

## ABSTRACT

MULVEY, JAMES PATRICK. *The Saga of the Confederates: Historical Truth in an Icelandic Saga*. (Under the direction of Dr. John Riddle.)

*The Saga of the Confederates*, written anonymously in the thirteenth century, tells a story that takes place in eleventh century Iceland. The saga presents an opportunity to examine Iceland's unique political and social systems during the Middle Ages, both during the time of the story and also during the author's lifetime. While elements of the story reflect society in the eleventh century, the attitudes and values of the anonymous author can also help us understand the thirteenth century. The purpose of this research is to examine the medieval Icelandic sagas as historical sources, with *The Saga of the Confederates* as a case study. While many characters and their situations within the Icelandic sagas may be completely fictional, the ways in which the saga authors relate their subjects to their readers provide insight into the true makeup of medieval Icelandic society at large from the Settlement to the submission to Norwegian rule in 1262 CE.

# **THE SAGA OF THE CONFEDERATES: HISTORICAL TRUTH IN AN ICELANDIC SAGA**

by  
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## **Chapter 1: *The Saga of the Confederates: Historical Truth in an Icelandic Saga***

### **1.1 Purpose of the Research**

“We do not know for sure whether these accounts are true, yet we do know that old and learned men consider them to be so.”<sup>1</sup> So begins the introduction to *Heimskringla*, the master work of thirteenth-century Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson. With those words is highlighted perhaps the most contentious point in medieval Icelandic history and the fundamental stumbling block for historians ever since our collective interpretation of the Vikings changed. Archaeological discoveries in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries had completely repainted the established view of the Norse from uncouth barbarian raiders to members of a complex, vibrant society as rich as any on continental Europe. Snorri’s admission of uncertainty has, at different times and for different purposes, been used to “prove” that the Icelandic sagas have no value as historical sources; for instance the notion that the Icelanders had no original, pre-existing oral tradition and instead relied heavily upon the literary influences of continental Europe to produce their works. Some scholars have contended that the tradition was in fact Norwegian in origin and simply transplanted to Iceland after the settlement of that harsh and beautiful land, while others argue that the sagas are nothing more than popular narrative art that ultimately make no difference to the history of Iceland whether they are true or not.

This thesis will argue that the true values of the Icelandic sagas are to be found in the social context from their time of creation. They are “stories by a medieval people

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<sup>1</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, trans. Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964) p. 2.

about themselves”<sup>2</sup> and in that sense retain the same historical value applied to them by Snorri in the thirteenth-century. What a community believed happened to them in the past is just as valuable as what actually did happen to them, because both contribute to a greater overall understanding of their history for a modern reader. *The Saga of the Confederates* is a prime example of this contention. The saga provides an interpretation of both the past, as the action takes place in the eleventh century, and a social commentary on the anonymous writer’s contemporary thirteenth century present. It ties together centuries of medieval Icelandic history in the pages of a short story. With a greater understanding of the sagas as a comprehensive body of work and how they played a role in Icelandic society, the modern historian can see how one medieval Icelandic viewed the changes that had swept through his society over the span of centuries.

It is remarkable that *The Confederates* and other sagas were produced at all. As Preben Sorensen pointed out, this amazing collection of works was produced by a small, almost entirely agrarian society that rarely exceeded 50,000 people in total population. Geographically isolated from the rest of Scandinavia and Europe, and not to mention dominated by uninhabitable mountains, glaciers, and volcanic activity, it seems incredible that a literature the caliber of the Icelandic sagas came from this island of fire and ice rather than from one of the increasingly centralized continental European powers.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001) p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Preben Sorensen, “Social institutions and belief systems of medieval Iceland and their relations to literary production,” M Ross, trans., *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p. 10.

## 1.2 Bookprose and Freeprose Theory

Historians have avoided using the sagas as historical sources ever since the mid-twentieth century saw the rise of the formidable Icelandic School of scholars, under the leadership of Konrad Maurer and later Björn Ólsen and Sigurður Nordal, who dominated Icelandic studies and held many of the aforementioned views.<sup>4</sup> The Icelandic School rode the wave of “bookprose” theory, which postulated the belief in a written rather than an oral origin for the sagas. Bookprose research and theory centered on the relationship of Icelandic and foreign texts, the age of the texts, the influence of Latin, as well as the roles, identities, and influences of the authors who wrote the sagas.<sup>5</sup> The school would much rather give credit for the extant medieval Icelandic works to the authors of the thirteenth century rather than the saga-tellers of the eleventh, twelfth, or earlier centuries.

Furthermore, the theory stipulated that outside influences were crucial to the production of the sagas. While a general foundation may have been laid down with some early indigenous writings and random stories, the sagas themselves were the result of literary borrowings from other sagas, church writings, stories of saint’s lives, philosophical writings, and other written sources stemming from continental Europe, England, Ireland, and Scandinavia. In the bookprose school the concept of oral tradition was used nearly exclusively to explain leftover material; details for which there were no literary sources to be found.<sup>6</sup>

Bookprose theory held dominance in the field for years, but a small contingent maintained that the sagas were backed up by a consistent oral tradition that the authors of

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<sup>4</sup> Byock, 2001, p. 149.

<sup>5</sup> Gísli Sigurdsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition*, trans. N. Jones (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

the thirteenth century simply put to parchment. While this is a simplistic view, the basic tenants of the theory attracted more attention, especially among rural Icelanders who had long believed that the sagas were true accounts of their ancestors. Freeprose theory, as it came to be known, was originally championed by mainly Swedish and Norwegian scholars who could point to an established oral tradition in their own countries that existed prior to the settlement of Iceland and was simply put to parchment on the island afterwards. At the same time, the assumption of an established oral tradition gave Icelandic scholars validation to the belief that the sagas were accurate portrayals of their heroic ancestors and consequently the ability to assert that the sagas had in fact originated in Iceland because they told strictly of Icelanders.

Still, those that hoped to push the freeprose theory forward were facing an uphill battle. It was assumed that saga research became distorted when an editor, historian, or scholar deviated from the search for indications of manuscript transmission, literary relationships to other texts, the age of the saga, and the identity of the author. Searching for an established oral tradition was seen as pointless because it was so much conjecture. Bookprose theorists felt much safer sticking to the extant words on paper.<sup>7</sup>

### **1.3 The Deluding of Gylfi**

Nordal in particular is given the most credit for the force behind the bookprose theory. A perfect example of his effectiveness in arguing this theory can be found in his examination of Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, an exposition of the rules of poetic diction but also what some historians believe to be the prime written source for information on the pre-Christian mythology of the Nordic world. Nordal claims in his masterful essay on the work, however, that the true value of the *Prose Edda* is a counterattack within its

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-1.



pages against the foreign influence of Christianity. Nordal interprets the piece as a backlash against an influence that sought to bury pagan myth from medieval Icelandic society rather than a traditional Icelandic story recorded in the oral-to-parchment mode.

“The Deluding of Gylfi,” a short story found within the *Prose Edda*, is on the surface a simple tale. King Gylfi of Sweden, a wise man and skilled in magic, had become obsessed with the desire to understand the Æsir (the race of the Norse gods) after encountering one of their kind disguised as a simple beggar woman. Believing he was disguised he traveled to Ásgarð, the dwelling place of the gods. The gods, being wiser than he, knew of his coming and prepared themselves to tell the mortal king about their kind.

With “the Three” – the High One, Just-as-high, and Third – acting as his spiritual guides, Gylfi is enlightened within their great hall. At times his ignorance amuses the Three, yet they never fail to tell him exactly what he wants to know. Gylfi is told the tales of Óðin and Freyja, Nifelheim and Muspell, Thór and his hammer Mjöllnir, Fenrir and the World-Serpent, the trickery of Loki, the whims of the Norns, the very creation of the world, the twilight of the gods at Ragnarök, and a multitude of other aspects of the pagan Norse worldview.

When the gods felt that the mortal king had been given enough understanding of their kind, he is told to make what use of the information that he can, and “the next thing was that Gangleri [the false name under which Gylfi was traveling] heard a tremendous noise on all sides and turned about; and when he had looked all round him that he was standing in the open air on a level plain. He saw neither hall nor stronghold. Then he went on his way...relating the tidings he had seen and heard, and after him these stories

have been handed down from one man to another.”<sup>8</sup> In this way, Snorri tells a fantastic myth within a myth while simultaneously preserving a general literary style for his contemporary young poets to have at their disposal.

