

CHAPTER 4

Saga and Society

In each province King Harald took over all the estates and all the land, habited or uninhabited, and even the sea and lakes. All the farmers were made his tenants, and everyone who worked the forests and dried salt, or hunted on land or at sea, was made to pay tribute to him.

—From *Egils saga*¹

Up to now we have been concentrating on *Egils saga* itself, but it is important to remember that although the saga is the work of an individual or group of individuals who were both learned and creative, it is equally the product of a particular society. Something in the make-up of that society caused the work to come into existence and take the form it did. It is now time to try to visualize the milieu that gave birth to the work, much like an archaeologist will try to understand an artifact with his knowledge of the historical context that produced it.

In the present chapter, a general description of Iceland in the thirteenth century will therefore be given. It will be followed by a chapter focusing in more detail on Snorri Sturluson and the circumstances that may have motivated the composition of *Egils saga*. A final chapter will examine possible signs of unconscious forces underlying the narrative.

Icelandic society underwent far-reaching changes in the first half of the thirteenth century. The old system of *goðorð* or chieftaincies

1. Scudder (2004), 7. “Haraldr konungr eignaðisk í hverju fylki óðul qll ok allt land, byggt ok óbyggt, ok jafnvel sjóinn ok vötnin, ok skyldu allir búendr vera hans leiglendingar, svá þeir er á mörkina ortu, ok saltkarlarnir ok allir veiðimenn, bæði á sjó ok landi, þá váru allir þeir honum lýðskyldir.” ÍF 2:11–12.

had been disintegrating ever since the emergence of regional domains in the late twelfth century. The authorities of the Church, an institution at once local and international, were demanding increased autonomy for themselves in line with their European counterparts. Peace had been restored in Norway after almost a century of civil war, and its rulers now had more leisure to turn their attention to Iceland. Men of property in Iceland, whether of *goðar* or *bændr* (farmer) stock, increasingly imitated the manners of foreign aristocracy, adopting its sense of identity and in some cases even seeking advancement at the courts of the Scandinavian kings. A great flowering of literary activity, particularly saga writing, took place in tandem with these social changes. Laymen used the art of writing, previously the province of the clergy, to serve their own ends, while various kinds of verse and lore that had previously enjoyed only an oral existence were now committed to parchment.² It was almost certainly during this period that *Egils saga* was written.

I shall now attempt to describe this society in flux by taking a closer look at the social group of which the sources tell us most, that of the *goðar* and magnates (*höfðingjar*) of the new regional domains, before broadening the focus of my discussion to include its interrelationship with other groups. For aside from being the focus of most surviving sources, the *goðar* and chieftain families were prone to internecine rivalry that at times erupted into conflicts revelatory of the inner workings of their society.

Conflict at the Alþingi

In 1216 there was a minor skirmish at the Alþingi when two opposing factions resorted to arms and a battle was narrowly averted. One faction was made up of the Oddaverjar, for many years the most powerful dynasty in the country; the other consisted of Snorri Sturluson and his brothers, Þórðr and Sighvatr, whose advancement had been rapid over the previous decade. The conflict

2. For a recent discussion of the secularization of literature in many European countries from the twelfth century onward, see Martin Aurell, *Le chevalier lettré: Savoir et conduite de l'aristocratie aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles* (Paris: Fayard, 2011), especially 191 for a short discussion of Snorri in this context.

was triggered by an incident in which some of Snorri's followers attacked and wounded Magnús Guðmundsson, the *allsherjargoði* and prominent member of the Oddaverjar clan, when he tried to prevent them from killing one of his men. Mediators persuaded the two parties that Sæmundr Jónsson, head of the Oddaverjar, should receive the right of adjudication, and he accordingly proposed a settlement to which both parties could acquiesce, though not equally happily. According to the historiographer Sturla Þórðarson, Snorri was seriously dissatisfied with the outcome of the case.³ Immediately afterward the following conversation is reported:

When Sæmund came into his booth, one of his men said that matters had gone as so often and that Sæmund alone had won honor in these cases.

Sæmund replied, "What's the use in saying that? For these brothers push themselves forward so that scarcely anyone can hold his own against them."⁴

The narrator of these events, Sturla Þórðarson, was the author of *Íslendinga saga*, our principal source for the life of his uncles Snorri and Sighvatr and his father Þórðr. Here he is drawing attention to the fact that although their family, otherwise known as the Sturlungar, had been worsted by the Oddaverjar this time, their status had undergone a significant change. The established chieftains had begun to fear Sturlungar ambition; indeed, things had come to such a pass that only the most powerful among their ranks were now able to stand up to these upstarts.

It was not long before Snorri took action against Magnús Guðmundsson. When a wealthy woman, Jórunn of Gufunes, died without any obvious heir, Magnús made moves to appropriate her

3. "... og Snorra líkaði illa," *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:253 ("... and Snorri was ill-pleased," *Sturlunga saga* (1970-74), 1:161).

4. *Sturlunga saga* (1970-74) 1:161. "Þá er Sæmundur kom í búð sína þá talaði einn hans maður að enn færi sem oftast að Sæmundur hefði enn einn virðing af málum þessum. Sæmundur svarar: 'Hvað tjór slíkt að mæla því að bræður þessir draga sig svo fram að nær engir menn halda sig til fulls við þá?'" *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:253. As *Sturlunga saga* is the principal source for the next two chapters, the translation will henceforth be quoted with its page number in footnote, followed by the text in the original with a reference to the page number in this edition.

property for himself, since she had been under his jurisdiction. Snorri sent an emissary south to Gufunes where he unearthed a suitable candidate and, declaring this man to be Jórunn's heir, took over the inheritance suit on his behalf. On the appointed day Snorri summoned Magnús, not to the Kjalarnes assembly as might be expected but to the Þverá assembly in Borgarfjörður, which was under Snorri's jurisdiction, and consequently it was an easy matter for him to have Magnús sentenced to outlawry. When the Alþingi next convened, Snorri and his brothers were present in force and again conflict seemed inevitable. But mediators once more averted disaster by offering money to reconcile the warring factions, though this time Snorri was seen as having gained the upper hand rather than the Oddaverjar.

A certain amount has been written about this case, for instance by the historian Helgi Þorláksson, who offers a convincing explanation for what was going on. He views it in terms of the relative fortunes of the Sturlungar and Oddaverjar clans, which waxed and waned according to how their vital trading interests were influenced by political developments in Norway during this period.⁵ In the present study, however, I shall attempt to consider Snorri's and his brothers' elevation from a different perspective, by focusing on the passage that follows Sturla's account of the lawsuit over Jórunn the Wealthy's inheritance:

Snorri gained prestige from this case; and, indeed, by all these cases his status grew considerably throughout the country. He became a good skáld and showed himself skillful in everything he set his hand to; he always gave the best advice about what should be done. He made a poem about Hákon galinn, and in return the jarl sent him gifts—sword, shield, and byrnie.⁶

5. Helgi Þorláksson, "Snorri Sturluson og Oddaverjar," in *Snorri: Átta alda minning*, ed. Halldór Laxness et al. (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1979). See also Gunnar Karlsson, "Stjórnmálamaðurinn Snorri," in *Snorri: Átta alda minning*.

6. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:162. "Snorri hafði virðing af málum þessum og í þessum málum gekk virðing hans við mest hér á landi. Hann gerðist skáld gott og var hagr á allt það er hann tók höndum til og hafði hinar bestu forsagnir á öllu því er gera skyldi. Hann orti kvæði um Hákon galinn og sendi jarlinn gjafir út á mót, sverð og skjöld og brynju." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:254.

Nowadays we do not usually equate cultural activities with power struggles, yet here Sturla explicitly connects Snorri's poetry with the position of prestige he occupied in his community. Poetry is mentioned in the same breath as status, and it is evident that the historian Sturla takes for granted links between literary activity and social standing that it might be profitable to examine in more detail.

This will be done with the help of concepts conceived by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002).⁷ Bourdieu's life work can be described as an attempt to explain dominance and power struggles in human societies. His basic education was in philosophy, a formative influence being the phenomenology of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). Phenomenology emphasizes the creative way in which the human consciousness processes experience. Thus an important element of Bourdieu's approach is to examine how individuals and groups devise for themselves a picture, map, or explanation of reality. Further, Bourdieu's theories were being formed at a time when thinking in the humanities was dominated by structuralism, so he was particularly sensitive to relations in human society and the interplay among these relations.⁸

One of Bourdieu's best-known concepts, that of "habitus," is based on the notion of structure as a set of relations. According to him, habitus is not simply a structure but what he calls a *structure structurante*.⁹ It is a structure insofar as it is a framework of related

7. In several of my writings, I have made use of Bourdieu's theories to describe and analyze Snorri's behavior and social circumstances (see Torfi H. Tulinius 2000a, 2001, 2009). In an elegant and thought-provoking book, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda: The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia*, Toronto Old Norse-Icelandic series 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), Kevin J. Wanner has put Bourdieu's theories to use to explain how the composition of the *Edda* was part of a wider cultural and political strategy deployed by Snorri throughout his life.

8. For an account of the background to Bourdieu's theories, see Craig Calhoun, Edward LiPuma, and Moishe Postone, "Introduction: Bourdieu and Social Theory," in *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

9. Pierre Bourdieu, "Espace social et pouvoir symbolique," in *Choses dites* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1987), 156; trans. Matthew Adamson as "Social space and symbolic power" in *In Other Words: Essays Toward a Reflexive Sociology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990). In a later version of the same article Bourdieu provides a different division of capital in the social space, i.e. into the economic, cultural and social (rather than symbolic). However, I have preferred Bourdieu's earlier definition since it seems better tailored to medieval society in which supernatural phenomena played a more important part than they do in our contemporary culture, which was Bourdieu's main concern.

ideas, values, and attitudes that each individual adopts as his own during his formative years. This structure gives rise in turn to other structures since it shapes the way in which individuals process their experiences: their set of attitudes to religion, social issues and politics; their lifestyle, tastes, and cultural consumption; and their capacity to identify themselves with the dominant social group.

