

The Icelandic Sagas: Oral Testimony and Official History

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In this paper, I will discuss an aspect of oral history which may perhaps seem a little remote from most of the research being done today, but which may throw some interesting light on the difficulties and even the limitations of some of that work, as well as its possibilities. It was not until pursuing research myself into what seemed initially to be a field only distantly related to the general field of history that I began to realize that the oral tradition might be of considerably more importance in the delineation and interpretation of some of the larger or more public issues of history than is commonly admitted. Ultimately, I found myself dealing with questions, in the context of mediaeval Iceland, regarding the reliability of oral tradition, and the particular biases affecting both narrators of so-called "folk history" and official historians. The various problems resulting from these biases, in a study of political history, especially when I was dealing not merely with mediaeval historians and their writings, but also with contradictory interpretations of such records made by nineteenth and twentieth-century academic historians, were quite complex. Where the study led me, I think, was not to an aggrandizement of oral tradition as such, but rather to a considerable suspicion of the claims of established histories to be objective, even in such cases as the description and interpretation of political events at a national level.

The particular series of incidents which I chose to look at were the events leading to and following from the conversion of Iceland to Christianity in the year 1000. These events are recorded in the mediaeval Icelandic sagas. My chief interest was the literary sagas, but these are based on the lives of individuals who are attested to in historical records, and many of the events which occur in them are likewise so attested. In this sense, they cannot be considered entirely fictional, or even historical fictions. It is relatively difficult to determine the extent to which conscious literary techniques have intervened at all. On the other hand, it is only too easy to dismiss these sagas, in historical terms, as highly embroidered local legends, perhaps

merely as superbly crafted examples of what Brunvand calls "garbled local history" (Brunvand 179). From the perspective of the present, it is probably impossible to determine how far the authors of the literary sagas felt themselves obliged to retain the integrity of what they considered to be factual narrative, and how far they felt free to expand such narrative into what we would recognize as fictional structures. The distinction made by nineteenth-century folklorists between *thíðsögur* (roughly translated as "folk tales"), which are considered by the storytellers themselves to have little or no basis in fact, and *thíðsagnir* (or "folk histories"), which are considered to be true accounts of events, did not exist in the Middle Ages. The word *saga* means merely a story or narrative, without any qualification as to type or truthfulness, and is used indiscriminately to refer to any prose work, whether oral or written, in which there is any recognizable narrative structure at all. As a kind of test, I decided to look at narratives contemporary with the literary sagas, but which are specifically identified as having an historical rather than a literary or entertainment purpose, and in which I could therefore assume some factual integrity.

The major literary sagas are set in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. I decided therefore to look at historical accounts of Iceland for the same period—around the year 1000. The first and obvious problem which arose was that there are virtually no contemporary written records of Icelandic history at this time—there are a few mentions in German and English works, but nothing else. The reason for this is not the barbarism of the Icelandic people, but rather the immense value which they placed upon oral, as opposed to written, record-keeping.

Old Norse, the original language, did have a written form from a very early period. This is the form known as runes. However, the runic alphabet is not suitable for extensive written record-keeping, being developed rather for engraving in wood and stone. It was used for inscriptions on landmarks, and other similar purposes. Almost all records were transmitted orally, and oral

techniques were formal and highly developed. In Iceland, there were four general subject areas in which some training was given: these were law, poetics, genealogy, and history. All four were considered essential to the integrity of the community and were controlled by many checks. For example, the government of Iceland during the early mediaeval period was more or less democratic. The Althing, a congregation of chiefs (or *godar*) and their principal followers, met annually during the summer months. At the Althing all outstanding court cases were heard, particularly those involving more than one official district, and major legal and constitutional decisions affecting the whole country were made. The chief figure at the Althing was the Lawspeaker (*Lögsögumaður*), who had the power of arbitration in unresolved cases. (There was a system of appeal courts which led eventually to the Lawspeaker.) However, one of the primary responsibilities of the Lawspeaker was to recite one third of the law each year at the Althing. Thus, in three years, the whole body of the law would be recited. This recital was subject to correction by all those present.

Poetics also were important. Significant local events were celebrated by local poets, and national and international events by more famous poets. The structure of poetry, including its vocabulary, was extremely complex and rigid. It allowed virtually no scope for personal variation after the initial composition—once a line had been forgotten, it remained forgotten and could not be replaced. Individual verses were used mnemonically for the retention of historical information.

Genealogy was also important, since it related to the division of property, and the inheritance of property through generations, as well as to family solidarity and pride and a sense of history.

History itself could be both local and national, but either way it concerned the community identity.