As Nordal points out, however, there is doubt that Snorri was recording a previously oral heritage of an Icelandic (or maybe even Norse) pantheon in “The Deluding.” First of all, the mythology that Snorri recounts is not a completely faithful work of pagan Scandinavian beliefs as far as Nordal is concerned. As he states, “many of the stories about the gods are simply the product of poetic imagination and derive from speculation current during the decline of paganism, occasionally mingled with ideas as motifs that are Christian and southern in origin.”<sup>9</sup>

The decline of paganism and the rise of Christianity in Iceland are central to Nordal’s thesis. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Icelandic poetry – and therefore mythology – was increasingly threatened. The clergy had already instituted a fundamental change that trickled down throughout all of society when they demanded the old names for the days of the week, formally named for various gods, were changed to the bland “third day”, “mid-week-day”, “fast day” and the like. Poetry, such an integral part of medieval Icelandic culture, was therefore extremely threatened if something as fundamental as the name of the week days were at risk. In its efforts to obliterate every trace of heathenism, the Church aimed its sights upon not only references to pagan gods within poetry but even the very styles and kennings of the poetry itself. Furthermore, Nordal and the other bookprose theorists would claim that much pagan heritage would

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<sup>8</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. J. Young (Berkeley: UCLA Press, 1954) p. 93.

<sup>9</sup> Sigurður Nordal, “Introduction” to *The Prose Edda*, trans. J. Young (Berkeley: UCLA Press, 1954) p. 13.

have been lost not only after the conversion to Christianity but also in the 300-odd years before Snorri actually put words on parchment.

In his “Poetic Diction,” another work within the *Prose Edda*, Snorri makes it clear that “Christians must not believe in pagan gods or that these tales are true”, a line that Nordal is quick to emphasize.<sup>10</sup> Snorri’s prologue to “The Deluding” suggests that perhaps the Æsir had been real men and women who had lived in prehistory and that the tales of their great deeds were so impressive that after a while men began to worship them as gods. He provides a supposed genealogy for a real-life Óðin and Thór (rooted in the ancient city of Troy, interestingly enough).

If that was not enough, and some felt he could still be accused of planting the seed of pagan doubt within Christian minds, Snorri used a sly literary device to silence his critics once and for all. As Nordal points out, “by making the [Æsir] themselves work magic for Gylfi and relate to him the stories of the gods in order to tempt him to believe in them Snorri has finally ensured himself complete liberty to say all he wants.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, the pagan gods would be cast in an evil enough light to satisfy the critical Christian mind. As a result, Nordal has effectively challenged any attempt at proving Snorri’s work to be the result of an established pagan literary tradition and instead the result of Christian influences.

Nordal’s bookprose thesis is shattered, however, by other primary sources. The famous tale of Þorr’s (Thor’s) fishing trip with the giant Hymir within Snorri’s *Edda* recounts the hunt for the world serpent Miðgarðsormr. In this story Þorr, using a bull’s head as bait, hooks the giant snake and reels it nearly aboard before Hymir cuts the line

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<sup>10</sup> Sturluson, 1954, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Nordal, p. 12.

and dooms Þorr and the serpent to a final, climactic battle at Ragnarök. Representations of this maritime struggle are found on stone carvings from England to Scandinavia, some dating to as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The stones are evidence to some that “the extant written sources for Scandinavian heathendom must be in some way linked to a living oral tradition going back to ancient times” and effective counterarguments to the assumption that Snorri and his fellow writers were simply making up their stories.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, Ari Þorgilsson’s history of Iceland *Íslendingabók*, written in the 1220’s, was composed with guidance from bishops. However, within its pages we are told of a highly peaceable transition from paganism to Christianity. The new faith was accepted by an act of the Althing, a national assembly of freemen, insinuating a great deal of consensus among the Icelanders. Two bishoprics were established, and it was not until 1230 that the bishops were freed from a responsibility to serve in the legislative assembly alongside the chieftains. During this transitional period, according to the *Íslendingabók*, it was permitted to eat horse meat, sacrifice to the heathen gods, and expose newborns to the elements.<sup>13</sup> This incredible amount of tolerance on behalf of the church not only casts serious doubt on the image of zealous bishops attempting to wipe out pagan myth, but also does much to prove that there was a preexisting pagan belief system in place. Clearly such patience on behalf of the church would have given ample time for skaldic poetry, pagan tales, and settlement histories to be remembered and written down in the thirteenth century.

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<sup>12</sup> Sigurdsson, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Sorensen, p. 20.

#### 1.4 Patience, Peace, and Compromise

Jesse Byock picked up on this theme of patience, peace, and compromise during Iceland's transition from paganism to Christianity. His studies reveal the nature of medieval Icelandic society through the examination of primary source material, most importantly the legal codes and family sagas of the period. Byock is not convinced that these primary sources are of either strictly literary or historical value.<sup>14</sup> Rather, they are both. They provide the historian with a unique vision of a western medieval society unparalleled in extant sources.

The very environment of Iceland influenced the nature of the social system on the island during the middle ages. With no native inhabitants competing against the Scandinavian settlers, there was no need to rally together in cities to defend against hostilities. Settlers could stake their claims wherever they pleased but almost always along the coastline (with denser populations forming closest to what little natural resources Iceland offers), which inevitably led to feuds but also fostered the development of law.

Indeed, law was the cultural focus of early medieval Iceland. Law is perhaps the only defining characteristic of Iceland as a cohesive state; there was no army or navy, no foreign policy, no levy, no military structures, very little church influence, sparse contact with foreign monarchs, and the only major potential enemy – the Norwegian kings – were too busy with civil wars to interfere much with Iceland for centuries.

A code of law based upon consensus and compromise developed from the very start of the Settlement Period, c. 870-930 although it would not be put into writing until Iceland made the conversion from heathendom to Christianity. Prior to those written

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<sup>14</sup> Jesse Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley: UCLA Press, 1990) pp. 31-8.

laws, the main source for interpreting early Icelandic law comes to us from the sagas themselves.<sup>15</sup> There was no real hierarchy on the island. Byock calls it a ‘headless state’ of decentralized self-government. Law revolved around the process of advocacy and was dispensed at local courts. While many disputes among freemen were brought forward to the Althing (an institution kept from continental Scandinavia), richer and more powerful chieftains and farmers known as *goðar* could be used by freemen to fight on their behalf in legal or social disputes.

### **1.5 Law, Landownership, and Advocacy**

Landownership was the principal source of a chieftain’s income and his rise to power as a *goðar*, but he did not monopolize the ownership of land. The smaller farmers controlled the majority of the arable land, unlike in continental feudal Europe where most of the land was in the hands of a wealthy minority. The chieftains never enjoyed special privileges or exclusive rights over public or private land. Most income came from taxes (a secular tithe, the first such form of taxation in Scandinavia), trade, price fixing the goods brought in by foreign merchants, and rental lands, although for the most part we simply do not know where the early chieftains acquired their wealth. The game of acquiring wealth was dangerous and tenuous; the use of overblown legal claims to obtain property alienated farmers and those chieftains whose property rights were being challenged. To push too hard was to risk death.

The advocate system was employed by Icelanders to deal with issues both petty and major, and simultaneously increased the power of all parties involved. It allowed the *goðar* to retain their lawful positions of power as leaders of interest groups, but it also reinforced the rights of the freemen supporting them. Freemen had a say in determining

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<sup>15</sup> Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) p. 345.

their future, which helped control violence in a society with limited to no governmental control. Freemen who knew their rights could often frustrate ambitious chieftains who may otherwise attempt to abuse their power. The focus upon compromise and compensation staved off threats to public order for centuries in medieval Iceland.<sup>16</sup>

The laws that governed this balance of power are an incredibly valuable source for the historian. They can reveal to us a cataloguing of fines for various crimes (as in the *Grágás*, a collection of laws), the process by which law was created, and the nature of settlements among disputing parties (such as in the family and Sturlunga sagas). Additionally, the historian will often find descriptions of the practice of outlawry and exile in Iceland. This practice, Byock argues, helped Iceland avoid the need for policing bodies to oversee punishment and limit violence for many years, which in turn helped contribute to the survival of a headless state.<sup>17</sup> To some extent, the historian can also glean information about the role of Christianity and faith in society from sources such as the *Grágás*.