Thus Bourdieu fruitfully combines two main currents of modern thought (phenomenology and structuralism) in a way that enables him to propose a theory on the parts played by education and culture in the distribution of power in society and transmission of power from one generation to the next. Individuals compete for status and power in the *espace social*, using capital to which initially they do not all have equal access and that they are not all in the same position to employ and augment. What makes Bourdieu's ideas particularly useful for gaining a deeper understanding of human societies is that instead of limiting his focus to economic capital, he shows its interrelationship with what he calls *capital symbolique* and *capital culturel*. Symbolic capital is dominance of the positions of rank created by a society's value system, which does not necessarily entail the possession of material wealth or talent. Examples include royalty and aristocracy, both lay and religious, of earlier societies or film stars, rock stars, and other celebrities in today's consumerist and media-driven world. Cultural capital is the knowledge of and ability to work with various kinds of cultural material (language; art; the discourse of power, e.g. law, religion, technology, etc.), while simultaneously sharing the same taste as the dominant elite and having a connoisseur's eye for the things its members regard as valuable. This type of capital is closely related to the habitus, since an important precondition for social success is that an individual should think like the ruling classes, constructing his experience of the world as they do and adapting himself to their habits, thus projecting his class through his behavior.¹⁰ Bourdieu

10. An excellent description of this can be found in T. Bilton et al., *Introductory Sociology*, (Basingstoke: MacMillan Education, 1987), 331: "Each class, according to Bourdieu, possesses its own set of meanings or cultural framework, which is internalized initially through socialization within the family; henceforth this habitus shapes perception, thought, taste, appreciation and action. Although one culture is not intrinsically superior to another, the power of the dominant class enables them to impose their own framework of meanings on others (and on the school) as the only legitimate culture. . . . As pupils move up the educational ladder, those from

refers to this as “distinction,” an important aspect of cultural capital. The interrelationship among the three species of capital explains an individual’s success, his behavior in the social space, and the way in which the power system both maintains and renews itself.¹¹

One of Bourdieu’s principal contributions to modern sociology is his explanation of how education and other cultural activities are by their nature closely related to the power structure of a society. The concepts he developed in this context are particularly illuminating for any student of literary history, providing as they do an innovative basis for understanding the connection between literary activity and societal type. Bourdieu himself led the way in this context with his studies of the works of the nineteenth-century French novelist Gustave Flaubert.¹² We should not take it for granted, however, that Bourdieu’s concepts are appropriate for describing the long-vanished reality of a society that was utterly unlike the industrialized nations of the last two centuries.¹³

Economic Capital

In his book on the rule of the Icelandic chieftains in the Commonwealth Age, particularly in the twelfth and first half of the thirteenth centuries, the historian Jón Viðar Sigurðsson discusses the basis of the chieftains’ power and its economic foundations. Sigurðsson believes the sources of the chieftains’ revenue can be divided into four categories:

the dominated class are progressively eliminated, or shunted into less prestigious forms of education; on the other hand, the habitus of children from the dominant class provides them with cultural capital which is translated into academic (and eventually occupational) success.”

11. Bourdieu provides a succinct description of this in “Espace social et pouvoir symbolique” (1987), 152 (trans. “Social space and symbolic power” (1990), 128).

12. Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l’art : Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Libre examen (Paris: Seuil, 1992). See also the offprint of *Pierre Bourdieu and Literary History*, ed. Marshall Brown, in *Modern Language Quarterly* 58, 4 (1997): 367–508.

13. This chapter largely echoes two essays of mine: “Snorri og bræður hans: Framgangur og átök Sturlusona í félagslegu rými þjóðveldisins,” *Ný Saga* 12 (2000), and “Virðing í flóknu samfélagi,” in *Sæmdarmenn: Um heiður á þjóðveldisöld* (Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun, 2001). See also Viðar Pálsson, “Var engi höfðingi slíkur sem Snorri: Auður og virðing í valdabaráttu Snorra Sturlusonar,” *Saga* 41, 1 (2003).

- the assembly attendance dues (*þingfararkaup*) paid to them by their supporters, and other similar fees
- payments for conducting lawsuits on behalf of others
- loot, e.g. the property of enemies confiscated after victory in battle
- revenues from the chieftains' own farms and local ecclesiastical institutions.¹⁴

In Sigurðsson's opinion the last-named category was the most significant, not least when power began to accumulate in the hands of an ever-decreasing number of magnates from 1200 onward. The sources certainly imply that thirteenth-century chieftains were more preoccupied than formerly with amassing estates and gaining control of wealthy ecclesiastical sites that would ensure them a share in the church tithe. Sigurðsson attributes this to the fact that, as their power grew, the chieftains needed more followers, and in order to attract them they had to accumulate more wealth, which would in turn enable them to hold larger banquets and distribute more largesse.¹⁵ The brothers Snorri and Þórðr Sturluson were typical of this new era, the possessions of each far outweighing the possessions of their father, although the latter had apparently succeeded in doubling his landholdings during his lifetime.¹⁶

The sources also give us an idea of *how* the chieftains accumulated their wealth. In the first place, it was vital to make a good marriage. The brothers Þórðr, Sighvatr and Snorri all married the daughters of chieftains or rich men, who came with considerable dowries.¹⁷ Second, they were shrewd enough to augment their landholdings.¹⁸

14. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, trans. Jean Lundskaer-Nielsen, Viking Collection 12 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1999), 102: "The four most important sources of income were: the assembly attendance dues (*þingfararkaup*) and other payments, payments for conducting lawsuits, revenues from the chieftains' own farms and local ecclesiastical institutions and loot."

15. *Ibid.*, 109–19.

16. *Ibid.*, 111–13.

17. This emerges clearly in the account of Þórðr Sturluson (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:183–84).

18. In *Sturlunga saga* Sturla Þórðarson gives an excellent description of how Sighvatr contrives to improve his position in the Dalir district by buying and selling land, and in the Barðaströnd district by exploiting the large landholdings of Helga Gyðadóttir, with whom he was on good terms: "Sighvatr lagði jafnan stórfé til

Third, they had a talent for gaining control of ecclesiastical properties: Þórðr Sturluson was based at Staðarstaður; Snorri held, in addition to Stafholt and Reykholt, the church site at Melur in Miðfjörður, and Sighvatr inherited Hjarðarholt from his father and later acquired control of Grenjaðarstaður.¹⁹ It is instructive to observe the sort of legal shenanigans Snorri had to employ to acquire the churches at Stafholt and Reykholt, as well as the promises he made to the former church-owners, which incidentally he did not necessarily keep.²⁰

The brothers also amassed considerable wealth from lawsuits, as is evident from the account of Snorri's dispute with Magnús *allsherjargóði*. An interesting example of this acquisition is the fate of the Valshamarseyjar islands in Hvammsfjörður. These were valued at twenty hundreds, a relatively high price, bearing in mind that the initial inheritance of each of the brothers, Sighvatr and Snorri, was no more than twice that amount (pp. 186 and 188). The

bús hennar en tók í mót af lendum sem hann vildi og dróst með því stórfé undir Sighvat." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:186–87. "Sighvat continually contributed a great deal of money to her household, and got in return whatever he wished of her estates. Thus Sighvat became a very rich man." *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:124. He says of Snorri that he was "fjárgæslumaður mikill" (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:212); "Snorri was a very good businessman" (*Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:132).

19. In an interesting article, Gunnar F. Guðmundsson discusses the establishment of the tithe laws and comes to the conclusion that control of ecclesiastical institutions was not a significant source of revenue for chieftains as earlier scholars had assumed ("Guði til þægðar eða höfðingjum í hag? Níu aldir frá lögtöku tíundar á Íslandi," *Ný Saga* 9 (1997)). Others will no doubt respond to Guðmundsson's arguments better than I can here, but it is worth pointing out that the Sturlusons would hardly have made such an effort to acquire churches unless they provided them with economic capital. In addition, Ormr Svínfellingr's comment that his tithes would not be exhausted even though he had to pay out large sums suggests that they constituted a substantial source of income (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:331).

20. *Oddverjaþáttr*, in *Byskupa sögur*, vol. 1, ed. Guðni Jonsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1953), 142, tells how Snorri acquired the church at Stafholt. The church owner made over control of the church to Snorri on condition that Snorri find a husband for his daughter. This Snorri omitted to do, however. *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:211 tells how he acquired Reykholt. Here the sequence of events is slightly more convoluted, with Snorri employing the law on the one hand and promises on the other. The father of the church owner was illegitimate, which meant that other people had a claim on the church. Snorri persuaded them to hand over the case to him, thereby maneuvering himself into a relatively strong position. The lawsuit ended with Snorri inducing the church owner to hand over Reykholt to him by promising to raise his sons "til þroska þess er auðið yrði" ("to manhood, should this be their lot"; *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:131).

islands originally belonged to the farmer at Valshamar on the north coast of Snæfellsnes. In due course he was found guilty of aiding and abetting the outlaw Aron Hjörleifsson whom Sturla Sighvatsson had sentenced to outlawry, and Sturla compelled the farmer to make over the islands to him as a fine (p. 293). Sometime later Sturla himself was found guilty of plotting the death of his uncle Þórðr and paid him the same islands in compensation (p. 304).