In the late eleventh century, probably around 1095, an alphabet was developed for the writing of Old Icelandic. The model used was the alphabet of Old English, which included consonants not found in Latin or other Germanic or Romance alphabets. The first known work to be written in the new alphabet was the Tithe Law, which was drawn up around 1097. This was a new law, for which no oral tradition was available. However, in the winter of 1117-18, the whole code of Icelandic secular law was written down, under the direction of the current Lawspeaker and several prominent chiefs. Then, during the years 1123 to 1132, the Ecclesiastical laws—again not based on oral tradition—were also written down. Partly what had allowed this legal activity to come about was the foundation of schools in the late eleventh century under the direction of priests. One of the most important scholars of the time was a man called Ari Thorgilsson the

Learned, who was connected to some of the leading families in Iceland and particularly to the Church party. Around 1125 he wrote a history of Iceland from the time of the Settlement (c. 850) to 1120. This history, called *Íslendingabók*, is the oldest extant source for early Icelandic historical information. Ari acknowledges the oral tradition, and the names of some of his informants are known (e.g., Teitr Ísleifsson and Thúridr Snorradóttir). In an epilogue to another work, *Landnámabók* (*The Book of Settlements*), which is also partly ascribed to Ari, an interesting motivation is given for the writing down of history and genealogy:

People often say that writing about the Settlements is irrelevant learning, but we think we can better most of the criticism of foreigners when they accuse us of being descended from slaves or scoundrels, if we know for certain the truth about our ancestry. And for those who want to know ancient lore and how to trace genealogies, it's better to start at the beginning than to come in at the middle. Anyway, all civilized nations want to know about the origins of their own society and the beginnings of their own race.

(*Book of Settlements* 6)

What is interesting here is both the suggestion that a knowledge of one's own history is an attribute of a civilized nation (with the implication that the oral tradition may perhaps no longer be considered the means of providing this knowledge), and also the reference to *foreign* criticism. The Conversion of Iceland to Christianity had occurred in the year 1000. At the Althing that summer, the Lawspeaker Thorgeirr Thorkelsson had decided conflicting lawsuits brought by the Christian and pagan parties in favour of the Christians, and the law had been amended to make it a requirement that every Icelander should be baptized. In the years following, the Christian party consolidated its position and efforts were made to establish the Church in Iceland with a sufficient number of priests. The early missionary priests were not Icelandic themselves, and did not speak the language, and the chieftains seem quickly to have understood the need to train native Icelandic priests. This meant sending young Icelanders to school abroad, mainly to Germany and France—an activity which seems to have begun about the middle of the eleventh century. For Iceland this seems to have been the first formal contact on a large scale with the academic tradition of Europe. Not only were theological and ecclesiastical learning dependent upon books, but so also were those branches of learning, including history, which were part of the Icelanders' oral tradition. As the Church extended its influence in

Iceland, with the establishment of two bishoprics and several monasteries, as well as parish churches, academic learning increased among the population (or at least among the male population), and contemporary written record-keeping was introduced. During the following centuries, a number of historical works were produced by both clerical and secular writers. While those dealing with early Icelandic history tended to follow the pattern of Ari's *Íslendingabók*, its brevity made it not altogether suitable as a model. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, historians continued to consult the oral tradition in order to expand the information found in *Íslendingabók*.

The general view of most nineteenth and twentieth-century historians is that Ari's work is reliable, but the later historical works are not. The literary historian and critic, Turville-Petre, for example, moves from the expression of a vague doubt:

It is often difficult to know when these later historians are following the lost works of Ari, and when their source is a less reliable one,

(Turville-Petre 51)

to a much more straightforward condemnation of accounts of the Conversion year:

It is plain that they were intended, not as records of history but as imaginative descriptions of the fortunes of missionaries in pagan Iceland. They are historical romances....

(Turville-Petre 67)

At the same time, virtually no information is available except from these "historical romances," so modern historians are compelled, in spite of themselves, to use them. However, with Turville-Petre, they apparently feel themselves free to make adverse judgments concerning any source that is not Ari. As Turville-Petre himself says:

Records of the period of transition from paganism to Christianity are more detailed than those about earlier periods in the history of Iceland, but in reading them it is often hard to distinguish history from legend and fiction. The conversion was the most memorable event in the history of Iceland since the settlement and, for this reason, many facts about it were recorded. But, for the same reason, the more tendentious historians of the thirteenth century made the period of the conversion a favourite field for embroidery, and artistic saga-writers made tales about it. Before any such story in the profuse literature of Iceland can be accepted as history, the author's source

must be considered./ He may have derived it from a reliable record written at an early date, but his source might be folklore, or he may have borrowed his motives from international hagiography and romance; he may even have invented the story.

(Turville-Petre 50-51)

Within these parameters, since the only "reliable" records are written ones, the only reliable source is Ari. Folklore, including all oral history and tradition not recorded by Ari, is unreliable by definition.

