



Dissent versus conformism in Þórðar Saga Kakala (13th-century Iceland)¹

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to highlight some developments in the writing of contemporary sagas in respect to their role in strengthening and perpetuating a discourse of power aimed at establishing the 13th-century incipient Icelandic aristocracy. The source we shall focus on, Þórðar Saga Kakala, translated as *Saga of Þórðar the Stammerer/Cackler/Chatterer*, was written during the second half of the 13th century by an unknown author and includes details on the life of the protagonist from the period 1242 to 1250. It is one of the fourteen sagas in the Sturlunga collection, probably assembled around the year 1300 by Þórðr Narfason.

Rezumat

Scopul acestui articol este de a evidenția anumite evoluții în scrierea unor saga ale contemporanilor și a rolului lor în întărirea și perpetuarea unui discurs al puterii al cărui scop era de a fundamenta aristocrația islandeză incipientă din secolul al 13-lea. Sursa pe care o vom folosi, *Saga lui Þórður Kakali Sighvatsson (Þórðar saga kakala, al cărui titlu se traduce drept Saga lui Thord Bâlbâitul)*, a fost scrisă în a doua jumătate a secolului al 13-lea de către un autor necunoscut și include detalii despre viața protagonistului în perioada 1242-1250. Aceasta este una din cele paisprezece saga din colecția Sturlunga, care a fost reunită în jurul anului 1300 de către Þórðr Narfason.

Keywords: Þórður Kakali Sighvatsson, Iceland, Norway, Age of Sturlungs, King Hákon Hákonarson

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The main source, *Þórðar saga kakala*², was preserved in two differing manuscripts: the *Króksfjarðarbók* (AM 122 a fol.) and the

¹ An earlier version of this work has been published as a subchapter of Costel Coroban, *Ideology and Power in Norway and Iceland 1150-1250*, Cambridge Scholars Publishers, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2018.

² Available in English as Julia H. McGrew, R. George Thomas (transl.), *Shorter Sagas of the Icelanders*, Vol. 2, (Twayne Publishers Inc.: New York, 1974), 227-530. Also see Jón Jóhanesson, Magnús Finnbogason, Kristján Eldjárn (eds.), *Sturlunga saga*, 2 vols. (Sturlunguútgáfan: Reykjavík, 1946); Kristian Kaalund (ed.), *Sturlunga saga*, 2 vols., (Gyldendal:

Reykjafjarðarbók (AM 122 b fol.), with some notable differences between them, and in 17th-century copies of these manuscripts that are also somewhat different. It is suspected that most of the information in the saga (chapters 164-211 of *Sturlunga saga*³) is owed to Svarthöfði Dufgusson, one of the retainers of the protagonist, or that Dufgusson himself was the author⁴.

There are a few reasons why this source stands out as different in comparison to other Icelandic family sagas. First, while the action of *Egils saga* and *Laxdæla saga* took place a couple of centuries before their writing, *Þórðar saga kakala* is a contemporary saga which narrates events that had taken place only a few decades prior to its writing. This helps in achieving our purpose of providing an overview of the ideology of power during the period from the middle of the 12th century to the middle of the 13th century. The action in *Þórðar saga kakala* concentrates on the last decade of this period, during the conflicts fought in Iceland during the *Age of the Sturlungs*.

Second, while the earlier sources concentrate on family history beginning with the first known ancestors of their protagonists, in the current saga only the engagements of the protagonist, Þórður Kakali Sighvatsson, are presented over a comparatively very brief period of time. Þórður (d. 1256) was an Icelandic chieftain, son of Sighvatr Sturluson, the brother of Snorri Sturluson. What is related in the saga is that Þórður was travelling around Norway when his brother was killed in the Battle of Örlygsstaðir in 1238. Following this event, the protagonist started looking for ways of returning home, arriving in Iceland around 1242 and beginning to look for

Copenhagen/Kristiania, 1906 and 1911); Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *The Age of the Sturlungs. Icelandic Civilization in the Thirteenth Century*, transl. By Jóhann S. Hannesson (Cornell University Press: Kraus Reprint Corporation, 1953); R. George Thomas, 'The Sturlung Age as an Age of Saga Writing', *Germanic Review* 25 (1950): 50-66.