We now find ourselves faced with two apparently contradictory statements. On the one hand the sources tell of contemporaries of the Sturlusons who owned as many if not more earthly riches than the family, yet did not rank as chieftains. An example is Kolskeggr Eiríksson the Wealthy, who was one of the richest men in Iceland during his lifetime, yet seems to have been subordinate to a chieftain who could make inroads into his wealth as he pleased.²¹ On the other hand, these examples show that the Sturlusons' accumulation of wealth was based to a large degree on other factors besides good husbandry and utilization of their estates. They exploited their social rank in order to acquire economic capital, and this in turn enabled them to amass other kinds of social capital. What apparently distinguished Kolskeggr from the Sturlusons was that the latter also possessed symbolic and cultural capital that they could cultivate alongside their economic capital.

Symbolic Capital

Symbolic capital is the prestige that the possessor enjoys in the society in question. Capital of this type can differ in nature. For instance, the degree of prestige that economic capital confers on its possessor varies greatly from society to society. In modern Western societies, it seems to have acquired an importance over and above other kinds of capital, but this was not true of the Icelandic Commonwealth period, at least not among the chieftain class. For them estates and portable wealth were desirable primarily as a

21. The chieftain was Ormr from Breiðabólstaður in Fljótshlíð, south Iceland, the son of Jón Loptsson of Oddi. Ormr had children with Þóra, Kolskeggr's sister, and Ormr's and Þóra's children were heirs to Kolskeggr's property. During his lifetime, Ormr helped himself to Kolskeggr's money as he pleased (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:213).

necessary means of acquiring prestige and maintaining their social status, for example via gifts to their supporters.²² According to Helgi Þorláksson, this is in keeping with chieftains' attitudes to commerce in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.²³ They seem to have despised commerce conducted purely for profit, while approving of merchants who obeyed social conventions such as the exchange of gifts with chieftains. Þorláksson lists numerous instances of this attitude toward merchants in the *Íslendingasögur* and contemporary sagas. Furthermore, Þorláksson argues that whereas twelfth-century chieftains engaged in trade to a considerable degree, this practice became less common after 1200,²⁴ perhaps indicating that another kind of capital had assumed a greater importance for them. We may therefore ask what symbolic capital an individual required in order to become a member of the chieftain class.

It was not possible to become a chieftain without holding a *goðorð*, since this office entailed an authority over men that conferred social recognition. In most cases the *goðorð* were hereditary but they could also be gifted or bought and sold.²⁵ In spite of this, the evidence suggests that there were restrictions as to who could become a *goði*, with birth apparently forming the most important criterion. Although the laws did not impose any restrictions on who could buy a *goðorð*, it is tempting to assume that the *þingmenn* or assembly supporters would have been more willing to follow a new leader from a *goðar* family than a commoner, even if the latter were rich enough to buy a chieftaincy. No doubt Snorri Sturluson benefited from the fact that his mother came from a *goðar* family in Borgarfjörður when he acquired the *goðorð* of that region. In general, then, it must have been in the interest of the men who collected chieftaincies to be the sons or descendants of *goðar* when establishing their position vis-à-vis their new *þingmenn*.

The importance of the authority over men concomitant with the office of *goði* is evident from the fact that all the Sturlusons made efforts to acquire more than one *goðorð*. In this context it

22. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power* (1999), 90–101.

23. Helgi Þorláksson, "Vaðmál og verðlag: Vaðmál í utanlandsviðskiptum og búskap Íslendinga á 13. og 14. öld," PhD diss., University of Iceland, 1991, 153–70.

24. Ibid., 155–58.

25. *Grágás* (1992), 58 and 153.

is equally instructive to examine the disputes that arose between Sighvatr Sturluson and his brothers over their hereditary family *goðorð*. When Sighvatr's son Sturla married Solveig Sæmundardóttir of the Oddaverjar clan, Sighvatr gave him the *Snorrungagoðorð*, Hvamm–Sturla Þórðarson's chieftaincy, *til kvonarmundar* (p. 289), “for his dowry” (p. 200). Shortly afterward Sighvatr's brothers, Snorri and Þórðr, joined forces to wrest the *goðorð* from their brother and nephew, an aim they achieved after some wrangling (p. 300). It has been assumed that Þórðr and Snorri wanted to prevent Sturla from gaining too much power in the region close to their own domains.²⁶ This is a plausible explanation, but if it is true we may well ask why they took no action when their brother Sighvatr was in sole possession of the family *goðorð*. What had changed?

The rivalry between Snorri and Sighvatr for influence in the Vestfirðir seems to have been escalating for some time, which may explain why they both made an effort to secure the friendship of Þorvaldr Vatnsfirðingr in 1223–24 (pages 286–87). After Snorri had secured Þorvaldr's backing by giving him his daughter Þórdís in marriage, Sturla Sighvatsson's rise to eminence in the Dalir region could have been regarded as a threat to Snorri's and Þorvaldr's relationship, since the main routes connecting Borgarfjörður and the Vestfirðir ran through Dalir, particularly those leading to the regions where the Vatnsfirðingar held sway.²⁷ Second, Snorri and Þórðr were probably able to resign themselves to their brother's holding the family *goðorð* alone, but it was quite another matter when he disposed of it to his son without consulting them. Third, the dispute over the *Snorrungagoðorð* arose as a direct result of Sturla's marriage to Solveig Sæmundardóttir, for not only was she from one of the most powerful dynasties in the country and the heir to great property, but she was also of considerably more aristocratic descent than the Sturlusons. Her great-grandmother Þóra, mother of Jón Loptsson, was the illegitimate daughter of King Magnús berfættr (Barefoot) of Norway. Thus royal blood ran in Solveig's veins.

26. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power* (1999), 99.

27. Helgi Þorláksson, “Sauðafell: Um leiðir og völd í Dölum við lok þjóðveldis,” in *Yfir Íslandsála: Afmælisrit til heiðurs Magnúsi Stefánssyni sextugum 25. desember 1991* (Reykjavík: Sögufraeðslusjóður, 1991), 107.

Without dismissing the importance of the first two reasons, the third may well have weighed as heavily if not more heavily than the others; in other words, Solveig's royal blood may have had considerable symbolic cachet. That Snorri was displeased with the marriage of Sturla Sighvatsson and Solveig is plain from Sturla Þórðarson's account in *Íslendinga saga*: "Snorri was annoyed by he learned of Sturla's marriage, and people thought that he had had something else in mind."²⁸ Quite what it was that Snorri had in mind is unclear, but he had probably been planning either to wed Solveig himself or else to marry her to his son, Jón murtr. She was clearly a sought-after matrimonial prize and one of the main reasons for this was her above-mentioned blue blood. But why should this have weighed so heavily in the power struggles of chieftains in a country that did not even recognize the authority of a king?

The historian Andrew Lewis has demonstrated the importance of royal descent in Western political thought of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The authority of kings was justified by reference to royal progenitors, and royal families were seen as sacred.²⁹ This way of thinking was also current in Norway, although whether it was entirely Christian in origin or partly derived from pagan ideas is unclear.³⁰ In his book on attitudes toward royal authority in the Icelandic kings' sagas, Ármann Jakobsson demonstrates that similar ideas were

28. *Sturlunga saga* (1970-74), 1:196. "Fár varð Snorri um er hann frétti kvonfang Sturlu og þótti mönnum sem hann hefði til annars ætlað." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:286.

29. Andrew W. Lewis, *Royal Succession in Capetian France: Studies on Familial Order and the State*, Harvard Historical Studies 100 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 104-54. See also Jacques Le Goff, "Roi," in *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'Occident médiéval*, ed. Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 988-90.

30. For the sanctity of Norwegian kings, see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Norsk historie 800-1300: Frå høvdingmakt til kongemagt," in *Norsk Historie 800-2000* (Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 1999), 2:93-97. For differing opinions on whether this attitude originated in the pre-Christian period, see Gro Steinsland, *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi: En analyse av hierogami—myten i Skírnismál, Ynglingatal, Háleygjatal, og Hyndluljóð* (Oslo: Solum, 1991), 307-24; and Lars Lönnroth, "Dómaldi's death and the myth of sacral kingship," in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, ed. John Lindow et al., The Viking Collection 3 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986).

present in Iceland.³¹ Those who could prove they were of royal blood greatly enhanced their social standing, as there was “an unbridgeable gap between the royal family and other families.”³² Many of Jón Loptsson’s contemporaries regarded him almost in the light of a king. Sverrir Tómasson has pointed out that the phrase *princeps patriæ* applied to Jón in the Latin version of *Þorlákssaga helga* (The Life of St Þorlákr) is clear evidence of such an attitude, since in the Middle Ages the word *princeps* was used exclusively of kings.³³

For a man who was not himself of blue blood, marriage to a woman of royal Norwegian descent and the begetting of legitimate children with her may have been a trump card in the pursuit of power. The Sturlungar could trace their ancestry to the early Swedish Ynglingar dynasty but could not claim descent from Haraldr Finehair or any later kings.³⁴ Significantly, the King of Norway was more likely to elevate someone of royal blood than a commoner to the rank of earl. The *Hirðskrá* (law of the king’s men) of Magnús lagabætir, son of Hákon gamli (the Old), indicates that the honor of becoming an earl was intended primarily for those who were of the king’s own family or else close relatives.³⁵ It is disputable whether Solveig’s relationship to Hákon would have been sufficient to secure Sturla’s position in this respect. Yet it was not inferior to the relationship between the king and Gizurr Þorvaldsson, who later became an earl. Jón Loptsson, Solveig’s grandfather, was Gizurr’s great-grandfather. The king recognized the relationship and is said, in *Þórðar saga kakala*, to have referred to Gizurr as his kinsman.³⁶

31. Ármann Jakobsson, *Í leit að konungi: Konungsmynd íslenskra konungasagna* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1997), especially 143–71.

32. Ibid., 171: “. . . óbrúanlegt bil milli konungsættarinnar og annarra ætta.”

33. Sverrir Tómasson, “Veraldleg sagnaritun 1120–1400,” in *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, vol. 1, ed. Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1992), 280–81. See also Ármann Jakobsson, *Í leit að konungi* (1997), 295–99.