The Family Sagas are of particular importance to Byock since they reveal the often banal (but historically priceless) reality of everyday life in medieval Iceland such as feuds, farming, love, dowries, taunts, alliances, and the like. In this sense they are very much unlike contemporary Latin chronicles and histories. Additionally, these sources provide things the legal documents can not: the saga writers were free to explore aspects of social interaction, for instance the blossoming of love and its effects upon the human condition, the souring of friendship, the development of new concepts within society, and the role of Christianity within society. Byock is convinced that the sagas represent an

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<sup>16</sup> Byock, 1990, pp. 51-101.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 135-6.

indigenous development that was the result of a long oral tradition being adapted to meet the needs of a newly literate culture, while simultaneously having the freedom to import some new ideas from Europe.<sup>18</sup>

As far as the Church goes, Byock sees compromise within this aspect of medieval Icelandic culture as well. Although the Church acted as a catalyst for change in Iceland, it did not uproot earlier social and political processes but rather adjusted to them. Icelandic society maintained a rural social context, dominated by law and feud, while integrating roles and demands of the church.<sup>19</sup>

While the evidence is slowly stacking up against the bookprose theorists, or at the very least Nordal, this school of thought is only fully explained in the light of the historiography surrounding it. A study of the political and academic climate in Iceland during the reign of the bookprose theorists reveals a telling story. During the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century Iceland was making a major push for independence from Denmark, under which crown they had been ruled since 1380. Towards the end of the eighteenth century Icelanders were forced to deal with Danish trade monopolies that had stunted Icelandic economic growth, a problem that was later compounded in the nineteenth century by devastating famine. Nevertheless, as the twentieth century approached towns in Iceland – Reykjavík in particular – were growing larger, the educational system was expanding with the foundation of a university in 1911, and the Danish crown held ever-diminishing control over Icelandic domestic policy until Icelandic independence was achieved in 1944.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 48-50.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>20</sup> Byock, 2001, pp. 151-6.



The Icelanders political resilience during such a long period of foreign rule is only matched by their tenacity in retaining their language, culture, and heritage. By adding a defined literary origin to the sagas through the bookprose theory, Icelanders were equipped “with a cultural heritage worthy of its status as an independent nation.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, the bookprose theorists sought to ‘elevate’ the sagas from simply traditional stories to a world class literature that was still Icelandic. By doing so, Icelanders could show the world that “medieval Icelandic literature was the product of an impressive body of learning that had been brought to Iceland and flourished there in the hands of a vigorous and independent people prior to their submission to the king of Norway in 1262.”<sup>22</sup> In short, Iceland had always been independent and culturally separate from the rest of Europe.

## **1.6 Christianity and Foreign Influences**

Regardless of the theory one subscribes too, there is a consensus that the ability to read, write (other than in runic carvings), and make books arrived in Iceland with Christianity. As was the case in Europe and Scandinavia, monasteries developed into intellectual centers and undoubtedly did much for the production of the sagas.<sup>23</sup> The bookprose theorists of course used this fact in their attempts to prove a Latin textual birth of the sagas. Still, the bookprose argument that the sophistication of the sagas demanded a textual birth has been challenged by subsequent research into the nature of oral traditions and cultures. The bookprose assumption was based upon a now archaic

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>22</sup> Sigurdsson, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

reductionist notion that illiterate people simply lack the ability to produce complex oral narrative.<sup>24</sup>

If Byock still allows room for foreign influence while maintaining that the sagas are the product of an indigenous Icelandic oral tradition – a result of complementary contributions from different approaches – then what exactly was brought into these works from outside Iceland and its oral tradition? Scholars have questioned this by examining three main categories of supposed foreign influence upon the Icelandic sagas: individual motifs and short stories repeated in both the sagas and foreign writings, ideological influences of the time period expressed in literary form, and technical literary features concurrent between the sagas and works of continental Europe in the twelfth century.<sup>25</sup> Ursula Droke's study lists examples of direct borrowings in the sagas from Latin sources. For example, the *Fóstbræðra* saga lists the number of bones, teeth, and veins in the human body. This list is found in a number of extant Latin writings such as the *Regimen Sanitatis* that would have been available to medieval Icelandic saga authors.<sup>26</sup>

The bookprose theory can be severely challenged in this discussion of Latin influence. Having established that any influence that was not Icelandic was interpreted as foreign for nationalistic purposes, we can safely include Norwegian works of the period in that category. Saxo Grammaticus' early thirteenth century work in Latin on the history of Denmark, *Gesta Danorum*, praised the Icelanders for their historical prowess. During his life, Icelanders were seen as the authorities on historical knowledge in addition to

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<sup>24</sup> Byock, 1990, pp. 35-49.

<sup>25</sup> Sigurdsson, p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> Ursula Dronke, "Classical Influence on Early Norse Literature," *Classical Influences on European Culture A.D. 500-1500*, ed. R. Bolgar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971) pp. 143-9.

being master authors and story-tellers.<sup>27</sup> Sorensen describes the medieval Icelandic authors as a sort of literary Swiss Guard, on call to write histories for Norwegian kings. So skilled were the Icelandic historians that the Norwegian contributions to Old Norse literature became less and less. By the thirteenth century, at least in Norway, writing history was seen as a completely Icelandic vocation.<sup>28</sup>

The ideological influences of the time period manifesting themselves in the sagas are a little less obvious to spot. Among the most common checkpoints for the historian include social class divisions within the sagas and their relation to what we know of Settlement-period and thirteenth century Icelandic society as well as an open eye to Christian ethical values represented within the works (although this has been hotly debated since it is difficult, without direct references to the Christian faith, to claim an ethical value as uniquely Christian).<sup>29</sup>

Carol Clover has thoroughly studied literary structure in the sagas in her 1982 work *The Medieval Saga*. She determined that, unlike contemporary medieval works written in an Aristotelian style with a defined beginning, middle, and end, the Icelandic sagas are open-ended in nature. For an example, a saga may very well begin with a genealogy of the main characters and end with another genealogy listing the family tree to the author's present day. As a result, she interprets the sagas as an overall conceptualization of the history of Iceland from the Settlement Period onward. This open-ended structure should not lead to the assumption that the Icelandic sagas are in some way deficient in a literary sense in comparison to the works of continental Europe.

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<sup>27</sup> Sorensen, pp. 12-3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> Sigurdsson, p. 29.

Rather the structure of the sagas reveals the nature of Icelandic storytelling; it divulges how Icelanders expected a story to be told.<sup>30</sup>

Still, Clover's research has been a breath of fresh air into the bookprose school. She found multiple structural and literary devices commonly associated with the work of continental Europe within the Icelandic sagas. For instance, Latin writings often amassed many unrelated stories in one work and this structure is certainly echoed within some of the sagas. Moreover, European Latin works favored addressing the same subjects over and over again with the constant additions of new material over time. Previously unconnected events were brought together under the actions of a few heroes. Both of these trends are mirrored in the Icelandic sagas. Structurally, the sagas and the continental works share a bipartite narrative format. Two (or sometimes more) storylines, shifted between via lines such as 'now the story turns to', is a technique Clover believes was adopted from Latin writings.<sup>31</sup>

Clover acknowledges that while these techniques and motifs are shared between Latin works and the sagas, there is very little direct proof that Icelanders had been greatly exposed to the works of continental Europe, regardless of how likely this may have been. All that the historian can prove is that, for instance, French romantic poems had been translated into Old Norse. Even then, it is highly unlikely that innovations in French literature would have been immediately applied to Icelandic works. Clover concludes that the parallels between continental works and the sagas were a response to changes in

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<sup>30</sup> Sigurdsson, pp. 30-1.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid..

medieval Latin and should therefore be included in the general European historiographical trends of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>32</sup>

The best conclusion to this debate is an acknowledgement of foreign influences upon a pre-existing Icelandic oral tradition. Gísli Sigurdsson neatly ties it all together: “The picture that seems to emerge is one of a strong, domestic oral narrative tradition coming into contact with historiographical works from abroad and flourishing by way of attempts to reproduce methods used in them.”<sup>33</sup> Despite this literary synthesis, the Icelandic sagas are still markedly different from the Latin works they drew from. This points to one conclusion: there existed in Iceland a strong native oral tradition that formed the backbone of the sagas:

“Without the learning brought in from abroad and modified [to Icelandic needs]...there could have been no sagas as we know them, since it was the learning that made it possible for the native tradition to find expression in written form. But it is equally clear that this learning on its own and unsupported could not have engendered the Icelandic sagas and the literary tradition as we know it from 13<sup>th</sup>-century Iceland; as proof of this we need only look to mainland Scandinavia, where the same learning existed, but produced only negligible results in terms of original literature.”<sup>34</sup>

What then is the nature of this oral tradition? A historian is hard-pressed to describe it because there is no direct evidence such as sound recordings to be examined. A stone carving may give us evidence of a preexisting oral tradition, but it can do little to shed light on how a story was told and disseminated. Diana Whaley’s research suggested

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 21-30.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid..

the only type of oral tradition that survived until the thirteenth century that we have evidence for is found in skaldic poetry. This uniquely Norse poetry, constructed in court metre, varied widely in subject matter including the praises of Nordic chieftains and kings, tales of heroes both real and legendary, genealogies, and mythology. *Heimskringla*, Snorri Sturluson's history of the kings of Norway, contains over six hundred skaldic verses from over seventy skalds, and he references them as valid historical sources.<sup>35</sup>

The earliest known skalds are Norwegian, although the discipline followed the Norse settlers to Iceland. While Icelandic skaldic poetry typically occupied itself with events of a much smaller scale, such as relationships between local farmers, it is extremely interesting that no skaldic verse survives concerning such monumental moments in Icelandic history such as the settlement, the establishment of the Althing, or the conversion to Christianity.<sup>36</sup> Whaley concludes that rather than acting as a record of major events, skaldic verse was a catalyst for sustaining interest in the past and ultimately the force behind all historical writing in Iceland.

