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Suing for Peace: The Historiographer Sturla Þórðarson and the Icelandic Contemporary Sagas as Ideological Documents

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It has sometimes been easy for historians to dismiss as anachronistic any notion of an Icelandic peace movement in the 13th century that influenced the historical works of the period, not least because the 13th century was an age of conflict in the country, known as the bloodiest age in Iceland's history (Grímsdóttir, 2021, p. xcvii-xcviii). Abhorrence of war may seem a recent sentiment to the modern eye. Nevertheless, it has been firmly established by Sverrir Jakobsson, with a close reading of various battle scenes from contemporary sources such as *Sturlunga saga*, that the first mass peace movement in history, the 'Peace and Truce of God', had indeed reached Icelandic shores in the 13th century and infiltrated society to a great extent. In the various conflicts of the age, Icelandic church leaders were indeed acting in accordance with the aims of this movement and not solely out of self-interest, as previous scholars had sometimes assumed (Jakobsson, 2008; see also Stefánsson, 1978; Magnúsardóttir, 2015; Tulinius, 2016).

It remains to establish whether an ideology of pacifism is also reflected in the sources themselves and whether it did reach beyond the religious leaders to secular forces. The following examination of one secular historiographer is potentially useful to determine if this was indeed the case. The caveat must be made that even though lay and secular forces gradually became more separate during the 13th century, in Iceland as well as in Europe in general, this may not necessarily be the case when it comes to ideology since, as argued by Stephen Jaeger (1994), much of the lay literature of the High and Late Middle Ages also stems from the clergy so the demarcation between religious and worldly literature is not as clear as sometimes assumed. While the Church in Iceland adopted a pragmatic attitude, focusing largely on sacred places and sacred days, the Peace movement was not confined to protecting holy days and venues but also driven by an antipathy to violence and this antipathy could also reach the ranks of the nobility (Karlsson, 1988; Nordal, 1989).

Peace is mentioned twice in the *Gamli sáttmáli* ('Old Covenant'), the document that made Iceland a tributary realm of the Norwegian king, presumably made in 1262,

although the manuscripts are much younger (Pires Boulhosa, 2005), indicating that a desire for peace was a major force in the decline of the so-called 'free state' of Iceland and the gradual submission of the people of Iceland – in practice, the magnates — to the Norwegian king from to 1262 to 1264. Thus, violence and peace were foremost on the minds of the upper echelons of society in Iceland in the late 13th century, the very people responsible for the *Old Covenant*.

In one late 13th century historical work, the *Kristni saga*, the authoritarian bishop Gissur Ísleifsson (d. 1118) is hailed for bringing peace to Iceland through obedience to his supremacy (Steingrímsson, 2003, 42), indicating that historians saw a single authority as the best way to gain peace in the region (Jakobsson, 1997). The need for peace became an even more pressing concern for 13th century Icelanders because the earlier part of the 13th century was characterised by complicated conflicts, strife and skirmishes that culminated in the various bloody battles between 1237 and 1246, the death toll of which has not been surpassed in Iceland to this day (Jakobsson, 2009; Bragason, 2010; Jakobsson, 2016).

Peace advocacy and Sturla Þórðarson

It is in this context that we must examine a 13th century secular historian who is indeed advocating for peace in his work. This is the author and aristocrat Sturla Þórðarson who lived from 1214 to 1284 and witnessed the expansive societal shift of that period. Sturla was the son of the important magnate Þórðr Sturluson (d. 1237), raised with his grandmother Guðný Böðvarsdóttir (d. 1221) and enjoyed the patronage of his uncle Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241), who possibly was also his teacher. He participated actively if usually in a supporting role in the violent upheaval in Iceland in the last three or four decades of the so-called 'free state'. Before the demise of the old system in 1262-1264, Sturla had been the sole functionary of the ancient institution of the Icelandic parliament (the *lögsögumaðr*, 'lawspeaker', or, to attempt a more illustrative translation, the 'attorney general'), which made him the only secular officer in Iceland. And, when Iceland was transitioning to a new system as a royal dependency in the late 13th century, Sturla, in his old age, became a royal official in Iceland, the 'lawman', *lögmaðr*, which was the successor role to the 'lawspeaker'. Sturla was also the author of a new legal code, *Járnsíða* ('Ironside'), adopted in Iceland from 1271 to 1274, that was initially rejected by Icelanders but in a later modified form transformed justice in Iceland as *Jónsbók* (1281) (Pires Boulhosa, 2017).