34. See “Skrá um ættartölu Sturlunga, til Egils Sölmundarsonar í Reykjaholti og Gyðu systur hans í Kalmanstúngu” in *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, vol. 1 (1857), 501–7.

35. “Sá er en fyrsti hattr er Noreghs konongr gefr sunum sinum skilgetnom iarls nofn: En stundum broedrum sinum skilgetnom eda namaghum.” *Norges Gamle Love indtil 1387*, ed. Rudolf Keyser et al. (Christiania, 1848), 402 (The first custom is that the king of Norway gives his legitimate sons the title of earl, and sometimes his legitimate brothers or close kinsmen. Trans. Victoria Cribb.)

36. Gizurr’s mother was Þóra, daughter of Guðmundr gríss and Solveig, daughter

It is tempting to suppose that competition among Iceland's leading men for the title of earl had already begun in the 1220s. If so, the type of symbolic capital implicit in the possession of royal blood would almost certainly have weighed heavily in the relative standing of any chieftain. Those who were not so fortunate as to be descended from Jón Loptsson had all the more reason to link themselves to the Norwegian royal dynasty through its Icelandic offshoot. If this conjecture is right, Sturla would have achieved a very strong position by marrying Solveig,³⁷ making it a matter of urgency for Snorri and Þórðr to reduce his social capital by other means.

This interpretation might also shed light on an incident that occurred when the sons of Þorvaldr Vatnsfirðingr attacked Sturla's and Solveig's farm at Sauðafell early in 1229. Their intention was to kill Sturla, and many believed that Snorri had conspired with them. When it became clear that Sturla was not at home, Þórðr Þorvaldsson said to Solveig: "Two things have gone otherwise than I planned: first, I did not find Sturla; second, you are being left behind, Solveig; but that would not be if you would come away with me."³⁸ His aim was apparently twofold; on the one hand to kill Sturla, on the other to abduct his widow. What he intended by the planned abduction of Solveig is arguable but it is perfectly possible that he meant to marry her himself, thereby enhancing his own prestige.³⁹

of Jón Loptsson (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:193–94). King Hákon calls Gizurr his kinsman shortly before he is made an earl (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 2:739).

37. Shortly afterward Snorri entered into a partnership with a close kinswoman of Solveig Sæmundardóttir, Hallveig Ormsdóttir, taking her to live with him (*Sturlunga saga*, (1988), 1:290). This has been interpreted as meaning that he married her. Although Hallveig was also Jón Loptsson's granddaughter, she was presumably not endowed with the same symbolic capital because her father was illegitimate.

38. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:226. "Þeir tveir hlutir hafa orðið annan veg en eg ætlaði er eg fann eigi Sturlu en sá annar er þú ert eftir Solveig, og eigi mundi það vera ef mætti með þig komast." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:313.

39. In his article "Konur og kvennarín á Íslandi á 12. og 13. öld.," *Ný Saga* 9 (1997), Jón Viðar Sigurðsson discusses the abduction of women in the Middle Ages. He believes that the purpose of abductions in the Commonwealth Age was to humiliate one's enemies (*ibid.*, 79). Sigurðsson does not discuss the raid on Sauðafell since no woman was actually abducted in that case, although the intention had been present. The plan of the Vatnsfirðingar could hardly have been to humiliate Sturla by abducting his wife, however, since they had intended to kill him first.

Symbolic phenomena, such as belief in the sanctity of royal blood, belong more to the supernatural than the material realm. Nevertheless, these phenomena can weigh heavily in the struggle to attain the most sought-after prizes in a society. Bourdieu refers to such phenomena as “magie sociale” and considers them no less significant in the present than in the past.⁴⁰ It is not hard to imagine that radical transformations in a culture, such as religious conversion or the impact of external factors, would lead to the development of new varieties of symbolic capital in that society. The medieval church in Iceland does not come within the scope of this discussion, but it would be tempting to see if one could trace any such development in the way it employed its “social magic,” such as the right to excommunicate people. The latter was a particularly effective weapon in the clergy’s disputes with lay chieftains, due to the social isolation that excommunication inflicted on the unfortunate recipient.⁴¹

Cultural Capital

A year or so after the attack on Sauðafell, Snorri became briefly reconciled with Sighvatr and his son Sturla. To quote *Íslendinga saga*:

Things now began to go better between Snorri and Sturla; Sturla spent some considerable time at Reykjaholt and was [very eager to have] copies made of the saga books which Snorri was writing.⁴²

This passage is the only contemporary evidence for Snorri’s literary activities. The fact that Sturla Sighvatsson, his rival for power and prestige, “was very eager to” own the books that Snorri

40. Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 117.

41. A clear demonstration is Jón Loptsson’s reaction to Bishop Þorlák’s threat of excommunication. He offers to go and live in the wilderness so that the populace will not be found guilty of association with him. *Oddaverjapáttur* (1953), 150–51.

42. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:242; the translation is slightly modified. “Nú tók að batna með þeim Snorra og Sturlu og var Sturla löngum þá í Reykjaholti og lagði mikinn hug á að láta rita sögubækur eftir bókum þeim er Snorri setti saman.” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:329.

compiled indicates that books and literary culture were of social significance. It is tempting to suppose that the type of literary activity Snorri engaged in was seen as having an intrinsic value and thus made up part of the capital for which people competed in the society of the Sturlungar age. In a wider sense, chieftains seem to have placed considerable value on cultural activities and cultural skills of various kinds. I shall now try to give an idea of the sort of cultural capital that might have proved useful to them.

Being a *goði* and possessing a generous fortune were not in themselves enough to make a man a chieftain. He had to earn the title. Nor was it sufficient to have innate abilities; rather, a man had to be equipped with various kinds of attributes, as emerges in the sources where young men are described in such terms as “capable of exercising authority over men” and “likely to make a chieftain.”⁴³ The accomplishments a chieftain needed in order to secure the confidence and support of his followers were in effect cultural.

A chieftain had to be able to muster a war band and lead it to victory. The former required a combination of determination and skill which had to be learned, since no doubt it was not always easy to persuade one's followers to leave their farms and take part in hostilities, for all it was their duty. The latter required military tactics, and there is little doubt that the sons of chieftains were taught these skills in their youth. The sources imply that people watched with interest to see to what extent men mastered these tactics, evidence that such skills were regarded as important attributes.⁴⁴

Knowledge of the law and its application was cultural capital of a different type. Skill in this field was perhaps even more important for chieftains to master than skill in warfare, since their disputes

43. “til þess færir að hafa mannaforráð” and “líklegur til höfðingja,” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:289 and 1:338.

44. See for example the comment on the different behavior of the war bands belonging to the brothers Tumi and Sturla Sighvatsson when they rode south to attack the Oddaverjar. The implication is that the younger brother already demonstrated leadership qualities that the elder brother lacked (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:271). It is also possible to interpret Sighvatr's comment that he did not think his brother Snorri had succeeded in the the endeavor to “halda vel stöðunni” (not to have “held the position well”; *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:160), as a criticism of his brother's skills in warfare (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:252).

were more often settled by litigation than by force. The sources tell us that the sons of chieftains were educated in law at an early age.⁴⁵ Knowledge of the law not only had a practical value, but it also conferred a degree of prestige, that is, symbolic capital, on the man who possessed it, the highest rank that such knowledge could confer on a man being the office of *lögsögumaðr* (lawspeaker). Throughout the first half of the thirteenth century the most powerful clans in the country, the Haukdælir and Sturlungar, passed the position of lawspeaker back and forth between them, indicating that the role had become more sought after during this century than it had been before.⁴⁶ Snorri was lawspeaker for many years, and it seems probable that the office was coveted because it conferred an authority that was both symbolic and also based on the knowledge and skill of the holder.⁴⁷ Legal knowledge is thus an example of cultural capital that can give rise to symbolic capital.⁴⁸

A good command of the spoken language was another important attribute for a chieftain, a fact often mentioned in character portrayals (pp. 56, 98, 388 in *Sturlunga saga*, vol. 1 (1988)),⁴⁹ as eloquence could influence men's success in the competition for prestige.⁵⁰ Here it is worth mentioning literature specifically, since Snorri's activities in this area were far from unique among his social group; indeed, skill in this field seems to have been highly prized by the chieftain class in general.⁵¹ As yet there has been no exhaustive study of the

45. Jón murtr Snorrason was in his early twenties when he charged his cousin Sturla Sighvatsson with carrying out a raid (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:295). His half-brother Órækja was eighteen when he conducted his father's lawsuit against Þorvaldr Vatnsfirðingr (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:286). Gizurr Þorvaldsson was only twelve when he proclaimed the penalty of outlawry against Loptr, the bishop's son, for the slaying of his brother Björn (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:269).

46. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power* (1999), 90.

47. On this subject see Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition* (2004), 53–82.

48. For evidence that Snorri was also well versed in canon law, see my article "Guðs lög í ævi og verkum Snorra Sturlusonar," *Ný Saga* 8 (1996).

49. See also Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power* (1999), 93.

50. For example, Ormr Svínfellingr and Þórðr Þorvaldsson both employ words to mitigate the humiliation they suffer at the hands of Snorri Sturluson and Sturla Sighvatsson (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:331).