In practical terms, this attitude allowed modern historians to select data from the mediaeval sources to fit whatever theory they had concerning the period of the tenth and eleventh centuries, and to reject any data that did not fit the theory. That this procedure has sometimes led them into difficulties even with Ari's text is a point that most fail to mention. When the point cannot be ignored, the unease is obvious, but even so there is a failure to question Ari's own biases. Evidently also, it is only thirteenth and fourteenth-century historians who are "tendentious." In dealing with the events occurring during the missionary journey of the priest Thangbrandr, Jón Jóhannesson, who at least acknowledges the problem, nevertheless manages to dismiss it, saying:

This information comes from Ari the Learned. He does not appear to have obtained very accurate reports on Thangbrandr, even though he was in a good position to learn about his missionary work and the subsequent legislation of Christianity in Iceland, since he was brought up in the house of Hallr Thórarinsson at Haukadalur, the man whom Thangbrandr had baptized in 999. At Haukadalur Ari studied under Teitr the Priest Isleifsson, whose paternal grandfather was Gizurr the White [one of the leading members of the Christian party]. In addition, Ari was the descendant of Hallr of Síða Thorsteinsson [another leading member of the Christian party]. Other mediaeval authors give the appearance of knowing much more about Thangbrandr, but their accounts may not be authoritative. On some interesting points their writings contradict Ari the Learned. Only a few items from those sources will be singled out for further comment here.

(Jóhannesson 128)

He then goes on to discuss first not any of the mediaeval Icelandic sources, but a Latin history of Norway.

I would like to take an example of the kind of problem that is introduced when the biases, of whatever sort, begin to operate. In order not to confuse matters

with a discussion of the relative reliability of mediaeval oral sources, I will take a minor example where Ari is not in conflict with his mediaeval successors, but rather with his modern interpreters.

In determining the outcome of the debate in 1000, the Lawspeaker Thorgeirr was approached by both the pagan and the Christian parties. According to Ari, the Christians "*keypti*" (or bought) his services. This is, literally, what the word means. Jón Jóhannesson deals with this problem in a typical fashion:

It is not known what Ari meant by the phrase "bought from Thorgeirr".... Ancient chroniclers understood it to mean that Hallr paid Thorgeirr a fee. The same writers are in disagreement in their apparently unfounded assumptions as to the amount of this fee. Their accounts imply that in accordance with the advice and approval of other Christians, Hallr paid Thorgeirr bribes. This view is reflected in *The Saga of King Ólafr* by the monk Oddr, where it is stated that King Ólafr handed Gizurr and Hjalti "a large amount of money in order that they might befriend influential men". Latter-day scholars have rejected this interpretation and suggested instead that Hallr only handed over to Thorgeirr the lawspeaker's fee he himself (Hallr) had already received. There is, however, absolutely no evidence to support this claim. On the contrary, none of the amounts mentioned in ancient sources is equal to the fee which it was customary to pay the lawspeaker. This disparity shows indeed that the old chroniclers did not wish to imply that any transfer of a lawspeaker's fee had taken place on this occasion. The most plausible theory is that Ari's words *keypti at Thorgeiri* (literal transl. "bought from Thorgeirr") merely mean "negotiated with Thorgeirr". It would appear then that in order to comply with the aspirations and wishes of Christian men of consequence, Hallr brought it about through negotiation that Thorgeirr should proclaim the laws; at the same time it was understood that both sides would make some concessions. Initially, however, the agreement was not made public.

(Jóhannesson 134-5)

In such an interpretation, "*keypti*," which in any other normal context has to do with paying money, merely means "came to a private agreement." The word "bribed" is not even considered. But the mediaeval Icelandic sources which were based on oral tradition understood Ari's word "*keypti*" to mean precisely that: "bribed." The amount of the bribe varies, but the information that there was a bribe does not.

It is clear that, according to oral tradition, Thorgeirr was bribed to support the Christian party. Why would modern historians dispute this mediaeval point of view? Here, we enter into the complications of the Icelandic world-view. In the nineteenth century, with the development of folklore studies, there was also a tremendous development of interest in mediaeval Icelandic literature. For the Icelanders themselves, this was linked to an increasing interest in a modern form of nationalism. The centuries of repression suffered under Danish colonial rule were being rejected. The Old Icelandic Commonwealth (wiped out in 1253) emerged as something of an ideal. In the Commonwealth, Icelanders were portrayed as democratic, rational, and honest in principle. The idea that an issue as important as the adoption of Christianity would be settled by bribes was unthinkable. Somehow or other, the word "*keypti*" had to be explained away.

Such considerations led me not merely to a re-evaluation of the judgment of modern historians, but also of the mediaeval Icelanders themselves. The question is not just why modern historians would reject the mediaeval testimony. But why would the mediaeval historians differ among themselves? And what precisely was Ari's authority, apart from his acquaintanceship with people who had lived through and remembered the period he described, but whose testimony he apparently decided not to use?