## **1.7 Historical Purpose and Examination**

That interest in the past, while not uniquely Icelandic, was and still is a defining characteristic of the Icelandic people. History had a purpose for these medieval people, and that history took a form that suited the needs of the contemporary population. Genealogical history is arguably the most basic form of history with a purpose, because as Whaley points out to remember chains of names without good reason would be difficult, pointless, and dull. Icelandic genealogies could entertain the descendants of

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<sup>35</sup> Diana Whaley, "A useful past: historical writing in medieval Iceland," *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge University Press, 2000) p. 167.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

those mentioned just as easy as they could legitimize claims of birth, landholding, and inheritance. Other common topics in the Icelandic sagas, such as Norwegian roots, the settlement of the island, the relationships between individuals, the establishment of a government and the nature in which it functioned, and the conversion to Christianity gave the Icelandic people a sense of place in a young but grand history as well as a national self-definition to embrace.<sup>37</sup>

Today, scholars use a variety of strategies when analyzing the sagas to determine historical truths. Some historians compare the events found in the sagas to other critical texts such as the law books, for instance in the cases of punishment or transactions. Still, others disavow the laws found in these other sources and claim they were dusty guidelines that were not really put into practice in Icelandic society. Rather, for these historians the events of the sagas paint a picture of how life was really lived. Others have suggested that a distinction between historical and sociological situations and persons exists within the sagas.<sup>38</sup> While characters within the sagas may not be identical to historical men and women, it is justifiable to draw sociological inferences from them and their interactions: “The texts represent social relations as they were, whether the events they describe happened or not.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 177-178.

<sup>38</sup> E. P. Durrenberger and J. Wilcox, “Humor as a Guide to Social Change: Bandamanna Saga and Heroic Values,” *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gisli Pálsson (Chippenham, Wiltshire: Hisarlik Press, 1992) p. 111.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid..

## Chapter 2: *The Saga of the Confederates* and the Historical Truths It Reflects

### 2.1 Introduction to the Saga

In an examination of historical truthfulness, *The Saga of the Confederates* proves to be elusive despite such colorfully depicted characters and personal histories. The story revolves around a certain Odd Ofeigsson and his relationship with his father Ofeig, his betrayal by an associate named Ospak, the death of a trusted friend named Vali, and his interactions with the powerful confederates at the Althing.

Odd's father Ofeig, we are told, was a loyal thingman (or follower) of the Chieftain Strymir. Chieftains competed with each other not only for status, but for also the support of men like Ofeig: free, independent farmers with the self-determination to both give and reclaim their allegiance to a chieftain as a thingman<sup>40</sup>. Ofeig's reputation is established from the very beginning of the Saga as strong, respected and stable in the western Midfjord region of Iceland. We are told that he came from good stock, married a woman of strong character and family named Thorgerd, and made a name for himself as an advisor. He was not extremely wealthy, despite owning large tracts of land, but was hospitable to all who needed his aid.<sup>41</sup>

Ofeig's wife gave birth to Odd and, as far as we are told, Ofeig had no other children. Interestingly, Ofeig was always cold and cared little for his only son despite the enormous potential for success the boy showed. Odd was disinclined to work hard, and it is certainly open to debate whether this laziness inspired the icy attitude from his father or if the disaffection from Ofeig made the boy that way. They did, however, raise a talented young boy named Vali in their household. The reader can infer that Ofeig had a

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<sup>40</sup> Byock, 1990, pp. 111-124.

<sup>41</sup> "The Saga of the Confederates," trans. Ruth C. Ellison, *The Sagas of Icelanders*, eds. Örnólfur Thorsson and Bernard Scudder (New York: Penguin Books, 1997) p. 465.



better relationship with Vali than he did with his own son, yet still nobody in the district could match the latent capability of Odd.<sup>42</sup>

Sometime after his twelfth birthday, Odd confronted his father and demanded he be funded to set off on his own. Ofeig replies, “‘I’ll give you no less than you have earned, and I’ll do it right away, and then you’ll see what support it gives you.’ Odd said that he would not be able to support himself very far on that, and they broke off the conversation.”<sup>43</sup> Rather than continue to live in a household in which he received no status – or did any work – Odd took it upon himself to leave. The reader of the sagas will quickly notice that Ofeig’s reply is uncharacteristically humorous in relation to other Icelandic works. Indeed, humor is a defining characteristic throughout the entirety of *The Confederates*.

## 2.2 Tone of the Saga

Humor in the Icelandic sagas is generally rare since tragedy, conflict and hero-extolling take up so much space in the tales. While there are some examples of isolated wit found elsewhere, Icelandic scholars generally agree that *The Confederates* is the exception to the rule and is the only extant Icelandic saga to not only use humor but also to embrace its role in storytelling. *The Confederates* contains “not the slightest breath of heroic idealism. Everything is on the petty scale of everyday life - depicted with a keen and sovereign eye for comical effect.”<sup>44</sup> Like other sagas, *The Confederates* is a challenge to the concepts upon which society is based such as reciprocity, honor and law

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 465-6.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid..

<sup>44</sup> Peter Hallberg, *The Icelandic Saga*, trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962) p. 114.

but through the medium of humor.<sup>45</sup> The entirety of Icelandic society is ridiculed within its pages: chieftains that are motivated more by greed than by fairness, law that is used for extortion rather than justice, and an emphasis placed on material wealth rather than honor.<sup>46</sup>

Soundly denied by his father, the young man traveled to the north and, with reputation alone, secured on credit the goods he needed to become a successful fisherman. For nearly four years he accumulated wealth, paid off his debts, established strong business bonds, and yet never contacted his father. Fishing turned into trade, and Odd soon found himself running a ferry transporting goods along Iceland's coast. He was so successful that he eventually owned two large trading vessels and was welcomed into the homes of wealthy men across Iceland. Still, he never made landfall in Midfjord near his father.<sup>47</sup>

Odd eventually got away from the life of a trader and, at the urging of his friends, bought a farm at Mel in Midfjord. Odd found the same sort of success as a farmer as he did as a trader, and was soon regarded as the most prominent, wealthy and generous man in the district. Vali was always with him, loyal and hard working. Shortly after Odd's establishment in Mel, a man by the name of Ospak, son of Glum of Skridinsenni and Thordis Asmunddotir, came to Odd's household and asked to be taken in. Ospak had been a fairly successful trader in his own right yet needed the help of a man like Odd to reach the next level of prosperity. Ospak had a shady reputation within the district, yet he convinced Odd to take him and his men in for a winter as a chance to prove their loyalty

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<sup>45</sup> Durrenberger and Wilcox, p. 112.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid..

<sup>47</sup> "The Saga of the Confederates," trans. Ruth C. Ellison, p. 466.

and worth. By springtime, Odd was so pleased with the hard work shown by Ospak and his men that he invited them to be full members of his household.<sup>48</sup>

Odd's farm was flourishing and his surprise decision to take in Ospak was regarded as brilliant in the district. According to the saga, it was common at this time for men to set up new chieftaincies. Icelandic chieftains, known as *goðar* (sing. *goði*) were more political leaders than warrior leaders. They held very little formal authority to enforce laws and held no control over a region's surplus production. The chieftains were unable to limit the access of other farmers to natural resources and held very little ability to compel others to do their bidding.<sup>49</sup> The real power of the *goðar* and their political office, known as a *goðorð*, was in their role as leaders for special interest groups that had been drawn together by common interests and personal relationships.<sup>50</sup> A *goðorð* was treated as a private possession that could be inherited, shared, received and given as a gift, or even purchased.