51. There are numerous examples of prominent chieftains reciting skaldic verses; some of them even numbered among the foremost poets of their day, e.g. the kinsmen Snorri Sturluson and Sturla and Óláfr Þórðarson who were all renowned poets. One could also mention Kolbeinn Tumason (*Sturlunga saga*, vol. 1 (1988), 153, 162,

social function of poetry in thirteenth-century Icelandic society,⁵² but we may presume that its function for the chieftains was both important and multidimensional. When major events occurred it was for example common for men to exchange verses. Snorri had a verse conveyed to Þórðr kakali Sighvatsson after the death of his father and brothers at Örygsstaðir in 1238, which can be interpreted as an exhortation to the Sturlungar to stand together in adversity (p. 425). Barely a decade earlier, following the attack on Sauðafell, verses flew back and forth between the chieftains, revealing differing opinions of the event. One verse pours scorn on the Þorvaldsons for killing an old woman, Þorbjörg Ysja, others accuse Snorri of having conspired with them in the attack and reproach him for jesting about such an atrocity (pp. 314–19).⁵³ Ambiguous verses containing allusions to heathen mythology could provide a chieftain with an alternative and more caustic means of expression than normal speech. An example of this is the verse by Sturla Þórðarson that unflatteringly likens Gizurr Þorvaldsson to Óðinn (p. 763).

In the first half of the thirteenth century Icelandic chieftains seem to have followed the example of foreign noblemen by attracting to themselves poets who would compose verses about them, thereby enhancing their reputation.⁵⁴ Even more crucially, poetry

165, and 215), Sighvatr Sturluson (ibid., 229 and 405), Gizurr Þorvaldsson (ibid., vol. 2, 644 and 649), Ormr Svínfellingr, Árni óreiða, and Sturla Sighvatsson (ibid., vol. 1, 317).

52. Guðrún Nordal's book, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture in the 12th and 13th Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), which discusses poetry in the thirteenth century, lays the foundation for a study of this kind. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen also briefly discusses Icelandic chieftains and poetry in his book *Fortælling og ære* (1992), 107–8.

53. See also Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and Action in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (1999), 216–17; and further, her article “Freyr fíflur,” *Skírnir* 166 (1992): 271–94. For a recent and careful study of this episode, see Jonathan Grove, “Skaldic Verse-Making in Thirteenth Century Iceland: The Case of the *Sauðafellsferðarvísur*,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 5 (2009). A comparable example is the verses that circulated after the failed attack on Þorvaldr Vatnsfirðingr (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:283).

54. Guðmundr was in Sturla Sighvatsson's retinue and composed laudatory poems about him. He had previously been with Earl Skúli (*Sturlunga saga*, vol. 1 (1988), 262, 275, 278, 314, 326, and 344). Guðmundr Galtason was a poet and member of Snorri's household (ibid., 302, 309, and 316). Two poets composed long poems about Brandr Kolbeinsson, a popular chieftain from Skagafjörður (ibid., vol. 2, 533, 536, 538–44). On this, see Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy* (2001), 130–41.

of this type seems to have been regarded as a “higher” art form, that is, an art form practiced and appreciated by the ruling class, serving a similar purpose as the opera in France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; to be a connoisseur and practitioner of this art thus signaled that one belonged to the chieftains’ social class. It is patently obvious from Snorri’s rage when one of his enemies commissioned a verse to mock one of his poems (pp. 264 and 269) that poetry was intrinsically bound up with a man’s prestige.

Being a good poet could also come in handy for those who wished to climb the social ladder, just as in Western Europe in the last century ambitious individuals from the lower orders would adopt the manners of the upper classes. In fact, such aping of manners may also have taken place in Iceland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as the sources contain many examples of people being described as *kurteis* (*courtois*) (pp. 131, 337, 338, 561). Those who were courtly knew how to behave themselves at court and were thus eligible to become chieftains or the retainers of chieftains.

Poetry was traditionally associated with the chieftain class, since Icelanders had long ingratiated themselves with men of the highest rank in Norway by composing encomia about them. Snorri was not the only member of the Sturlungar to practice this art, for the family was descended from renowned court poets of the first centuries of the Icelandic settlement. It was not until after the mid-twelfth century, however, that composition of sagas about the Norwegian kings began. Initially these were written by churchmen who were primarily interested in the Christian missionary kings, Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson.⁵⁵

Laymen known to have composed sagas of this type in the thirteenth century include the kinsmen Snorri Sturluson, who wrote *Heimskringla*, and his nephew Sturla Þórðarson, who wrote

55. In fact nothing is known about Eiríkr Oddsson, who around the mid-twelfth century wrote the first saga that can be attributed with any certainty to an Icelander. This was the saga of King Sigurðr slembidjárn, and Eiríkr was probably a cleric. Bjarni Guðnason believes he was “klerklærður en ekki prestvígður” (educated as a churchman but not ordained) (*Fyrsta sagan*, *Studia Islandica* 37 (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1978), 140.) See also Sverrir Tómasson, “Veraldleg sagnaritun 1120–1400,” in *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, vol. 1 (1992), 390–92.

Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar, as well as Óláfr hvítaskáld, Sturla's brother, who may have been responsible for *Knýtlinga saga*, about the kings of Denmark.⁵⁶ To this list we can add the author of *Morkinskinna*, since scholars who have studied the codex believe it was penned by a layman rather than a cleric.⁵⁷ These sagas were in all likelihood compiled for the kings themselves, judging by the evidence of the *páttr* of Sturla Þórðarson, which describes the circumstances in which King Magnús lagabætir commissioned him to write the saga of his father (p. 767). Thus Snorri, Sturla and Óláfr are all examples of poets who became saga writers; laymen who appropriated the art of writing, a cultural instrument of the Church, to serve their own ends.

To return to my original question: Why should Sturla Sighvatsson have been so interested in having Snorri's books copied? Did he intend to present them to magnates in Norway? Perhaps, but it is more likely that his purpose was simply to own them so that they could be read aloud to him and his household. This type of reading was not merely a courtly pastime that enabled Sturla to show off his lordly status; the actual content of the sagas also represented cultural capital. Kings' sagas like those in *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* not only increased the audience's knowledge of Norwegian and Icelandic history, but they also improved men's understanding of military tactics, of the power of chieftains and kings, and of life at court.⁵⁸ They were an instrument that enabled people to perceive the reality of their milieu and to have an impact on it, part of the "habitus" of the Icelandic ruling elite in the last decades of the Commonwealth.

56. Bjarni Guðnason, Introduction to *Danakonungasögur*, Íslenzk fornrit 35 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornleifafélag, 1982), clxix-clxxiv.

57. In their introduction to the English version of *Morkinskinna*, the translators discuss its anonymous author, concluding that he must have been an Icelander in the service of a Norwegian chieftain, probably used to bearing arms and with an interest in trade: *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings* (1030–1157), ed. and trans. Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade, *Islandica* 51 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 80–83. In his published PhD dissertation on the saga, Ármann Jakobsson concludes that the author was a poet and courtier (*Staður í nýjum heimi: Konungasagan Morkinskinna* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2003), 284).

58. Ármann Jakobsson, "Royal pretenders and faithful retainers: The Icelandic vision of kingship in transition," *Gardar* 30 (1999): 53.

The power to imbue social reality with meaning is one of the elements competed over in the social space.⁵⁹ Here we see a convergence between on the one hand symbolic capital, since society acknowledges that the possessor is authorized to give it meaning, and on the other hand cultural capital, which is a necessary tool for generating meaning. In medieval Christian society the Church was the most powerful and acknowledged source of such definitions, but it seems safe to suppose that royal authority gradually assumed this role as well, for example by adopting the Church's cultural instruments, including its view of history and composition of sagas.

According to Bourdieu, the struggle between social groups is largely a matter of definition.⁶⁰ New groups can appropriate the tools of older groups for the purpose of "redefining" the social reality to their own advantage. Indeed, during the period under examination we see exactly this kind of "appropriation" of the cultural capital inherent in saga writing, previously the preserve of the Church or king, by a new group of Icelandic chieftains. The direction that saga writing took in the first half of the thirteenth century may perhaps be largely explained by the Icelandic chieftain class's struggle to define social reality in the chieftains' own interest. The kings' sagas in *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* deal with kingship from the Icelandic perspective. But Icelandic chieftains were also involved in a power struggle among themselves and with the *bændr*, so the mirror the sagas held up to the past may have provided a way of defining this reality from different points of view.

Culture and Power Struggles

The sons of Hvamm-Sturla were descended from chieftains: their father and maternal grandfather had authority over men. They were thus brought up as chieftains' sons, which ensured them the "habitus" of the dominant class in thirteenth-century Icelandic society. They possessed the sense of identity, value system, and

59. Pierre Bourdieu, "The social space and the genesis of groups," *Theory and Society* 14 (1985): 727-35.

60. *Ibid.*, 731-34.

methods of processing reality that were innate to the chieftain class. The puzzle is not that they should have managed to become chieftains but that they should all have risen as high as they did, especially the youngest brother Snorri. The explanation for this puzzle would seem to be threefold.

In the first place, the Sturlusons lived in a time of change in Europe and Iceland. In Europe education now played a more significant role for laymen than before, a trend which had also spread to the Nordic countries.⁶¹ In addition, a power vacuum seems to have been created in Iceland by the death of Jón Loptsson, with the result that ambitious men were tempted to challenge the might of the established chieftains. The Norwegian court also became increasingly attractive to the sons of Icelandic chieftains once peace had been restored in the land after the turmoil of the twelfth century. At the same time, the king of Norway had more leisure to involve himself in Icelandic affairs.

Second, the situation in Iceland was changing, with chieftains increasingly finding themselves in a position to accumulate a greater volume of economic, symbolic, and cultural capital in their society than had previously been possible. These three species of capital had considerable multiplicative or cumulative potential, in the sense that each species provided an opportunity to accrue the others. The Sturlusons seem to have been more skilled than most in acquiring this capital and using it to their own advantage.

Third, the chieftains were beginning to exploit their society's existing cultural capital more effectively and in an unprecedented manner. Here Snorri seems to have occupied a special position among the brothers, having been sent at only three years old to be fostered by Jón Loptsson at Oddi, which is believed to have been a center of learning at least since the days of Jón's grandfather, Sæmundr fróði (the Wise). It is not unlikely that Snorri's upbringing at Oddi would have made him more conscious than his brothers of the way in which cultural activity could enhance the position of a man who wished to make his mark on society.⁶²

61. On the intellectual pursuits of laymen in Europe see Martin Aurell, *Le chevalier lettré* (2011).

62. Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda* (2008), 13.