Interestingly, Sturla Þórðarson was also a historian, in all likelihood originally a court poet in the old skaldic style but then taking on the role of a royal biographer of King Hákon of Norway (d. 1263) and his son King Magnús (d. 1280). He also authored a late 13th century version of *Landnámabók* ('Book of Settlements'), a list of settlers in 9th and 10th century Iceland, which includes a lot of genealogical information and the occasional micro-saga (Rafnsson, 2017). Furthermore, he is the presumed author of the *Íslendinga saga* which forms a major part of *Sturlung saga*, a large compilation of sagas dealing with the strife of 13th century Iceland (Jakobsson, 2023). These are the main texts that are surveyed in this study.

In addition, scholars have attributed many more texts to Sturla, both sagas in the Sturlunga collection and sagas concerning the old society of the 10th and the 11th centuries (Magnúsardóttir 2015). All these attributions are inevitably uncertain and unlikely to be proven since sagas mostly exist in manuscripts that do not hail from the original author, and thus we rarely possess a text with an established attribution to which we could compare the possible texts. However, *Hákonar saga*, the fragmentary *Magnúss saga* and most of the part of *Sturlunga saga* that retells the events of the 1220s and 1230s are attributed to Sturla in 13th century sources (*Sturlunga saga*, I, p. 115 and II, p. 234; see also Sørensen, 1992; Þorláksson, 2012), so these are the texts one should focus on to gain an understanding of the views of Sturla.

Both these narratives, *Íslendinga saga* and *Hákonar saga*, turn out to have relatively clear statements about peace and peacemaking as an obvious concern of the author. In *Hákonar saga*, King Hákon is presented as a *rex pacificus* who above all wants to end conflict and strife in his lands. While this endeavour occasionally entails killing, the text accentuates that the king's policy is to be merciful to all those who capitulate to him. When mercy is asked for, mercy is granted, and the author repeatedly finishes accounts of battle by mentioning the mercy granted to those who yielded (Jakobsson, 1995).

The king's most important task is state formation, the same policy pursued by other 13th century monarchs, and in King Hákon's case, relatively successfully (Jakobsson, 2009; Bagge, 2010). When he dies, his reign and his accomplishments are described at the end of *Hákonar saga* narrative; the author singles out his success in ending family feuds and killings and mutilations that arose from such feuds (Hauksson, 2013, p. 265; Jakobsson, 1995). This is indeed the period when murder becomes a crime against the state, or in 13th century parlance, against the monarch, which is still the practice today, although it seems to baffle people centuries later, that victims of violence are not officially party to the ensuing investigation or trial as the

king (or the state) takes the place of the injured party, one of King Hákon's innovations in Norway and Iceland that still very visible in the legal system in the 21st century.

Sturla as a royal official

The author of *Hákonar saga*, presumably Sturla Þórðarson, seems in wholehearted agreement with this reform and King Hákon's efforts in general, but, as has often been noted by scholars, he is writing this biography at the behest of the king and inevitably has to echo royal policy. This does not mean that he has no agency of his own, as I and other scholars have observed (Jakobsson, 2015; Jakobsson, 2017; Andersson, 2017; Orning, 2017; see also Ciklamini, 1981); his own interests often shine through, in particular when he is describing the Icelandic situation and the actions of his rival magnates. And, Iceland plays a prominent role in the narrative, presumably mostly through the agency of the author himself rather than the king who asked for the biography (Jakobsson, 2015; Björnsson 2022).

However, it is hard to say whether his emphasis on the king's mission of peace and his policy of mercy are something Sturla chose to focus on or whether he was told to by King Magnús, Hákon's son and successor, who appears to have more or less hired him for the job (*Sturlunga saga*, II, p. 234). Maybe the distinction is not necessary: a 13th century royal official will in any case have to adopt and internalise the king's point of view as a matter of course. Possibly scholars are wrong in trying to attempt to locate an entirely independent point of view in a saga composed by a royal official such as Sturla (Jakobsson, 2015).

In *Íslendinga saga*, however, Sturla Þórðarson is presumably writing only as himself and the point of view is admittedly nuanced and complex (Bragg, 1994; Nordal, 1998; Bragason, 2010; Bragason, 2021). That does not mean that he is not still a royal official. Indeed, as *Íslendinga saga* may have been written a decade or so later than *Hákonar saga*, its author had possibly progressed even further in internalising the point of view of the king – this is contrary to what Icelandic scholars have sometimes assumed, but they have occasionally been somewhat naïve in their attempts to define Sturla's own agency as clearly distinguished from the agency of the king (Jakobsson, 1995). What is clear, and has been remarked on by such scholars as Gunnar Karlsson, Guðrún Nordal and myself (Karlsson, 1988; Nordal, 1989; Jakobsson, 2003), is that Sturla Þórðarson puts a strong emphasis on violent scenes and that he often adopts the viewpoint of the victim. As I have shown myself, this is consistent throughout the narrative of *Íslendinga saga* and independent of who the victim in question is (Jakobsson, 2003).