Odd was so well established that he was able to do just that. He bought a *goðorð* and had no shortage of men willing to join him as thingmen. Everything was going splendid for the young man who had not long ago been strongly encouraged, if not outright forced, to move out of his father's home.<sup>51</sup>

A few years later, Odd announced to his household that he would be traveling abroad for the summer and wished to place Vali in charge in his stead to run the farm. The noble man politely declined, happy instead to maintain his position managing the farm's money and trade goods. The logical second choice for Odd was Ospak. He had

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 466-7.

<sup>49</sup> Byock, 2001, p. 13.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid..

<sup>51</sup> "The Saga of the Confederates," trans. Ruth C. Ellison, p. 467.

proven himself to be more and more valuable with each passing season, taking on more duties each year and doing much for the success of the operation. Ospak outwardly resisted the duty yet inwardly desired the power greatly. His apparent reluctance to take on the position may have made Odd do the inexplicable: he offered Ospak the opportunity to take over his *goðorð* as well during his absence.<sup>52</sup>

Again, Ospak outwardly resisted the power being handed to him, even going so far as to suggest Odd's father be contacted about managing the *goðorð*. With Odd's anger rising, Ospak agreed to take on the *goðorð*. People in the district were suddenly reminded of Ospak's old reputation, yet those fears were quickly laid to rest by Ospak's deft handling of the estate and expert representation of Odd's thingmen at the Althing. The household continued to flourish as if Odd had never left.<sup>53</sup>

The following autumn things began to change on the grand farm. Ospak had found a young woman to marry named Svala, despite the objections of her father. She had a farm in Svolustadir which they continued to run from Mel. It is at this point that those in Mel began to find Ospak overbearing. Thankfully for those thingmen, Odd returned from his trip the following summer.<sup>54</sup>

Ospak's true nature revealing itself at this time is not an accident. For one, it certainly makes the story more intriguing. The reader is made aware of Ospak's past reputation for greed and dubious behavior from his first mention, yet his hard work on Odd's farm casts doubt on those claims. This in turn makes his eventual betrayal of Odd harder for the reader to swallow: the reader, just like Odd, has been fooled by Ospak. Secondly, this gradual revealing of a character's nature is typical of the Icelandic sagas.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 468.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid..

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 469.

The narration style of the sagas does much for this process. The sagas are told in a style of cool objectivity in which “the narrator conceals his own presence, creating the impression that the story is relating itself.”<sup>55</sup> A character’s nature is revealed through situations, interactions and conversations within the story and not from the narrator himself. Individuals are described from the outside in, and the reader is expected to be cognizant of this form of character development.

While his thingmen were beginning to grumble about Ospak, Odd was still ignorant to the growing situation. As was his right, Odd requested his *goðorð* be returned to him. Ospak agreed that the *goðorð* should be transferred over, yet delayed the process by insisting those sorts of transfers were typically made at assemblies or Things. Odd, again inexplicably, agrees to this and begins his wait. By the time the morning of the autumn meeting arrived, Odd’s suspicions were finally piqued. He had been allowed to oversleep and miss the meeting; his hall was empty. When he arrived late, the meeting had already been concluded and its proceedings protected by law.<sup>56</sup>

Odd could now see what was happening. Enraged, he threatened Ospak with an axe and demanded his *goðorð* be returned. Ospak agreed to return the *goðorð* and things were quiet for a time, yet the district was rumbling about the true nature of Ospak. He was given less and less duties by Odd till he had nothing to do on the farm, prompting Ospak and Svala to move to her farm in Svolustadir.<sup>57</sup>

While the sources of Odd’s problems had left Mel, the problems themselves did not. Shortly after Ospak’s departure, sheep began to disappear from the fields of his farm at night. Odd believed Ospak was behind the theft, yet he could not come right out and

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<sup>55</sup> Hallberg, p. 71.

<sup>56</sup> “The Saga of the Confederates,” trans. Ruth C. Ellison, p. 469-70.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 470.

accuse him without proof. The danger to his reputation in the event of a false accusation was too great to risk. Instead, it was decided that Vali should travel to Svolustadir to discover the truth behind the thefts. Ospak welcomed Vali warmly and treated him with great hospitality on the farm. He asked Vali how Odd was doing and if it was true that he had suffered some losses during the past year. Vali confirmed the theft of sheep from Odd's fields, and told Ospak that some people believed he was behind the thefts. This blow to his honor enraged Ospak yet Vali held his ground. Ospak refused to admit his role in the crime and Vali left for Mel.<sup>58</sup>

### **2.3 The Climax of the Saga**

No other contact was made between the opposing parties until the following spring. Odd and Vali, accompanied by twenty men, rode to Svolustadir to confront Ospak and demand compensation. Vali went on ahead, hoping to resolve the matter diplomatically and come to terms with Ospak. The house was dark and quiet, yet the door was open. No sooner had he made a few paces inside when an axe was buried in his shoulders from behind. Mortally wounded, Vali turned to face his attacker and saw Ospak. The blade's bite had been meant for Odd, but the clever Ospak sent Svala out to meet his adversary in the fields instead. She assured Odd that he and Vali had come to terms and that Vali had continued to ride north to take care of his personal business. A short time later, the body of Vali was sent to Mel and Odd "received dishonor from the affair, which was considered to have turned out disastrously for him. Ospak now disappeared, so that no one knew what had become of him."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 470-2.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 472-3.

The story is at its critical point. The once successful Odd was finding his life and reputation crumbling around him. The fact that he had such wealth to begin with, however, provides a logical point from which to examine the historical truthfulness behind the saga. While medieval Icelandic scholars agree that most of the characters in *The Confederates* are historically attested to in other texts, it is interesting that a man with such power and influence as Odd would not turn up in *Landnámabók*. There is no mention of Odd or his father anywhere in the *Sturlubók* version of the work compiled in the thirteenth century. Ofeig and his relatives, as well as Ospak and his kin, are not mentioned either.<sup>60</sup>

It is entirely possible that these men existed despite their absence from the records in *Landnámabók*. It is plausible that the events in *The Confederates* did not warrant much attention outside the involved district, that some records have been lost over time, or that the bloodlines of the men did not extend far enough to reach the author's own lifetime. Nevertheless, we could even assume that these men were purely creations of the author's mind because the historical validity and value of the saga would in no way diminished. These men and women, along with other presumably fictitious characters in other sagas, might have well have been alive. Their actions, interactions, words and beliefs reveal what the saga author believed Icelandic life during the Settlement Period was like. These beliefs and interpretations of the past tell us just as much about that period as they do about the Iceland of the author's lifetime. What we are told in *The Confederates* is a biting, satirical criticism of the powerful men at the top of Icelandic society. Up to the point of Vali's death, the saga does not differentiate itself much from many other sagas in terms of story or style. Objectivity reigned supreme throughout the

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<sup>60</sup> Durrenberger and Wilcox, p. 112.

work, but with the death of Odd's kinsman also came the death of that objectivity. From this point forward, the saga slowly becomes a two-pronged spear aimed at the legal system of the Settlement Period as well as the Icelandic aristocracy whom it served.

## **2.4 Law in *The Confederates***

The highest forum in the Icelandic legal system was at the Althing, and Odd was resolved to take full advantage of it in his case against Ospak. As was customary, Odd assembled a panel of his neighbors in the district to support him in the case before leaving for the Althing. During the preparations, however, one of these men died and had to be replaced. This technicality provided a defense against the charges brought forward by Odd: since he was acting as a replacement the tenth panel-member was to be summoned at the Althing, not in Odd's home district. Once at the Althing, it became clear that while successful and honored Odd was not without his opponents. Two members of the defense, the chieftains Strymir and Thorarin, were aware of the death and replacement and knew Odd's case was flawed from the start. They also acknowledged that while Ospak was an evil man and most likely guilty of the crime, they had a duty to provide a successful defense when the opportunity to do so existed. After all, their honor as chieftains laid on the line in every case they presided over. To not take advantage of a legal defense when they had the opportunity to do so would cause irreparable harm to their reputations. Yet still, how could their honor increase by defending a murderer? As Thorarin tells us, "Odd seems to me more than justified in bringing a suit following the killing of such a man as Vali, and I regard the accused as a thoroughly bad lot."<sup>61</sup> The matter was further complicated by family politics. Thorarin was kin of Ospak's wife

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<sup>61</sup> "The Saga of the Confederates," trans. Ruth C. Ellison, p. 473.