³ Jan de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, Vol. 2, *Die Literatur von etwa 1150 bis 1300; die Spätzeit nach 1300*, 2nd ed. (de Gruyter : Berlin, 1967), 308.

⁴ Einar Már Jónsson, 'La Saga de Thórdur kakali : une oeuvre de propagande ?', *Médiévales* 50 (2006): 47-57.

ways to secure his estate and at the same time to retaliate against the murder of his brother in order to maintain the honour of the family⁵.

Two years after his supposed arrival in the Westfjords during which Þórður built a small fleet, the chieftain actively began to pursue the reconquest of his family's lands in the north in Eyjafjörður. His boats clashed with those of Kolbeinn ungi Arnórsson (1208 – 22 July 1245) in what became the single most notable medieval naval battle of Iceland (and an inconclusive one) at Flói on 25 June 1244⁶. A new battle took place after two years' time, this time between Þórður and Brandur Kolbeinsson at Haugsnes (on 19 April 1246), where over 110 men fell, including Brandur, which ended the power of Þórður's enemies and propelled the protagonist to the position of highest power throughout Iceland. Þórður did not enjoy his power for long, as he was recalled to Norway by King Hákon Hákonarson in 1250 (it seem that the bishop of Hólar had written letter complaining that Þórður hadn't been furthering Norway's interests), where he passed away after six years' time, not long after having just received permission to return to his lands by the King⁷.

Jón Viðar Sigurdsson draws attention to a fundamental change of paradigm when comparing contemporary sagas (*samtíðarsögur*) from the 13th century to earlier sagas that describe events in the distant past (*fortíðarsögur*), which lies in the way they treat conflicts between different Icelandic chieftains⁸. While in the case of the first types of sagas conflict is personal, much like the manifestation of power was, being reflected in different feuds between families with women often stepping in to incite the men into restoring the honour of their families, in the case of contemporary sagas conflict becomes impersonal, battles involve thousands of people, and protagonists such as Þórður kakali are fighting for possessions and territory⁹.

⁵ Phillip Pulsiano, *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (Garland Publishing: New York and London, 1993), 316.

⁶ Magnus Magnusson, *Iceland Saga* (Tempus: 2005), s.v. „The end of the Commonwealth“.

⁷ Pulsiano 316.

⁸ Jón Viðar Sigurdsson, “Kings, Earls and Chieftains. Rulers in Norway, Orkney and Iceland C. 900–1300” in Gro Steinsland, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Jan Erik Rekdal, Ian Beuermann (eds.), *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages. Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faroes* (Brill: Boston, 2011): 69-108, 98.

⁹ *Ibid.*

The similarities between the two types of sagas are a consequence of the fact that all of them were written around the same period in the evolution of the Icelandic Commonwealth, when most families are supposed to have kept the memory of their forebears live through oral dissemination within each region¹⁰; in other words, the families living in Iceland in the 12th and 13th century shared a similar culture, which is evident from certain political-cultural patterns that are repeated in various sagas: that rulers were expected to be generous, the importance of gift-giving, and of their speech and eloquence¹¹. We should also not lose from sight the political agenda embedded in many sagas, that of legitimizing various chieftains' claims to their territories. To offer an example here, Axel Kristinsson opines that Þórður kakali may have commissioned the writing of *Gísla saga* in order to promote the claim of his family, the Sturlungs, over Seldælir, which they had taken from the hero Gísli Súrsson, whose sister was married to Þórður's ancestors¹².

One important difference between Þórður and the other Icelandic chieftains mentioned is that in Norway he was directly delegated with bringing Iceland in servitude of the Norwegian throne, while he himself was striving to maintain the independence of his homeland, at least in ecclesiastical matters¹³. While the event of Þórður's recall to Norway in 1250 passes as unimportant in many sagas, this attempted unification of the country was of real importance. The King almost kept Þórður as a hostage until the end of the forceful guest's death¹⁴. *Hákon saga Hákonarsonar* also mentions this episode¹⁵.