To some extent, Ari's biases are similar to those of modern historians. Both nineteenth and twentieth-century historians seem affected by the need to view the Icelandic Commonwealth as not merely an independent and more-or-less democratic state, but also one run by rational, thinking people. For Ari, there was something of the same need. Even though Iceland had only recently entered into the ranks of "civilized nations," there was a source of pride in the fact that the Conversion had been accomplished from within, without either bloodshed or lengthy political unrest, and certainly without any direct imposition of foreign influence.

While the lack of bloodshed is probably a fairly unimportant factor as far as modern historians are concerned, the visible independence of the Commonwealth is not. The suppression of Icelandic feelings and aspirations under Danish rule, the curtailment of freedom, not merely through physical oppression, but also through the imposed end to debate, whether political or religious, was an offence which Icelanders still find hard to tolerate. Any suggestion that the Icelanders had willingly accepted foreign domination or even influence, particularly in those golden years of the Commonwealth, would be anathema. That suggestion that Thorgeirr might have been ruled not by reason, but by bribes, also attacks the value

placed on the Commonwealth's legal system. (Not that this system should be underrated, of course. It must have been unique in mediaeval Europe in so far as it actually attempted to assess the damage caused by various crimes, and demanded reparation rather than punishment.)

In viewing Ari as almost an ideal historian—objective and unbiased—modern writers contrive generally to ignore his own close connections with the Church party and its point of view. For by Ari's time, the earlier English and Irish (and possibly even Eastern Orthodox) influences on the development of Icelandic Christianity had disappeared, and the continental Church was in control.

Ari himself only hints at these earlier influences, but they are discussed in much more detail in the later, thirteenth-century historians. Yet, despite the passage of time, these later histories are as likely to be based on accurate folk-memory as they are to be fanciful inventions. Given Iceland's geographical position, the arrival of missionaries from England and Iceland, and even from the Eastern faith (then established in Poland and elsewhere) during the tenth century, cannot be considered surprising. But for Ari, whose connections were not merely powerful, but which were also concerned with establishing orthodox Roman beliefs and a regularized ecclesiastical structure under Cluniac influence, many of the details of the Conversion must have appeared unsuitable, if not absolutely incorrect.

While the thirteenth-century historians were clerics, and were certainly writing from a clearly Roman point of view, their concerns were not quite the same as Ari's. Since, in writing of the Conversion, they tended to include all the details they could find in the oral tradition, including tales of miracles, the rational nineteenth and twentieth-century writers are able to dismiss them, rejecting the stories as, at best, "folklore," and at worst as indications of foreign hagiographical influence, and so on. But the point is that the thirteenth-century clerics were not interested in Icelandic independence, but rather were committed to a Church which had been, for more than a century by this time, fighting against it. Ari's own loyalties seem to have been those of political autonomy combined with ecclesiastical solidarity. While Iceland remained a part of the archdiocese of Bremen,

such a combination was, of course, possible. However, as Iceland was shifted first to the archdiocese of Lund, in southern Sweden, and later to the archdiocese of Nidaróss, in Norway, the reality of political as well as ecclesiastical dependence became only too clear to the Icelanders. In Norway, the archbishop and the king went hand in hand. By the thirteenth century, everything depended on what side you were on, and so it automatically followed that the clerical historians were on the side of assimilation, not of independence. This is the wrong side as far as modern historians are concerned, so all the stories are rejected, even when, as in the case of Thorgeirr's bribe, they seem to indicate an oral tradition that agrees with Ari's own account.

The fourteenth-century secular historian, Haukr Erlendsson, recognized some of these problems, but he also is rejected by the moderns. Writing from the other side of the fight for independence—for him, Iceland was politically merely an adjunct of Norway—he viewed the history of his own country from a severely tempered Christian point of view. He was suspicious of miracles. On the other hand, he had no problem with dealing with Cluniac, or any other Church influence. Unlike Ari, he was not involved in establishing the Roman Church. Further, while he had a considerable amount of nationalistic pride, he did not question the political subjection of Iceland. In his work (mainly *Kristni Saga* as far as the Conversion is concerned), we find an attempt to deal with the earlier sources in terms of their probability, rather than according to some political or ecclesiastical agenda.

I do not intend to argue that all records of oral testimony should be accepted as true. However, what the history of the Conversion of Iceland suggests is that academic historians are no less subject to bias than oral record-keepers, while, of course, the writing down of records is no more a guarantee of their objectivity than of their truthfulness. The oral testimonies recorded in the thirteenth and fourteenth-century histories of Iceland do suggest, however, a more complex situation at the time of the Conversion than most modern historians seem to allow. In addition, they throw some light—regardless of their own veracity—on the biases of academics.

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