense of rationally based communication and coordination across the religious divide. As we can observe in this situation, mutual respect and acceptance replace traditionally heroic interaction, whether we call this a rational form of behavior or a type of character development beyond the older dimension of friendship between major figures. Moreover, once Gizur and Hjalti have returned to Iceland, they address the Althing and succeed through their overpowering eloquence and sincerity of their new faith to convert all people there to Christianity as well (153; cf. Classen 2018, pp. 139–42).

Of course, this does not mean the end to all violence, but a new tone has been struck, and innovative political structures emerge, if ever so slightly, as best represented by a large peace meeting at which the hostilities over previous killings are compensated, mollified, and substituted, which allows rationality to enter the public sphere: “The terms of the settlement were to be announced at the Thorsness Assembly” (179; cf. also [Heller 2020](#)).

It dawns upon some of the heroes that the continuous blood feud would never come to a stop, as we learn from a man called Thorstein the Black: “For it is a tragedy that you kinsmen should keep on killing each other off” (184–85). Some among the younger generation turn to study law (190), and we hear more often voices calling for the termination of the feuds (195). In short, the author of the *Laxdaela Saga* presented a historical scenario in which the traditionally heroic society of the settlement days transitions into a new, more civilized society where many efforts are made to intervene in these fatal cycles of mutual slaughter and to allow legal principles, based on rationality, to determine the future events in public. Both here and in the *Njál’s Saga*, the emphasis does not only rest on physical prowess and fighting skills, but also on new learning, expertise in law, and eloquence, critical elements, which are also well represented in the overall design of the twelfth-century renaissance ([Semler 2020](#)).

We have to acknowledge, however, that the efforts to establish law and order and to operate by the principles of rationality were often contested, as the situation in *Egil’s Saga* ([Scudde 1997](#), trans.) illustrates as well. Although the protagonist pronounces a settlement to come to terms with the slaying of two slaves over the illegal grazing of another person’s land (195–96), he encounters open opposition and is told explicitly that enmity will continue from then on because of this refusal to obey. Onund Sjoni informs him: “‘Everyone will agree, Egil, that the settlement you have made and delivered here is unjust. For my part, I have made every effort to prevent the trouble between them, but from now on I will not restrain myself from any inconvenience I can cause to Thorstein’” (196).

Peace and global harmony do not set in here, not even after Egil and then his own son have converted to Christianity, and yet, in the background, we regularly hear about the Althing, that is, a political institution of considerable power contributing to the future shaping of Iceland. Unfortunately, even there the various attendees quarrel with each other (194), and it remains open-ended in this saga as to whether a truly functioning legal system actually surfaced, and this in clear contrast to the *Njál’s Saga*. Nevertheless, as the text also indicates, there are numerous attempts to set up a legal system that would bind everyone, but this seems to work well only as long as the bickering parties are actually bonded through friendship with each other (193–94).

In many respects, of course, this genre at large does not seem to lend itself to the exploration of rationality as a critical tool in political, military, and social terms. Nevertheless, we are regularly faced with human drama, tragedy, and heroism, and we are invited to share the emotions, the respect for the protagonists, and the intrigue exerted by the heroic deeds and the strategies to overcome conflicts, to achieve settlements, and to seek a peaceful community based on a legal system, the *Grāgās* ([Dennis and Perkins 2006](#)). The difference between the Old High German “Hildebrandslied,” for instance, with its fatalistic conclusion by the father about the necessity for him to fight against his own son, and the saga literature with its many attempts to overcome the individual’s binding to destiny by rational strategies, communicative operations, and legal procedures proves to be significant and highly illustrative of the profound changes affecting the world of Icelandic saga as reflected by its literary products.

## 9. Conclusions

Modern fascination with the Viking world can, indeed, draw quite a bit of inspiration from the Icelandic sagas where major heroes, such as Gunnar, Flosi, Egil, and Kol, operate with enormous power, strength, resolve, and authority. There are also countless examples of slaying, blood feuds, hatred, persecutions, and murder, but we would misread those sagas if we accepted them all as being part of the same category, literary hero worship.