Historians have presented different hypotheses why this fragment was left out of the saga in the first version¹⁶. Given the proposal of some exegetes that it had been written by someone who fought on the side of the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

¹² Axel Kristinsson, 'Lords and Literature: The Icelandic Sagas as Political and Social Instruments', *Scandinavian Journal of History* 28, 1 (2003): 1-17, 11.

¹³ Joseph R. Strayer (ed.), *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, Vol. 11 (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1988), 500.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Hákon saga Hákonarsonar*, chapter 195, 246.

¹⁶ See the discussion in Jónsson 51.

people of the Westfjords, it is surprising that the saga is not heavily biased in Þórður's favour, or that at least that his enemies are presented in a positive light. When it is said that Kolbeinn ungi could not participate in the naval battle at Flóabardagi, the audience is reminded that everyone knew he was a valorous man but did not participate due to sickness. Similarly, Brandur Kolbeinsson is praised for his qualities¹⁷. The writer had difficulties in taking a side in the conflict between Þórður and his enemies. The great number of casualties in the conflict may have made it very difficult even for the hero to revel in his victory which had brought the extermination of so many notable Icelanders¹⁸.

Where the author of *Þórðar saga kakala* takes the side of the hero is when his violent actions against his enemies are excused by pointing out different wrongs that were committed against the family of the Sturlungs in order to legitimize the hero's violent acts or taking over of his enemies' property. These examples of *casus belli* do not appear in the rest of the sagas of the Icelanders and, in fact, some of them are even contradicted by other sources¹⁹. For instance, when Þórður occupies the farm of the rich and powerful Ormur Bjarnason and loots it, the author of the saga reminds us that "he was head of a *goðorð* and had played a large part in the slaying of Snorri Sturluson"²⁰, while in *Islendinga saga* the same *goði* is said to have left the group of attackers after he had found out of their intention of slaying Snorri²¹.

Furthermore, in order to justify such actions of looting and pillaging on behalf of Þórður, the author mentions that he himself was dissatisfied by this bad reputation given by one of his "captains", Ásbjörn Gudmundarson, who had rather gone pirate, so the author used this character as a scapegoat for Þórður's raiding²². Ásbjörn is described as being crueller to his enemies than usual, for example killing a vagabond, Þórodd of Horn, for not giving up his weapon, or attempting to cut off an enemy spy's hand who then "bore

¹⁷ Ibid., 52.

¹⁸ Strayer vol. 11, 500.

¹⁹ Jónsson 50.

²⁰ *Þórðar saga kakala*, chapter 8.

²¹ Jónsson 51; *Sturlunga saga*, chapter 151.

²² Jónsson 51;

his wounds very bravely”²³ but shortly, maybe as “reward” for his heartless behaviour, Ásbjörn died by drowning in a river.

On the one hand, Þórður is depicted as a merciful war leader, who instructs his men to spare women and those who had taken sanctuary in the holy ground of churches²⁴. This is similar to *Sverris saga*, where the King often spared peasants who had fought against him and instructed his men to take care not to set fire to churches, even having them use wet sails to protect the church in a fire. On the other hand, his enemy in the first part of the saga, Kolbeinn ungi, appears as a man who fights very cruelly (an anecdote is even presented how the antagonist set fire to beached whales so Þórður’s men could not feed off them), he does not spare his enemies, devastates the countryside in order to prevent his enemies from taking shelter and seems to rejoice in taking lives²⁵. Another parallel may be drawn here with how King Magnús and the *Baglar* were depicted in *Sverris saga*.

It is also interesting to note how Þórður captures the attention of the yeomen (*bændr*) with his speech and manages to persuade the public opinion that he was not so violent and was actually fighting a righteous war against Kolbeinn ungi. On occasions, he holds speeches in front of his men before battle, makes promises to God and raises the troops’ morale²⁶. The use of feuds as reasons for murdering his opponents became a habit of Þórður. Also, the way the narrative was constructed suggests that the hero was predestined for a great purpose. In the saga, Kolbeinn ungi confesses before the naval battle that he feels the tide may be turned in the conflict, yet this would take place only after Kolbeinn’s death due to illness²⁷. While, for example, the great destiny prophesized for King Sverrir back in his childhood was fulfilled, this did not occur in the case of Þórður, who died a hostage at the Norwegian court²⁸.