Svala, yet he was still reluctant to provide a defense for a guilty man – not to mention a man he never liked to begin with.<sup>62</sup>

Strymir persisted that a legal defense had to be made against Odd's charges, and eventually he convinced a very reluctant Thorarin to his side. In typical saga style, Strymir's words betray his true feelings: "The fact of the matter is that it would also do Odd good to realize that he's not the only person of consequence around. He tramples over all of us and our thingmen, so that he gets all the attention. It will do him no harm to discover just how skilled in law he really is."<sup>63</sup> Through his characters, the saga author is slowly revealing his disdain for the aristocracy. Not only was an obviously guilty man to be defended by a trivial legal technicality, but the true motive behind that defense was a chance to knock a successful rival down. The author is presenting the legal system as a world of back-room politics and a vehicle for personal gain.

When the time came for Odd's case to be presented to the court of the North Quarter, it was patiently heard and then soundly defeated by the defense on the technicality. Odd was left dumbstruck as he suffered yet another blow to his success. While on his way back to his booth, he was approached by an old man in a threadbare cape, the hood pulled far over his peering face. A metal-tipped stick provided support for his shaky legs. It was Odd's father, Ofeig. Father and son had not spoken since the boy left home at age twelve, yet Ofeig had been keenly aware of his son's successes and troubles. In fact, Ofeig had even known that the case was prepared incorrectly before Odd ever left for the Althing.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., pp. 473-5.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 473.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., pp. 474-5.

## 2.5 The Resolution: Deceit and Dishonor

Unexpectedly, given his past attitude toward his son, Ofeig offered to rectify the case. Odd agreed, and gave Ofeig a heavy bag of silver. He took that bag of silver to the North Quarter court and after speaking to them about their duty to condemn a guilty man, as a ‘token of friendship’ distributed the money amongst the judges. The bribe worked. Odd was summoned back to court and in the absence of Thorarin and Strymir, the case against Ospak was heard and a sentence of outlawry was passed down by the council for Vali’s murder. Odd reveled in his success while Thorarin and Strymir were left feeling cheated and dishonored. The chieftains assembled a group of six other close friends and business relations, all of whom were highly skilled in law, to prosecute Odd on bribery charges. This confederacy of men – hence *The Saga of the Confederates* – knew that it was impossible the bribery charges would not stick. Their thoughts turned to Odd’s great wealth and how rich they would all get from his defeat at the next Althing.<sup>65</sup>

The Confederates plans did not stay secret from Ofeig for long. Shortly after the Althing, Ofeig became aware of the danger to his son and urged a very nonchalant Odd to prepare a defense. He knew that nobody would be able to challenge the legal and social might of the Confederates and that his son, with no legal defense available to him, was being set up for ruin. The sharp old man finally convinced Odd to place all the moveable wealth from his estate on a ship, ready to leave at a moments notice. Odd’s cash was given to Ofeig.<sup>66</sup>

When the next Althing convened, Odd left Mel and prepared to leave by boat the minute the assembly had ended. No formal defense was present and everyone fully

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 476-8.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 478.

expected the Confederates' case to go unchallenged. Ofeig approached one of the Confederates, Egil, before the case was to be heard. He convinced Egil that the case would not be the windfall of wealth that they expected since Odd had removed everything of value from his estate. If that was not bad enough, Ofeig reminded Egil that each member of the Confederacy would only receive one-sixteenth of the lands at Mel after it was split up amongst themselves and the innocent men of Odd's quarter who could not be made destitute because of their chieftain's actions.<sup>67</sup> As was the case with Strymir, the author uses Egil to highlight the self-serving nature of the legal system at the Althing: "The matter is getting tricky. It's obvious Odd wasn't going to sit around doing nothing, and I for one don't blame him. There are some people involved in this case whom I wouldn't mind seeing humiliated, like Strymir or Thorarin or Hermund, and they have been pressing it hardest."<sup>68</sup>

Ofeig suggested a way for Egil to get out of this case with both honor and wealth. The wealth would come from Ofeig himself; a bribe to Egil in a bribery case. The honor would come from Egil arranging a settlement in which he would be responsible for self-judgment on Odd rather than a sentence of outlawry passed down by the court. Egil was intrigued by the sly old man, yet was fearful to go up against the seven other chieftains. Ofeig promised him help and got it by securing a similar agreement from another council member, Gellir Thorkelsson. As he did with Egil, Ofeig stressed to Gellir that there was simply nothing left at Mel worth prosecuting Odd for and that the case would end badly for all of the Confederates. Ofeig gave Gellir a bribe and also convinced him that his

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 479-81.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 482.

daughter should be betrothed to Odd. After the dowry would be paid, Gellir would become a very rich man and a sudden ally of the most successful man in the North.<sup>69</sup>

It is interesting that the saga author made a specific mention of the dowry as a bargaining chip. The entire process surrounding the betrothal of a woman to a man followed the same protocol used for transactions involving land, chieftaincies and ocean-going vessels.<sup>70</sup> A contemporary Icelandic reader of the saga would have been aware of that and most likely been taken aback by such an enormous investment by Odd. The initial capital provided to a young couple was supplied by both families. The bride's family provided the dowry – the *heimanfylgja* – while the groom's relatives paid the bride price or *mundr*. The price of a dowry could be enormous, sometimes requiring a bride's father to borrow money to afford it.<sup>71</sup> In this particular instance, Gellir was not only going to receive the *mundr* but also have the *heimanfylgja* paid for by Odd. The reader begins to truly understand just how much wealth Odd had stashed away at Mel and how much was at stake in the case.

When the time for the trial came, Ofeig approached the Confederates and asked the council leader Hermund for self-judgment under the condition that he be allowed to pick two men who were to arrange the penalty against Odd. Naturally Hermund agreed, being oblivious to the old man's plot. Ofeig picked his two co-conspirators, who wasted no time in awarding the Confederacy the amount of thirteen ounces of the poorest quality silver, to be paid in the form of old rings and broken brooches. The council turned in on itself with great speed, with accusations and threats breaking apart the once rock-solid Confederacy. Egil emerged the winner during the war of words, summarily knocking

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., pp. 483-6.

<sup>70</sup> Jenny Jochens, *Women In Old Norse Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995) p. 27.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid..

down his fellow chieftains by reminding them of their past defeats, petty squabbles and – ironically enough – their greed in the case.<sup>72</sup>

Victorious, Ofeig returned to Odd and informed him of what had happened at the Althing. Despite their success, Odd still set sail for seven weeks, perhaps because his life was in danger while tempers were still hot. Upon his return, Odd was married to Gellir's daughter. Additionally, he strengthened his bond to Egil by sending him sixty sheep and two oxen. Hermund and Ospak would return to challenge Odd and his new allies, yet nothing would become of it. Hermund was killed by an archer while on his way to burn Egil in his house and Ospak was eventually stabbed and found dead in a cave. As for Odd, we are told that he “lived at Mel until old age and was thought a most outstanding man. Many important men in Midfjord are descended from him, including Snorri Kalfsson. The friendship and good family feeling between Odd and his father lasted the rest of their lives. And there this saga ends.”<sup>73</sup>

## **2.6 A Medieval Social Commentary and the Harbingers of Norwegian Rule**

The happy feeling the reader is left with at the end of the saga does little to hide the scathing criticisms tucked between the lines of *The Confederates*. Because of his intimate knowledge of the wheeling and dealing of the aristocracy, scholars have come to the general conclusion that the author of the saga was either a monk or a “priestling,” a poor priest whose education had been funded by a wealthy chieftain whom he served. A man like this would have been in the best position to observe the inner workings of power

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<sup>72</sup> “The Saga of the Confederates,” trans. Ruth C. Ellison, pp. 487-92.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 495.

and the most likely to criticize them. As Paul Schach aptly observes, “Whoever he was, the author was a master of scintillating repartee and of devastating sarcasm.”<sup>74</sup>

What is most likely is that the author was heavily in favor of the political changes sweeping Iceland during his lifetime. The saga was written sometime in the late thirteenth century, a watershed moment in Icelandic history that marked the end of the Commonwealth period and the acceptance of Norwegian rule over the island. During the second half of the eleventh century onward, political power had become increasingly centralized because of new economic, social and political conditions and those that were ruthless enough to take advantage of them. The mechanisms behind this process of power-extension had been put into motion long ago, however. Before Christianity was officially adopted by the Icelanders at the Althing in 1000, people participating in events at heathen temples were also followers of the *goði* chieftain-priest in charge of it.<sup>75</sup> Since people would have logically attended the temple closest to their homes, there was little risk of a chieftain’s influence reaching large or remote areas. When the heathen Norse faith was officially abandoned, this constraint was removed allowing men to amplify the authority of their chieftaincies.<sup>76</sup> The Church would continue to play a large role in the political history of Iceland. A prime example of this can be found in the estate-churches. As the name suggests, the estate-churches were estates that had been donated to churches but had fallen into the hands of ambitious chieftains. Technically being church property, the lands were exempt from paying tithes while simultaneously collecting tithes from others. As the estate-churches grew richer, so did the chieftains who administered and

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<sup>74</sup> Paul Schach, *Icelandic Sagas* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984) p. 148.