Finally, it is worth drawing attention to the fate of the three kinsmen, Snorri, Sighvatr and Sturla. Ultimately, they did not rise as high as their vaulting ambition, falling instead to their adversaries in the struggle for power. Yet even if this had not been the case, it is far from certain that any of them would have achieved their goal. They lacked the symbolic capital implicit in royal blood, while living in an age when the ideology of royal power was reaching its apogee all over Europe, and thus there were limits as to how far up the social ladder those who were not of royal lineage could climb.

Unequal Access to Capital

The advantage of applying Bourdieu's theories to the Sturlusons' careers in Icelandic society from 1200 onwards is threefold. First, it is evident that the advancement an Icelandic chieftain could achieve in the first half of the thirteenth century was far from straightforward, but rather the result of a number of interrelated factors. Second, different species of symbolic capital, not least kinship to the Norwegian royal house, had an important bearing on a chieftain's status and prospects by the second and third decades of the thirteenth century. Third, Bourdieu's theories have the advantage of demonstrating that cultural activity of various kinds could be closely related to the exercise of authority and struggle for power.

Above all, these theories have proved useful in contextualizing the behavior of Icelandic chieftains in this period, that is, in helping us to interpret their most disparate activities—killings and lawsuits, accumulation of wealth and legislation, marriage alliances and book production—as ways of securing or bolstering their position within the social space or, in other words, increasing their personal status. Yet although the sources tell us most about secular chieftains, we must bear in mind that Icelandic society was composed of other groups as well. An attempt will therefore now be made to extend Bourdieu's theory of social space to other social classes.

Different individuals have greater or lesser access to the various forms of capital in the social space.⁶³ This becomes obvious when

63. See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, "Espace social et pouvoir symbolique" (1987), 152.

we consider economic capital: wealth generates more wealth; thus if a man inherits a substantial legacy, it is easier for him to acquire more riches. It is no less true of cultural capital. Those who possess the education and knowledge that society values find it easier to acquire new knowledge than others; besides which, capital of this kind is inherited just like the economic type. Naturally, the same applies to symbolic capital. In a society in which titles are hereditary, as in the *goðar* society, people's status differs greatly according to their birth. Thus, although the *Grágás* lawcode implies that it was theoretically possible to purchase a *goðorð*, the sources make it clear that in practice men did not acquire one unless they had the right sort of background.⁶⁴ Farmers, for example, did not occupy the same position in the social space as *goðar* because they were excluded from acquiring the symbolic capital associated with the *goðorð*. Consequently, these two groups differed in their relationship to other types of capital.

If we consider economic capital, it is obvious that their attitudes must have differed. A *goði* had to have wealth, not least to ensure the support of his assembly men and win the friendship of other *goðar* with gifts, and thus increase his prestige. A farmer, in contrast, was not obliged to show the same kind of generosity to his subordinates, that is, to his laborers and less important farmers, or to his peers. On the other hand, he had to be prepared to support the *goði*, not least with gifts of money. Thus we can begin to glimpse a certain structure in the social space: wealth flows from the farmers (and their tenants) to the *goðar* who put it back into circulation either within their domain or else outside it, in the form of gifts to other *goðar*.

It is hard to tell from the sources whether the attitudes of the *goðar* and farmers to cultural capital were fundamentally different. Presumably, the richer farmers made every effort to acquire knowledge of the law and poetry, in addition to other cultural skills that the *goðar* possessed, but the sources are vague as to how far down the social ladder demand for this type of capital

64. An exception is provided by *Bandamanna saga*, believed to have been composed in the last quarter of the thirteenth century, some time after the rule of the *goðar* ended. See Sverrir Tómasson, "Bandamannasaga og áheyrendur á 14. og 15. öld," *Skírnir* 151 (1977): 111.

extended. The farmers were evidently not as well placed to acquire cultural capital, either in the field of law or at the royal court, as the chieftains seem to have been. It seems plausible, however, that it could have come in useful for a farmer or farmer's son who wanted to ingratiate himself with a chieftain and even improve his position.

One of the most striking aspects of the structure of the social space during this period is that access to fields with which an individual is not in direct contact depends on his position. The tenant is in contact with the farmer, but not with other major landholders. The farmer is in contact with other farmers in his district but mostly with a single *goði*, whereas the *goðar* are in contact with one another. Thus we can say that the greater the sum total of their capital, the more scope individuals had for manoeuvre within the social space. At this stage it would be useful to introduce two additional concepts of Bourdieu's: the "field" (French *champ*) and what he refers to as "illusio."

"Capital," "Habitus," "Field," and "Illusio"

"Capital," "habitus," and "field" are Bourdieu's three key concepts that combine to explain social reality and individual behavior. I have already discussed capital in some detail and mentioned habitus, that is, the framework of dispositions that enables the individual to process reality in keeping with his social position.⁶⁵ Bourdieu uses another concept, "field," to refer to the way in which groups that are engaged with different subjects, and perceive and shape their reality in different ways, can coexist within the same society. To elucidate, he compares the social space to a room in which a crowd of people is divided up into smaller groups playing cards. At first glance all the groups appear to be playing the same game, but on closer inspection it transpires that this is not the case. Each group is obeying its own rules: the cards at one table have different values from those at the other tables and the aims of the games are not the same.⁶⁶ These are the "fields," then: the arenas within

65. On fields and habitus, see Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992), 16–18.

66. On fields, see *ibid.*, 94–115.

the social space where people are competing for specific powers by acquiring particular types of capital that can be likened to “cards” with differing values depending on the field in which people are operating.

One example of a field is the modern business community where economic capital is the deciding factor; but other types of social capital, such as family connections and political affiliations, also matter. Naturally, cultural capital has a role to play here as well, in the form of various attributes that come in handy in the management of a company, combined with general education and polish, which are useful when it comes to networking and negotiating contracts. All these forms of capital can be converted into symbolic capital if society colludes to legitimate them. This conversion applies, for example, to the “image” in the business community of individuals who have received recognition of some kind. The power for which the business community is competing goes far beyond mere economic capital that any individual can amass; it enables people to line not only their own pockets but also those of their friends and backers as well.

The university is an example of a completely different field. Here, cultural capital is a powerful deciding factor in whether people earn a place within the community and how they succeed once there. One should not dismiss the importance of other types of social capital, either, as although the education system is supposed to have developed ways of preventing inequality on the grounds of social background, it is common knowledge that such inequality persists. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is nowhere more important in the total volume of social capital than in the field of higher education. Individuals brought up by educated parents have from infancy absorbed the behavior, thought processes and standards that apply in this field, thus gaining a huge advantage over others who have not received as much of this capital from their environment. The symbolic capital that applies in this field includes exam certificates, published books and scholarly articles, and various other forms of recognition.

Just as universities and the business community seem to coexist independently within the social space, so many different fields coexist in all sophisticated societies. Moreover, the fields are divided up into subfields, each with its distinct characteristics and objects of

competition, such as the fishing industry as a branch of the business sector or literary studies as a subfield of higher education. In the light of Bourdieu's theories, it is no coincidence that success should be passed down from parent to child within a particular field, since it is largely dictated by the ability of each individual to perceive which types of capital are desirable and how one should comport oneself within the field. People develop this perception by growing up in proximity to those who are active in the field.

Closely related to the habitus is yet another concept which Bourdieu named "illusio" (illusion, derived from the Latin *ludus*, "game").⁶⁷ "Illusio" refers to an individual's capacity to believe in the game that is taking place in the field in which he is active. It gives him an incentive to compete for the benefits that are available in that field. The person who carves out a niche for him- or herself in academia, for instance, will probably have little interest in the sort of advancement offered by the business world, and vice versa. This differing attitude is often linked to one's background; that is, the world view and values an individual has grown up with and more or less unconsciously embraced.

Ultimately, one could say that Bourdieu's sociology enables us to analyze our own society, as well as societies that are remote from us in time or space, in terms of both the behavior of the individuals who comprise it and also of their perception of social reality. Society is a complex combination of multiple arenas (fields) in which individuals operate according to different rules and the types of cards (capital) they hold. Social conditioning of individuals results in their developing the skills to play the game (habitus) at the same time as giving the game meaning (illusio). By comparing the process to a game, or rather a collection of games, Bourdieu is able to explain the apparent paradox that society shapes the behavior of individuals, while at the same time they are free to decide their own actions.

Complex Society

We must now ask whether medieval Icelandic society was sufficiently sophisticated at the turn of the thirteenth century for us to be able

67. Ibid., 98.

to distinguish separate fields. In his book on social development in Iceland from 1000 to 1300, with particular emphasis on the part played by Christianity in the process, Orri Vésteinsson puts forward various arguments claiming that Icelandic society grew progressively more complex during this period. Although Christianity played an important part in this development, no less significant is the way chieftains and other laymen made use of the social structures created by the Church.⁶⁸ Vésteinsson endeavors to show that the changes occurred gradually and were dependent on the circumstances. He evokes a convincing picture of a complex society that directly invites analysis of its differing fields in the spirit of Bourdieu, although Vésteinsson does not refer to these theories.

Three fields can be distinguished from the sources available to us: the field of secular landowners, the field of the royal court, and the field of the Church, which overlap in different ways within what might be called the field of power. Doubtless other fields existed, but as the sources deal primarily with the upper echelons of society, it is difficult to perceive through the mists of time any fields apart from those that affect these groups.

The field of secular landowners has already been partially dealt with when discussing the chieftains. It is in this field that the chieftains have dealings with their *þingmenn*, that is, farmers, both rich and poor. The role of the *goði* is to provide his followers with protection, in return for which they accompany him to the assembly and back him in his disputes with other *goðar*. This could be called the field's external role, and is the justification for its existence. But the field is also based on a considerable internal exercise of power. This exercise of power is the basis for social differentiation, or men's unequal capacity to acquire the available capital. As a result, some individuals attempt to improve their position within the field, though generally without breaking its rules of engagement.