There are a few striking examples of this point of view. One is the narrative of the 1229 'raid on Sauðafell', the *Sauðafellsför* (*Sturlunga saga*, I, p. 325-330), where the young and reckless magnates Þórður and Snorri Þorvaldsson, seeking to avenge their father's death, invade the home of the grand Sturla Sighvatsson, attempting to kill him, but, as he was absent, instead managing to mostly hurt women, children, labourers and clerics. They also terrorise Sturla's wife who has recently given birth, but, miraculously, no blow strikes the crib of the newborn baby. While the brothers and their henchmen are the ruthless assailants in this narrative, their own fears and nervousness is also presented, as they stand for a long while outside goading each other to attack (Jakobsson, 2003). In the end, they attack is an abject failure and the attackers emerge with nothing from the endeavour, apart from a few insults towards Sturla whom they refer to as the Freyr of the Dales (Nordal 1992; Bragason 2010).

This unsuccessful raid of a gang of youths is presented unequivocally as a brutal and disgraceful act in *Íslendinga saga*. In their futile attempt to be heroic, the brothers instead are heaped with scorn from the general populace of Iceland as a consequence. For example, several defaming verses directed at the brothers are composed about a poor elderly woman they presumably accidentally killed in the hoopla (*Sturlunga saga*, I, p. 330-332).

A few chapters later, however, Sturla Þórðarson relates how his cousin and namesake Sturla Sighvatsson, presumably still seeing the failed raid and his wife's distress as a slight to his honour, breaks a settlement with the two brothers in 1232, when they are in the vicinity of his estate. He chases and eventually executes these young and vicious brothers who attacked his home three years previously (*Sturlunga saga*, I, p. 347-360), and in this case the sympathy of the narrative seems surprisingly to lie heavily with the brothers who are presented with gentle sympathy (Jakobsson, 2003). To begin with, their point of view is given precedence in the narrative leading up to their capture. Their wounds and their execution are also described in gruesome detail and at length, particularly that of the eighteen-year-old Snorri Þorvaldsson who was an exact contemporary of the author and presumably well-known to him. Previous scholars attributed this dramatic switch of sympathy to different sources, as they found it hard to believe that Sturla did not side consistently with one magnate.

Peace and Point of view in the sagas of Sturla

While the narrative of the execution of Þórðr and Snorri Þorvaldsson is interesting in itself, the shift in sympathy from previous attacker to current victim is not isolated, since in his *Íslendinga saga*, Sturla Þórðarson consistently sides with the victims of violence. Thus, he is able to compose a graphic account of the attack on Sauðafell and one equally as graphic of the execution of the perpetrators a few years later, in both cases with much sympathy for the victims (Jakobsson, 2003). I think it could also be argued that it is most natural to see this switch in sympathy as a part of a clear ideology of non-violence, with Sturla Þórðarson influenced heavily by the Peace movements of the 13th century. But in his graphic depictions of violence and its victims, he is also championing, after the fact, his master the king as the unifier who brought peace and stability to the harried society of Iceland in the 1260s.

Although this one example is quite illustrative, there are several more that suggest that this is indeed a general trend. In the lengthy and powerful narrative of the 'Battle of Örlyggstaðir' (*Örlygsstaðabardagi*) that took place in 1238, Sturla Sighvatsson, the very same magnate who was responsible for the faithless and brutal execution of Þórður and Snorri Þorvaldsson in response to the Sauðafell attack, is now the victim and sympathy shifts once again to him (*Sturlunga saga*, I, p. 430-439). Sturla lays wounded on the ground when his enemy Gizurr Þorvaldsson arrives and strikes the injured man with a blow of such energising fury that the witnesses can see both his feet leave the ground. Sturla is consequently stripped of everything. This brutal vindictiveness of the conquerors is not echoed in *Hákonar saga* where King Hákon is said to be consistently lenient and clement to his conquered opponents and treats them with dignity (Jakobsson, 1995).

Given how roughly Sturla Þórðarson treats Gizurr Þorvaldsson in the portrayal of the 'Battle of Örlyggstaðir', in particular with the striking image of his feet in the air when hacking away at the wounded and defenseless Sturla, one would expect scant sympathy for Gizurr in the lengthy portrayal of the burning at Flugumýri in 1253 (*Sturlunga saga*, I, p. 481-494, also Bragason, 2009). Fifteen years after the 'Battle of Örlyggstaðir', Gizurr's farmstead at Flugumýri is attacked unexpectedly by his enemies, who burn the farmstead down and kill not only Gizurr's three sons, all of whom were mere teenagers, but also Gizurr's second wife, of whom, the saga recounts, only the breasts remained unburned.