<sup>75</sup> Jon Johannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth*, trans. H. Bessason (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1974) p. 227.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*.

enjoyed their incomes.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, chieftains were becoming increasingly bold in their attempts to absorb the lands of small farmers. A tax for the maintenance of government leaders was imposed sometime near the end of the Commonwealth (or Free State period, as it is alternately known), just before submission to Norwegian rule in 1262. The *sauðakvöð*, or “sheep tax”, was developed along with several lesser taxes called *thingtollr*. These new taxes seem to have been forced rather than regularly collected and could be aggressively, sometimes violently, pursued by predatory chieftains.<sup>78</sup>

Iceland’s economy was pushing this drive towards centralization and power accumulation. Iceland was, and still is, completely dependent upon foreign imports to sustain society. Because it was so crucial, chieftains of the Settlement and early Commonwealth periods would often engage in both farming and trade. There was no distinction between merchants and farmers in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Chieftains or their sons would engage in trade during the summer (since this was the only time when the seas were navigable), but this was also the time of year when labor on the farm was intense.<sup>79</sup> This of course implies that only farmers with a surplus of labor and capital could afford to engage in trade, so it was not as if every farmer in Iceland moonlighted as a merchant in distant ports. Still, the ability to participate in trade was real possibility for many farmers, especially if they combined their resources with other chieftains and signed a contract of cooperation between themselves.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Helgi Thorlaksson, “Icelandic Commonwealth Period,” *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga*, ed. William Fitzhugh and Elisabeth Ward (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000) p. 185.

<sup>78</sup> Byock, 2001, pp. 261-2.

<sup>79</sup> Kirsten Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) pp. 224-5.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid..

## 2.7 The Collapse of the Commonwealth

This possibility for trade was not to last. As years passed, lumber was becoming an increasingly rare commodity in Iceland. The original trade fleet dwindled, and without a cheap source of native wood, it became increasingly expensive and difficult to travel abroad.<sup>81</sup> Fewer and fewer chieftains had the available necessary capital to engage in trade, channeling more power into a handful of men. Additionally, trade ships were becoming larger vessels as it became simply unrealistic – and financial suicide – to use anything else.<sup>82</sup> Not only could the average farmer not afford to equip these large ships, but additionally they could only be landed in certain deep water landing sites. Chieftains fortunate enough to control land with one of these suitable ports found themselves receiving dues paid per head and per horse coming into the Icelandic market.<sup>83</sup> Their pockets and power were growing exponentially as trade monopolies developed through alliances made with foreign merchants landing at their ports, and soon prices in the Icelandic market were determined by power distribution rather than by popular judgment as it had been for centuries. Norwegian merchants, powered by the backing of their king and fueled by the natural resources at home, would end up dominating the sea lanes between Iceland and Norway. The majority of Icelanders were forced to deal with a small group of rich farmers to both buy and sell their goods, magnifying existing social tension and conflict.<sup>84</sup>

As a result of this long process, by roughly 1220 till 1260 power had become gripped in the hands of a few Icelandic families. This age, known as the Sturlunga Age

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid..

<sup>82</sup> Ibid..

<sup>83</sup> Ibid..

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 226.



because of the success of the Sturlungs, was dominated by powerful men known as *stórgoðar*. Rather than focusing upon the acquisition of power and wealth in individual districts like the *goðar* before them had done, the *stórgoðar* set their sights on entire regions.<sup>85</sup> The intense violence and dangerous quarrels this bred is not surprising. The Sturlunga Saga collection, based upon this period of Icelandic history, highlighted the bloodshed and strife caused by the *stórgoðar* and their quest for power. The social system of the time rested on the concept of property, but there was no state to defend claims of ownership. Instead, claims were backed up by being part of a coalition of force such as the one The Confederates formed to acquire Odd's lands.<sup>86</sup> Although not incredibly efficient, the easiest way for these men to obtain that power was through the purchase of many older *goðorð*. Their rules tended to be short and their hold on power was generally insecure as feuds between them arose. Further complicating matters was the lack of any system of inheritance in the families or even a sense of cohesion amongst individual families.<sup>87</sup> The long-standing traditions of compromise and balanced power that had defined the Settlement and early Commonwealth periods were rapidly disintegrating. Chieftains had always been reliant on farmers for support to feed their large personal followings or armies, to support them at assemblies, to accompany them on raids against other chieftains, and to defend against incoming raids by rivals.<sup>88</sup> In turn, farmers would turn to the chieftains to defend their own claims to property despite the risk that a chieftain could abandon him or at any time make alliances with other chieftains that realigned the land. As the chieftains acquired more and more power, this

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<sup>85</sup> Byock, 2001, pp. 341-2.

<sup>86</sup> Durrenberger and Wilcox, p. 121.

<sup>87</sup> Byock, 2001, pp. 348-9.

<sup>88</sup> Durrenberger and Wilcox, p. 121.

reliance on the chieftains put more at risk than just a farmer's financial security during the Sturlunga Age. Every chieftain was forced to assemble overwhelming force in his favor if he was to not only maintain but also increase his influence. A balance of power was not only becoming unrealistic; it was becoming impossible. To maintain power a chieftain *had* to expand, the alternative being a loss of honor and influence. The equation would not and could not work any other way. This constant expansion, however, took a heavy toll on the small farmers since expeditions took labor away from the farm and put the farmer's life in jeopardy.<sup>89</sup>

The Althing was becoming an all-to-common scene of chaos and strife. Chieftains traveled to Thingvellir armed, and although pitched battles were typically averted many skirmishes took place at the Althing that ended with fatalities.<sup>90</sup> To make matters worse, it was becoming common for powerful chieftains to not even bother to make the journey to the Althing. Without participation in the general assembly, the Althing was left toothless and unable to fulfill its role. It is doubtful that chieftains who considered attendance at the assembly to be below them (or simply a waste of resources and time) would be willing to abide by decisions made in their absence.<sup>91</sup> Chieftains were not alone in their lack of respect for the Althing. Christianity had done much to weaken the authority the assembly held for the common Iclander. As the Icelandic church grew, albeit in a non-confrontational process in regards to the established political system, their demand for certain decrees to be officially recognized throughout Iceland despite never having been approved by the Court of Legislature undermined public

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>90</sup> Thorlaksson, p. 185.

<sup>91</sup> Johannesson, p. 239.

respect for governmental law.<sup>92</sup> Coupled with the internal strife generated by the chieftains and families through their lust for power, the system rotted from the inside out.

This process is evident in *The Confederates*. The men of the Confederacy are bound together not out of a sense of duty to right a wrong, namely the bribery of the North Quarter court at the Althing, but rather to secure for themselves a piece of Odd's *goðorð* and thereby increase their own power. They are all in competition with each other yet are too weak on their own to challenge the power Odd has amassed in Midfjord. When Ofeig presented Egil and Gellir the opportunity to double cross their fellow Confederates, both men relished the opportunity. Any reluctance they did show came from fear of reprisal and certainly not from a sense of duty to their compatriots.

The true nature of their relationships became evident soon after Egil announced they would be sharing thirteen ounces of silver from Odd's estate. Egil and Hermund argued over whether or not Hermund served horse when Egil visited him during Christmas. Strymir was accused of both being a coward as well as starving his household yet keeping his stomach full when times were tough. Thorgeir was belittled for demanding thirteen ewes and their lambs from a poor farmer who had crossed him at an earlier assembly. The power of the Confederacy evaporated instantly in a cloud of insults and petty fighting, just as the power of the *stórgoðar* could vanish at a moments notice. This is so different from the other family sagas, in which chieftains are characterized as men of mutual support, gift giving, and communal feasting. Egil's accusation that Hermund did not adequately provide for him and his retinue at Yule implied more than that Hermund was on tough times. An integral part of being a chieftain was the ability to sponsor feasts for his peers. These feasts were signs of support and solidarity between

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid..

the chieftains of different households; Egil is suggesting that Hermund did not have the means (or perhaps the desire) to continue the socio-political relationship any longer.