Einar Már Jónsson proposes that *Þórðar saga kakala* was written down in the period when the hero was at the apogee of his power in Iceland and

²³ *Þórðar saga kakala*, chapter 21.

²⁴ Jónsson 51;

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Þórðar saga kakala*, chapter 15.

²⁷ Jónsson 52.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

that it was a work of propaganda that had the role of promoting an ideal image of him and of justifying the ruthless war he waged against his enemies²⁹. The same author believes that Þórður kakali succeeded in this as many people think of him in a positive way in Iceland even today, and that this campaign of earning a good reputation for himself began after he and Gissur were asked to present the story of the feud between the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir in front of King Hákon Hákonarson. Gissur, the chieftain of the latter family, presented the story in a speech, while Þórður ordered that a roll (*rolla*) be written and handed to the King. As the King appreciated the two stories to be similar, it is likely that the version of events in the *rolla* was not the same as in the saga, but it could represent a starting point³⁰.

Overall, the portrait of Þórður kakali in the eponymous sagas scores greater similarity to those of the Norwegian monarchs in the kings' sagas than earlier portraits of chieftains in *Egils saga* or *Laxdæla saga*. Þórður is depicted as harsh and decisive but just in his actions, every man he kills he does so in response to some misdeed of that man (invented or not) that is mentioned in the saga. Similarly, King Hákon Hákonarson is depicted in the saga that bears his name as:

“...an exemplary king: a guardian of the Church, a defender of the faith, and the keeper of the peace. All crimes and every disturbance is a personal affront to him. He is clement and generous, noble in conduct and skilled in strategy and council. Last but not least, he is well educated, literate, and a great patron of the arts”³¹.

Though Þórður does not match the King in all his qualities, he certainly strived to go so and equals him in regards to being a protector of the church and in being a skilled military commander. Yet fate did not allow Þórður to return to his homeland and act according to the power he earned. Nevertheless, according to the actions in the sagas, there are arguments to support the view that Þórður may be considered a King *in nuce*, i.e. a

²⁹ Ibid., 53.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ármann Jakobsson, 'Royal Pretenders and Faithful Retainers: The Icelandic Vision of Kingship in Transition', *Gardar* 30 (1999): 47–65, 59.

chieftain with the potential to become an independent King, had he been gifted with sufficient *luck*.

The saga scholar Ármann Jakobsson identified three general attitudes to kingship existent in the Icelandic sagas before 1262:

- hostility towards kings may only be found to some extent in *Egils saga* but there is little in the way of describing kings negatively, with some exceptions that seem to confirm the rule;
- the sagas tend to focus on the fate of the Icelandic hero at the Norwegian court who generally is received and treasured as a friend, such as in the case of *Morkinskinna*³² or *Laxdæla saga*;
- third, “a tendency to depict notable Icelandic nobles as kings in embryo, discernible mainly in *Laxdæla saga* and *Hungrvaka*³³, and in the portrayal of Jón Loftsson in *Sturlunga* [saga]”³⁴.

The third finding of the Icelandic saga scholar is the most important for our thesis that Þórður kakali was also depicted as a King *in nuce*. Ármann Jakobsson did not focus his analysis on *Þórðar saga kakala* but we hope to have contributed towards demonstrated that this source qualifies for such a perspective. If the saga was written by one of Þórður’s followers, as it is suspected by scholars, then it should not be surprising that the image of the protagonist is so positive. The fact that this tendency of attributing royal features to Icelandic aristocrats is evident in other sources as well is

³² *Morkinskinna* (the “Mouldy skin-parchment”) is a kings’ saga, actually one of the earliest, dating to about 1220 and describing events from 1025 to 1157. The manuscript GKS 1009fol is kept at the Danish Royal Library in Copenhagen, having been brought to Iceland by Þormóður Torfason in 1662. See Theodore Murdock Andersson, Kari Ellen Gade (transl.), *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030-1157)* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2000); Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Individual and the Ideal: The Representation of Royalty in *Morkinskinna*’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 99, 1 (2000): 71-86; Ármann Jakobsson, ‘King and Subject in *Morkinskinna*’, *Skandinavistik* 28 (1998): 101-117.