An example of this can be found in *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*, which most scholars date to the first half of the thirteenth century and which was therefore composed at a similar time to *Egils saga*, though

68. See Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland: Priests, Power and Social Change 1000–1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), especially the introduction and the last chapter, "The Church and the Increase in Social Complexity," 238ff.

probably slightly earlier.⁶⁹ The attempts of two young men to take a mistress reveal a striking difference in their scope for action, according to their position within the field. Ingólfr Þorsteinsson is the son of the *goði* of Vatnsdalur. He becomes a frequent guest at the home of Óttarr Þorvaldsson, who lives in the same valley and has a daughter called Valgerðr. When the young couple fall in love, Óttarr insists that Ingólfr either marry Valgerðr or else cease his visits. To Ingólfr this is out of the question, so Óttarr turns for help to Þorsteinn *goði* who obliges his son to put an end to his visits. Shortly afterward, however, Ingólfr composes a love poem to Valgerðr. At this point Óttarr asks Þorsteinn's permission to bring a lawsuit against Ingólfr. Þorsteinn grants his permission, receives right of adjudication in the case and deems that Óttarr should receive compensation, on condition that he move south over the moors to Norðurárdalur.⁷⁰

This story is almost an object lesson in the status and role of the *goði* within the landowning field. He is expected to protect the honor of his supporters, which he does by obliging his son to desist from his dishonorable behavior and by paying compensation to Óttarr. But at the same time he must ensure that his supporters do not have the temerity to regard him as their equal, for instance by engaging in lawsuits against him or his family, which is why he forces Óttarr to move away from the district. Hallfreðr, Óttarr's son, subsequently tries to behave in exactly the same way towards Ávaldi, an old friend of Óttarr's, as Ingólfr had behaved towards Óttarr, by attempting to take Ávaldi's daughter Kolfinna as his mistress. He behaves as if he and his father are in the same position vis-à-vis Ávaldi as Ingólfr and the *goði* were vis-à-vis his father. But his attempt to alter his standing within the social space misfires. Ávaldi resorts to marrying off Kolfinna to a man Hallfreðr cannot oppose, Gríss Sæmingsson, a former retainer of the Byzantine emperor. Humiliated, Hallfreðr is left with no choice but to go abroad to Norway.⁷¹

69. On the dating of *Hallfreðar saga*, see Bjarni Einarsson, *To skjaldesagaer: En analyse af Kormáks saga og Hallfreðar saga* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1976), 126–27.

70. *Hallfreðar saga* [*vandræðaskálds*], in *Vatnsdæla saga. Hallfreðar saga. Kormáks saga. Hrómundar þáttir halta. Hrafn þáttir Guðrúnarsonar*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslensk fornrit 8 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939), 142–44.

71. I discuss *Hallfreðar saga* with reference to Bourdieu's theories in more depth in my article "Virðing í flóknu samfélagi" (2001), 66–72.

There he is baptized a Christian and joins the court of King Óláfr Tryggvason, who supports him during his baptism and thus becomes his godfather. By this means Hallfreðr's social status is greatly improved and when he returns to Iceland he is able to compete with Gríss on an equal footing. It is worth noting that capital from one field, in this case the Norwegian or Byzantine court, can enhance an individual's status in another field. Countless examples can be found in the sources of men who have won advancement in the service of foreign kings, whether in contemporary narratives, like *Sturlunga saga*, or in the mirror this age held up to the past in the sagas about early Icelanders. In the contemporary sagas, this option does not seem to have been limited to the last decades of the Commonwealth, indicating that Icelandic society had long—perhaps from the outset—accepted the field of the Norwegian royal court as a possible setting for those who wished to improve their social standing, either because they could not do so at home or because they wished to increase their status when they returned home.

From the foregoing we can infer that by the thirteenth century a social space characterized by more than one field had already been in existence for some time in Iceland. Consequently, individuals, particularly those who belonged to the upper strata of society, had adopted a somewhat flexible idea of status. Status that could not be acquired within an independent landowning field in Iceland could nevertheless be achieved in the field of the royal court. This status was not of the same type one could aspire to at home, and one went about acquiring it in a different way.

What is particularly significant about Bourdieu's approach is that it enables us to link the composition of society in the first half of the thirteenth century with the mentality of Icelanders that is revealed in the sources by and about them. They are perfectly aware that these two fields have separate rules of engagement. That the prestige of chieftains in Iceland was subject to fluctuation is evident in the comments by Sturla Þórðarson about his uncle Snorri, cited at the beginning of this chapter, where he says that his standing reached its height in Iceland in a particular period (p. 254).⁷² Conversely, the ideology of royal power relies on the idea that the king is not like other men and therefore cannot be judged by the same standards as

72. See also my article "Snorri og bræður hans" (2000), 49.

others. His prestige is supposedly not subject to the same fluctuations. Moreover, the king confers status on others. Thus the method of increasing one's combined capital in the field of the court consists primarily in serving the king well, and gaining his trust and, ideally, his friendship.

In the chapters of *Hallfreðar saga* that describe the poet's sojourn at King Óláfr Tryggvason's court the author demonstrates that he is no less aware of the rules that pertain there than of those in the secular landowning society of Iceland. Yet his understanding of the delicate position of a courtier vis-à-vis the king is not as profound as that which informs *Egils saga*. The section of *Egils saga* devoted to the story of Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson gives a clear picture of the dangers inherent in becoming a royal retainer for an ambitious would-be chieftain. He must constantly subordinate his own ambition to the will of the king, and even endure being stripped of his power and status due to the king's unfounded suspicion that he might lead an uprising. Þórólfr's tragedy is that he cannot bear the injustice or humble himself before the king. Instead he rebels, making his death at the hands of the king inevitable.

In contrast, the last part of *Egils saga*, which deals with Þorsteinn Egilsson's feud with Steinar Sjónason, demonstrates how things work in the field of property owners in Iceland. Here it is the *þingmaðr* Steinar who tries to threaten the authority of his *goði* Þorsteinn, with the help of the neighboring *goðar* who are eager to increase their standing at Þorsteinn's expense. In this case status functions as a kind of index that rises or falls, depending to a large extent on a man's daring, determination, and skill in exploiting his position within the social space. *Egils saga* is testimony to what could be called an awareness of multiple social perspectives.⁷³

The difference between *Egils saga* and *Hallfreðar saga* is that from the perspective of the latter the solution is not to defend one's sphere of influence at home. The saga describes the plight of a man who, unable to find a place in Icelandic society consistent with

73. This is no less relevant to *Hallfreðar saga*, and it would not be surprising if the same applied to the majority of the *Íslendingasögur* and that this is one of their main characteristics as a literary genre, in common with many of the kings' sagas, not least *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*, which often present the Icelander's view of court life. See Ármann Jakobsson, *Í leit að konungi* (1997), especially chapter 7.

his own idea of his social status, chooses service with the king in the hope of advancement. In contrast, the first part of *Egils saga* shows the impact on society caused by the accession to power of a monarch who must ensure that no one else takes up position within the field harboring the highest authority in society.

The Field of the Church and Religion

The sagas about early Icelanders discussed here also show evidence that their authors were aware of yet another field, which did not actually exist at the time when the events in the stories supposedly occurred: the field of religion and the Church. Orri Vésteinsson's book demonstrates, as far as the sources allow, the reciprocal influences of the Church and lay society during the period 1000–1300. The Church originally became established in the country and flourished under the protection of secular leaders, but with the passing of time, the Church gained more autonomy and the men chosen as its leaders, figures such as St. Þorlákr, Guðmundr Arason and Árni Þorláksson, upset the balance of power between the Church and lay rulers. Gradually the clergy developed a separate sense of identity.⁷⁴

One of the many merits of Vésteinsson's book is that it shows how the position of the Church was constantly changing and evolving during this period, no less than the fields of the *goðar* or *þingmenn* or court. These changes were mutually dependent: changes in the status of the Church reverberated in the secular world and vice versa; besides which, priests had authority over laymen in many parts of the country for much of the era.⁷⁵

The field of religion in thirteenth-century Icelandic society cannot be confined to the Church. When trying to understand the behavior of laymen, for example their infighting over power and prestige, it should not be forgotten that they too had a share in the field of religion.⁷⁶ Different rules of engagement pertained there and

74. On churchmen's sense of identity see especially Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland* (2000), 209ff.

75. On priests who also exercised secular authority, see *ibid.*, 182ff.

76. Vésteinsson pays little attention to the religious conduct of laymen in his book, although it is of course an important aspect of the Christianization of Icelandic society with which his book is concerned. For this see Régis Boyer, *La vie religieuse en Islande* (1979).

the kind of capital perceived as desirable differed from that in the other two fields.⁷⁷ Status was derived ultimately from God, but as God seldom intervenes directly in this world, it was his interpreters who conferred that status. These were primarily clerics, although there were others in this Christian society who had availed themselves to some extent of both the clerics' interpretations and their methods of interpretation.⁷⁸ In this field prestige was dependent on whether the person in question conducted himself as befitted a Christian.