As was discussed earlier, Jesse Byock pointed out that these threats and personal feuds are indicative of a greater historical value to be found in the sagas. While *The Confederates* can certainly be classified as a comedy, insults about serving horse for Yule dinner are not just amusing. To Icelandic sensibilities, these insults are incredibly serious. Serious enough, in fact, to have laws in the *Grágás* law codes outlining penalties for such insults to a man's honor and reputation. Everything from derogatory speech to taunts to name calling is covered in the codes. In this particular instance, because the insults came while at the Althing, the offended party would have been entitled to double the typical compensation amount of forty-eight ounce-units of Egil's personal property.<sup>93</sup> Interestingly, Hermund appears to have had no intention of pursuing compensation through the law. Rather than attempt to reach a resolution peacefully, he chose to exact revenge by burning Egil alive in his house – a common way to attack an enemy in Viking tradition, contrasted with the emphasis on peaceful compromise from the Settlement and Commonwealth periods – and ends up with an arrow in the ribs to show for his efforts. It can only be assumed that the author of *The Confederates* is giving his reader one more example of how the *stórgoðar* had lost sight of Commonwealth ideals and how they had become dangerous to Icelandic society as a whole. Further bolstering this claim is the simple fact that Hermund, according to the law, did not even have the right to seek blood for Egil's insults. *Grágás* dictates that a man has the right to kill only if it is said "that he

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<sup>93</sup> *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II*, trans. A. Dennis, P. Foote, R. Perkins (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2000) pp. 195-6.

is womanish or has been buggered.”<sup>94</sup> The contemporary mind would almost certainly be aware of this, making the entire situation that much more funny and ridiculous.

Knowledge of the law codes would have been key to a chieftain’s success in the Settlement and Commonwealth periods. A man who knew the law could most effectively achieve compromise during a feud, avoiding not only bloodshed but also a loss of honor for all parties involved – especially if he was acting as an arbitrator on behalf of others. While an immensely successful man, Odd obviously had no legal skill to fall back upon. He failed miserably in his first attempt to seek legal compensation and was forced to flee during his second encounter with the courts while his father tried to save his fortune. His ineptitude nearly led to his downfall. Business acumen and charisma could only go so far; an honorable chieftain from the pre-Sturlunga Age could not succeed unless they had mastered the law and stages of arbitration in the courts.<sup>95</sup> The saga author is highlighting this deficiency in Odd, perhaps as a representative of the late contemporary chieftains he experienced in his lifetime, while simultaneously deriding how those who did understand the law such as the Confederates abused it or those like Ofeig made a mockery of it.

This commentary on the degeneration of the Icelandic legal system as well as the increasingly chaotic social structure had a very specific purpose: the author of *The Confederates* was defending and supporting the arrival of foreign rule on Icelandic soil. The feuding, anarchic nature of the *stórgoðar* proved to be their own downfall. As individual families fell deeper into turmoil from within and without, they turned to the Norwegian crown for support. All they succeeded in doing was making the expansionist King Hakon aware that Iceland was ripe for the taking. Patience was all that was needed

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>95</sup> Byock, 2001, p. 76.

to enable Norwegian movement into Iceland, and Hakon had that in abundance during his long rule from 1217 to 1263. By simply allowing the Icelanders to weaken one another, Hakon's own success was assured.<sup>96</sup> He already enjoyed a stranglehold on Iceland's economy. The defunct Icelandic trade economy had been further embarrassed by an exemption from landing-fees in Icelandic ports for all Norwegian ships.<sup>97</sup> While it has been speculated that this agreement was dredged up from an older treaty between the two countries, the result of it is not in question: it was clearly favorable to the Norwegians. If the Icelanders did something to upset the growing imbalance he enjoyed in the Icelandic market, Hakon always possessed the royal right to decree a *farbann*, or 'travel ban', effectively imposing an embargo on external trade.<sup>98</sup> Icelandic society could not endure during such an embargo because Norwegian goods had become its lifeline.

It had been a long standing tradition for Norwegian kings to dangle the tantalizing prospect of becoming an earl before the noses of the *stórgoðar*. This kind of subversion was typical of Norwegian intrusion into Icelandic politics, as opposed to an overt military invasion. Several Icelandic leaders of the Sturlunga Age were given the title of earl by Hakon, including the historian Snorri Sturluson, but no man made such an impact in his native Iceland as did Gizur Thorvaldsson. Gizur was appointed earl in 1258 but his relationship with the Norwegian crown had begun as early as 1230. He started as a courtier to the King but made a name himself as the man who thwarted Sturla Sighvatsson's attempt to seize control over the entirety of Iceland in the late 1230s. Gizur succeeded in destroying a large part of the Sturlunga family including Sturla and

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 350.

<sup>97</sup> Hastrup, p. 226.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid..

his son in 1238 as well as Snorri in 1241.<sup>99</sup> By the end of the Commonwealth, the King had given Gizur control over the Southern and Northern Quarters as well as most of the western districts in Iceland yet he retained very little autonomy. Gizur did wield much influence over the Icelandic farmers, and it was he and his aides who succeeded in making them accept a treaty of submission during 1262 and 1263. Hakon's representatives presented the proposed loyalty to the Norwegian crown as a stabilizing response to the chaos and strife caused by the *stórgoðar*. It worked. The *Gizurarsáttmáli*, or 'Gizur's Treaty', was complete by 1264 when all men had agreed to pay taxes to the Norwegian King.<sup>100</sup>

With their allegiance shifted to the Norwegians, farmers were actually able to preserve many rights that had traditionally been theirs but were stripped by the power-hungry *stórgoðar*. There was very little social upheaval for the majority of Icelanders, due in no small part to the fact that Icelandic law was generally kept autonomous. Icelandic law from the Commonwealth period was kept intact with few changes, and Icelanders enjoyed much legislative power even though it was the King's right to alter old laws and propose new ones. Unpopular law did not last in Iceland, characterized by the Norwegian-inspired law book *Járnisða* being thrown out in 1271 by King Magnus (the Law Mender) after much Icelandic grumblings over its contents.<sup>101</sup> The Norwegian Kings generally avoided abusing their powers in the island but over the course of a few generations many social, political and legal Icelandic traditions were beginning to fade away. Iceland was enjoying a period of peace and prosperity at the time *The Confederates* was written, and for the author and saga readers the logical reason behind

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<sup>99</sup> Byock, 2001, pp. 350-1.

<sup>100</sup> Hastrup, pp. 232-3.

<sup>101</sup> Byock, 2001, p. 352.

this success was the submission to the Norwegian crown and the peace that it brought. The author was aware of the chaos that had been caused by the *stórgoðar* and had written his saga in support of the new changes that had swept his country with the fall of the Commonwealth.

## 2.8 Conclusions

*The Saga of the Confederates* aptly echoes Snorri Sturluson's words concerning the historicity of the sagas: We do not know if they are true, but we know men considered them to be true. The anonymous author's interpretation is strikingly clear. The rapacious behavior of the *stórgoðar* was destroying Icelandic society and it is quite obvious that the author placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of the chieftains themselves. The author would never have been able to present his argument if at least some, if not all, of his contemporary readers did not agree that society had deviated from a collectively understood and accepted idea that a noble Commonwealth had once existed. This of course gives us insight into how thirteenth century Icelanders viewed their own history. The author believed that the chieftains had destroyed it with their insatiable desire for power, although it can not be proven that the majority of people agreed with him..

The author saw in the entire chieftain class a major deficiency that had to be rectified for the good of all Icelanders. Absent from *The Confederates* is the hero-extolling praise of the chieftains found in other sagas from the same period. It is a backlash against an entire social class, a medieval investigative report, presented in the guise of a comedy. After all, what is comedy except juxtaposition between the expected and the plausible-yet-ridiculous? What the reader expects is a heroic story of a chieftain and his rise to power, yet what is presented is a rise to power accomplished by



completely mocking every single traditionally held value and institution in Icelandic society.

The saga author lived in a time of social upheaval and national crisis in the thirteenth century. It was both logical and likely for him to look back on the past as a glorious golden age.<sup>102</sup> *The Saga of the Confederates* ties together that entire span of history. It is an interpretation of both the past, as the action takes place in the eleventh century, and a social commentary on the anonymous writer's contemporary thirteenth century present. This insight into the medieval mind is unparalleled and invaluable, and one of the many reasons that the Icelandic sagas rank among the world's great literatures and historical treasures.

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<sup>102</sup> Durrenberger and Wilcox, p. 123.

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