³³ *Hungrvaka* (the “Hunger-waker”), probably written at the beginning of the 13th century, is the history of the first five bishops of Skálholt. See Camilla Basset, *Hungrvaka – translation*, University of Háskóli Íslands, MA thesis, on-line at http://skemman.is/stream/get/1946/15914/37945/1/CamillaCB_Hungrvaka_2013.pdf, June 2013, 43–73, accessed 14.07.2017.

³⁴ Jakobsson 1999, 60.

indicative of a historiographical trend towards autonomy and centralization. It is believed that Iceland had a strong desire for independence in the Early Middle Ages³⁵, which I have tried to highlight by bringing in discussion different facets of Icelandic identity in the sagas, most especially the idea that in the sagas describing the distant past (*fortíðarsögur*) the Kings of Norway appear as Outsiders/Strangers, featuring either angelic or demonic role. A very interesting idea that is worth mentioning in connection with these descriptions of Icelandic magnates from the 13th century is that such Icelandic sagas as *Þórðar saga kakala* may have been written as a reaction to the translation of chivalric sagas in Norway during the early and middle 13th century under the guidance of King Hákon Hákonarson.

Would this idea of the protagonists' representation with some royal features in an attempt to promote his own image as an independent magnate of Iceland match his political intentions? Þórður kakali is known to have disregarded the mission given to him and to Bishop Heinrekur of Hólar by King Hákon Hákonarson in Iceland, that of bringing it under the Kings' fiscal and judicial sovereignty. In *Hákon saga Hákonarsonar* bishop Heinrekur of Hólar is the one that brings to the ears of the King the news that "what Þórður had done was useless" (*kallade þat onytt, er Þorðr hafði [syslat]*)³⁶ because "in all his dealings he had furthered his own cause but not the King's honour"³⁷ and "took little pains for the King's cause (*lagði litla stund aa kongs mal*)"³⁸.

A weak point for our hypothesis would be the *de facto* political situation of Iceland, where by 1250 almost all the chieftaincies in the Northern, Western and Southern were actually under the control of the King of Norway and could be bestowed upon or taken back according to the will of the King³⁹. In such conditions, it would have made little sense for Þórður

³⁵ Jesse L. Byock, "History and the Sagas: The Effect of Nationalism", in Gísli Pálsson (ed.), *From Sagas to Society* (Hisarlik Press: Enfield Lock, Herts, 1992): 43–60.

³⁶ Quoted in Hans Jacob Orning, *Unpredictability and Presence: Norwegian Kingship in the High Middle Ages* (Brill: Leiden, Boston, 2008), 233.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 234.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Frá goðorðum til ríkja: Þróun goðavalds á 12. og 13. Öld* (Menningarsjóður, Reykjavík, 1989) 71-78; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Goder og maktforhold på Island i fristatstiden*, doctoral dissertation in History (Historisk Institutt, Universitetet i Bergen:

to set in motion such a propaganda campaign aimed at consolidating his image as a just and brave chieftain, a propaganda campaign fit for a King. A refutation of this counterargument would lie in the unpredictability of the political situation of the times and the well-known self-governing *ethos* of the Icelanders. For example, the protagonist in *Hrafnkels saga*⁴⁰, chieftain Hrafnkell - who murdered one of his shepherds who had not made himself guilty of any crime and, furthermore, was unarmed – insisted on his right as chieftain on the life or death of his subjects, a right which belonged only to Kings.

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Bergen, 1993), 83 (published as *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, transl Jean Lundschrer-Nielsen /Odense University Press: Odense, 1999/).

⁴⁰ Also known as *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* (*Saga of Hrafnkel Freyr's-priest*), from the late 13th century, actually contains few pagan elements, in spite of its name. Authorship is still undecided among scholars. See Terry Gunnell (transl.), *The Saga of Hrafnkel Frey's Godi. The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, vol. V (Leifur Eiriksson Publishing: Reykjavík, 1997), 261–281; Jón Helgason (ed.), *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* (E. Munksgaard: Reykjavík, 1950).

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