The burning was, of course, a brutal act and likely to condemned by any historian describing it a few years later. It was also directed at Sturla Þórðarson himself who

was at that time a recent ally of Gizurr and had just married his teenage daughter Ingibjörg to Gizurr's oldest son Hallr (who was killed in the burning). Sturla was not present when the attack took place and in fact several of the attackers were his kinsmen and former allies. One of them takes care to rescue the young Ingibjörg from the fire so that Sturla ends up being not as much impacted personally as he would have otherwise been.

Sturla Þórðarson had a personal stake in this particular atrocity, but nevertheless his treatment of Gizurr, and in particular the shift in point of view to Gizurr and his family, is remarkable and possibly more indicative of a general tendency than to Sturla's involvement in the affair. In spite of his short alliance with Gizurr, Sturla was clearly full of anger and resentment towards his former ally when he wrote *Hákonar saga.* In *Íslendinga saga*, written later, no such resentment is detectable in the description of the Flugumýri burning suggesting Sturla's hostility had cooled by then.

Gizurr himself managed to escape death narrowly by hiding in a barrel full of sour whey, the acidic liquid from milk production, and the whole scene is depicted from Gizurr's own view, with all the sympathy again directed at the victims whereas the attackers, some of whom were related to Sturla Þórðarson, get none. Again, some previous scholars have argued that this must mean that Sturla's sources guided his hand (Ólsen, 1902; Sigurðsson, 1935; *Sturlunga saga*, I-II), or that this part of *Sturlunga* cannot have come from Sturla's pen.

These explanations are, however, unnecessary if we take into account how Sturla Þórðarson consistently sides with the victims and the vanquished in all his major accounts of battle and violence in *Íslendinga saga* (Jakobsson, 2003). Some decades after the events, the old man Sturla seems to be mostly of the opinion that there was little heroism and much horror in the events of 1230-1260 in Iceland. What is the reason for this view? I think it is most simple to see it as part and parcel of Sturla's now pacifist views.

Peace and state formation in the 13th century

In his old age in the 1280s, as he was approaching the age of 70, Sturla Þórðarson the royal official reviews his past and delivers his verdict on the brutal age of his youth and prime, a period of strife and conflict that ended with Icelanders turning to King Hákon of Norway and acknowledging him as their sovereign.

Icelanders of the 19th and 20th century, scholars as well as the public, tended to regard this capitulation to Norway, which eventually lead to 700 years of semi-colonial status, as an unfortunate event, casting King Hákon as the clever manipulator who brought Iceland to its knees by fomenting strife. They also believed that Sturla Þórðarson, as a free spirit born in a free country, must have secretly lamented this turn of events (Jakobsson, 1995). This is not at all supported by the testimony in sources that by and large emerge from royal servants, and not least from Sturla himself.

While these sources see the tragedy in the bloodletting and family feuds, they never suggest that the king fomented strife and wished for conflict and turmoil so that he could take the spoils in the result (Jakobsson, 1995). On the contrary, Sturla Þórðarson insists in *Hákonar saga*, that King Hákon urged restraint to all those Icelandic magnates who were in his service and regretted all violent acts performed in his name, such as the killing of Snorri Sturluson in 1241 (Jakobsson, 1995; Jakobsson, 2015).

In *Íslendinga saga*, this is not stated so unequivocally (Jakobsson, 2015), not necessarily (and not at all in my opinion) because the author had changed his mind about where the responsibility lay but rather because he had already stated his views in *Hákonar saga* about the role of the king in the events and *Íslendinga saga* is not about him, the king, but about the Icelandic magnates who brought civil war to the country that resulted in countless calamities.

Does Sturla Þórðarson censure these individuals? A close reading of the four scenes of violence I have already mentioned and other scenes from *Íslendinga saga* reveals that his sympathy shifts from scene to scene, indicating neither approval of nor hostility towards individual magnates or families but rather a strong opposition to violence in itself. Everyone is at some point a victim of needless bloodletting in this tragic tale. And the answer is King Hákon, whom Sturla may not have supported before 1263, but whom he, in hindsight, sees as the only way out of the conundrum.

Desire for peace and state formation go hand in hand in Sturla's work. He writes as the representative of a new order censuring the old order, to which he also belonged but no longer supports. The main flaw of this old order, as Sturla clearly presents in *Hákonar saga* and even more so in *Íslendinga saga*, is its inability to bring peace to Iceland, a cause that Sturla, approaching his final days, now advocates.

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