In fact, many times there are also specific references to mythology, to magic, sorceresses, travel, raiding, and land settlement. The good heroes try to maintain their position, but they also have to die, but not always a violent death. Most significantly, the emergence of law-making increasingly plays a major role, though this is not consistently the case. Our best example thus continues to be the *Njáls Saga*, but we hear of the Althing, of settlements, and arbitration in many other contexts as well.

We would stretch the available evidence too thin if we tried to superimpose the concept of the twelfth-century renaissance onto that Icelandic heroic genre in straight terms. Nevertheless, we recognize the fascinating assimilation or a rapprochement between the Nordic and the continental culture since the twelfth century. Most of the sagas were based on a variety of oral sources from earlier centuries, but they were normally recorded, or rather fully composed, only as late as in the thirteenth century. Icelandic society had by that time already transformed considerably, having become Christianized as early as 1000 C.E. The poets obviously felt attracted to the old heroic accounts, but they also wanted to acknowledge the devastating consequences of the blood feuds and the constructive alternatives through the Althing and arbitration/settlement (Viðar Sigurðsson 1999; for the most recent discussions, see also the contributions to Schmidt and Hahn 2021).

Those today who sport Viking symbols, letters, weapons, or tools rely only on half the truth as contained in the world of the sagas. Certainly, there are many examples of mighty fighting, slaying, and military clashes, but we would misread most of the sagas if we recognized in them literary idealizations and glorifications of the heroic past. The scribes were fully aware of the antiquarian perspectives contained in their narratives from several hundred years earlier, and they presented some of their protagonists with great admiration but only those who ultimately put down the sword, resort to the power of the word, and utilize the tools of communication, rhetoric, and law, above all, achieve truly ever-lasting fame and respect (van Nahl 2022).

Those heroes who rely on rational approaches to their conditions are to be respected most, and in that respect, we can recognize, at least indirectly, the influence of the twelfth-century renaissance on Old Norse literature. Those today who sport Viking dress are only poorly informed about their idols and play a dangerous game of self-illusion based on an extensive misreading of saga literature. In order to do justice to this problem and to come to terms productively and intelligently with the past in the Nordic countries of Europe, we must have strong academic programs focused on those cultures and their poetry (Eriksen and Sigurðsson 2010).

By the same token, a critical engagement with these medieval Icelandic literary and chronicle texts promises to lay the foundation for a further strengthening of critical thinking among the current generation of students about fundamental concerns in our own political conditions, here exposed to the early stages of state formation in the European north, with all the involved conflicts and resolutions, the emergence of a legal system, and the exploration of national freedom within a strong social network. We also ought to consider that we live today in a world very much prone to individual violence and crime, and increasingly threatened by outspoken opponents to democracy, rationality, reason, justice, and equality. The horrendous consequences of violence, blood feud, treason, and lack of loyalty and friendship, as outlined already in these Old Norse sagas, should be considered closely regarding our own situation (Miller 2014). Once again, as a clarion call, if we want to secure our future in a Western-style society, we ought to study the medieval past very closely, because there we can discover astounding literary mirrors of our own failures today (Kristinsson 2003).

I would not go so far as Semler (2020) to recognize here definitive elements of Aristotelian concepts concerning the role of free will within a world determined by fatalism and contingency, but it is certainly very reasonable to argue, as Semler does (“On one hand, they accept that their lives operate according to a deterministic world setup. On the other hand, they demonstrate that this fatalism is compatible with human agency,” 46), that some of the sagas clearly signal an intellectual transformation, also seen in late medieval

Iceland, which we can associate with the long renaissance of the twelfth century (again, see the contributions to Eriksen 2016; and to Münster-Swendsen et al. 2016). Here we observe, just as in contemporary continental literature, a new emphasis on communication, on the deliberations by wise and learned individuals, and on communal exchanges and agreements. Indeed, this rise of a much more “civilized” society can be regarded as the harbinger of this “Renaissance” in the northern parts of Europe as well.

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