Religious leaders had considerable power over the lives of laymen, not least over the chieftains. Bishops could excommunicate individuals with various uncomfortable consequences; for example, other people could not associate with the excommunicated man. Excommunication could also put an individual in a difficult position legally, particularly in relation to inheritance, or else force him into exile abroad, which could have a highly detrimental effect on his political position at home.⁷⁹ Above all, however, the Church had power over how people envisaged their own and their family's fate after death. Making one's peace with the Church was essential for obtaining permission to lie in hallowed ground, or trying to ensure oneself and one's family members a place in heaven. The sources are

77. An interesting example of the interplay between two different kinds of prestige in the fields of the court and religion can be found in *Ísleifs þáttur Gizurarsonar*, in *Byskupa sögur*, vol. 1, ed. Jón Helgason, Editiones Arnarnagænar, Series A 13 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1938). This *þáttur* relates how Ísleifr arrived at the court of King Óláfr Haraldsson and encountered one of his countrymen, Brandr örvi Vermundarson, who gave him a scarlet cloak that had recently been presented to him by the king. When the king heard of this, he was inclined to take offence, but after clapping eyes on Ísleifr he said: "suo litst mer a þig að ek uil fela mig undir bænum þínum" (I am so impressed by you that I wish to place myself under your prayers). Ísleifr answered: "herra allgod þotti mer adr giofin Brandz en þo myklu meiri virðing at þiggja af ydr uit þessi um mæli" (Sire, I thought Brandr's gift very good before, but how much more honor there is in receiving these words from you) (ibid., 22). The extra prestige Ísleifr gains is twofold: on the one hand prestige conferred on him by the king, on the other the prestige implicit in one holy man's recognizing another. The former belongs to the field of the court, the latter to the field of religion.

78. See my article "The Prosimetrum Form 2: Verses as an Influence in Saga Composition and Interpretation" (2000), 193–94.

79. On the foreign travels of Icelandic chieftains, see Helgi Þorláksson, "Rómarvald og kirkjugoðar," *Skírnir* 156 (1982). On excommunication, see Lára Magnúsardóttir, "Agameðul kirkjunnar fyrir siðaskipti: Bannfæringar," in *Íslenska sögufélagið* 28–31. maí 1997: *Ráðstefnurit*, ed. Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson and Eiríkur K. Björnsson, vol. 2 (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðingafélag Íslands, 1998), 210–22.

rich in examples of people going to considerable trouble on behalf of deceased relatives.

Although the status people could acquire in the religious field had a direct bearing on their standing in society, it was based primarily on symbolic capital, to invoke once again Bourdieu's concept. Capital of this kind could increase men's prestige in various ways: *góðgjarnir menn*, "benevolent men," were invited to arbitrate in disputes, for example. It is also possible that the relatives of a person endowed with an aura of holiness would have seen the advantage in acquiring this type of symbolic capital. Sturla Þórðarson's accounts of his father, Þórðr, especially the position he took in the chieftains' dispute with Bishop Guðmundr the Good (Arason), imply that he wished to emphasize that Þórðr had been a friend to the Church (pp. 221, 385, and 387).⁸⁰

Most if not all chieftains were forced at some point in their careers to make up their minds whether to pursue prestige in the field of religion or sacrifice it in order to increase their prestige in another field. This applies to Þorvaldr Snorrason and Sturla Sighvatsson, who committed deeds that resulted in excommunication. They probably knew full well that this would be the consequence of their actions but assumed they could atone for them later with a trip to Rome. In fact, everyone probably had to keep one eye fixed on his position in the religious field, whether he belonged to the field of *goðar* and their *þingmenn* or to the court. The evidence shows that men often had to choose which kind of prestige mattered more to them, especially when conflict arose between the Church and secular elite.

The fact that men were aware of many different rules of engagement in the social space would have affected their conduct. It would have had no less impact on how they interpreted other people's conduct, whether these people were real, as in the contemporary sagas, or characters from a remote, largely fictional past, as in the sagas about early Icelanders. We have already seen that *Hallfreðar*

80. The same tendency is even more obvious in the author of *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, although it is impossible to state for certain that the saga was composed by one of Hrafn's kinsmen. On this see Guðrún P. Helgadóttir's introduction to her edition of the saga (*Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, ed. Guðrún P. Helgadóttir (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), lxxxiff). See also Ásdís Egilsdóttir's article "Dýrlingur Vestfjarða? Um Hrafn's sögu Sveinbjarnarsonar," *Ársrit Sögufélags Ísfirðinga* 43 (2003).

saga bears witness to familiarity with two fields, that of the *goðar* and farmers in Iceland and that of the Norwegian court. The account at the end of the *saga* of how King Óláfr concerns himself with the fate of the deceased poet's soul is an indication that the religious field was no less important than the other two.⁸¹ Numerous other *Íslendingasögur* testify to their authors' understanding of the fact that the characters are competing for position not only in Iceland and at the royal court but also in heaven. Here it would be pertinent to mention again Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir's tears of penitence in *Laxdæla saga* and Njáll's comment that he would not be made to burn both in this world and the next.⁸² The first half of this book should suffice to demonstrate the knowledge of theological ideas evident in *Egils saga*.

The Field of Power

Abbot Arngrím's version of *Guðmundar saga Arasonar*, written in the mid-fourteenth century, has this to say about the three brothers, Snorri, Sighvatr and Þórðr Sturluson:

Three brothers must be mentioned, although they were very different, who were called as follows: Þórðr, Snorri and Sighvatr, sons of Sturla. Þórðr was the best of them, Snorri in the middle, and Sighvatr the worst; and we wish to emphasize that Þórðr was always the most faithful friend to Bishop Guðmundr, as is described both at the beginning and later in the *saga*, for which he earned the bishop's sincere friendship.⁸³

81. For interesting interpretations of the *saga* in the light of medieval Christianity, see Marianne Kalinke, "Stæri ek brag: Protest and Subordination in Hallfreðar *saga*," *Skáldskaparmál* 4 (1997), and John Lindow, "Akkerisfrakki: Traditions Concerning Óláfr Tryggvason and Hallfreðr Óttarsson vandræðaskáld and the Problem of Conversion," in *Sagas and the Norwegian Experience: 10th International Saga Conference, Trondheim, 3–9 August 1997 = Sagaene og Noreg*, ed. Jan Ragnar Haglund et al. (Trondheim: NTNU, 1997).

82. *Laxdæla saga*, in *Laxdæla saga. Halldórs þættir Snorrasonar. Stúfs þáttir*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslensk fornrit 5 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), 224; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslensk fornrit 12 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954), 329.

83. Trans. Victoria Cribb. "Þrjá bræður verður að nefna, þótt ólíkir væru, er svá hétu: Þórður, Snorri, Sighvatr, Sturlusynir. Þórður var þeirra bestur, Snorri í mið,

The writer of these words lived more than a century after the brothers. His work was probably intended to convince the supreme authorities of the Church to include Guðmundr in the list of saints.⁸⁴ This may explain why the standards he uses to judge the three brothers are solely those of the field of religion and the Church. Honor is calculated according to a single system of rules and values.

Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga* reports a striking incident in the life of the three brothers, which shows that their conduct was shaped by the demands of many different fields and that they knew how to play by the rules appropriate to each distinct field. The incident occurred on Palm Sunday, 1236. Sighvatr and his son Sturla were in the process of overrunning Snorri's domain in Borgarfjörður. Some time earlier Snorri had rejected his supporters' advice to head north with a large army against the band that his brother and nephew were gathering against him. Declaring that he was not *búinn til þess að fara að bróður sínum á þeim hátíðum er þá fóru í hönd* (p. 376), "ready to move against his brother in the holy days of that season" (p. 293), he abandoned Reykholt and went south to his farm at Bessastaðir. Before doing so he handed over Reykholt and his remaining property to his brother Þórðr. When Þórðr learned that Sighvatr had reached the Borgarfjörður district with an army over a thousand strong, he went to meet him at Hvítársíða:

He reprimanded Sighvatr severely because he was moving to attack his brother during the holy days; he said that God would surely punish him severely, old man that he was, for such an act.

Sighvatr took this in jest and said mockingly: "Neither of us should reproach the other with age. Or do you now pretend to be a [prophet], brother?"

en Sighvatur verstur; og því kveðum vér svá að með fullteknu orði, að Þórður var alla götu inn trúasti vin herra Guðmundar biskups, sem bæði lýsist í sögunni fyrr og síðar, þar fyrir fékk hann alvarliga vináttu biskupsins," Arngrímur ábóti Brandsson, *Saga Guðmundar Arasonar, Hóla-biskups*, in *Biskupa sögur*, ed. Jón Sigurðsson, Guðbrandur Vigfússon, Þorvaldur Björnsson, Eiríkur Jónsson, vol. 2 (Copenhagen: Hið íslenska bókmentnafélag, 1878), 71.

84. Stefán Karlsson, "Guðmundar sögur biskups: Authorial Viewpoints and Methods," in *Stafrókar: Ritgerðir eftir Stefán Karlsson gefnar út í tilefni sjötugsafmæli hans 2. desember 1998*, ed. Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson, Rit 49 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 2000).

Þórð answered: "I am no [prophet]. However I may be able to prophesy about you. Powerful as you now seem, and assured of your own might and your sons', still it may be only few winters before men say 'the greatest has gone.'"

"You are angry, kinsman," said Sighvat, "and one should never mark an angry man's speech. Perhaps we can talk better at another time, when we are both in good temper; let us wait for that."⁸⁵

Snorri and Sturla Sighvatsson had for several years been at loggerheads over the *goðorð* of the Dalir district and authority over the West Fjords. Þórðr, who had become embroiled in the dispute because of his connections in Dalir and sphere of influence in Breiðafjörður, sided with Snorri, perhaps because he considered Sturla more likely than Snorri to try to increase his dominion at his own or his sons' expense. What we have here then are internecine quarrels among chieftains within the landowning field, in which each is trying to defend or enlarge his own sphere of authority. The rules of engagement espoused by the chieftains involve harassing each other's *þingmenn*, and it is clear from the account in *Íslendinga saga* that Sturla and Sighvatr feel Órækja Snorrason has put excessive pressure on their supporters in the over the Vestfirðir. It is rare, if not unique, in Icelandic history for someone to lead a large army from one part of the country to another with the intent of taking over his adversary's entire domain.

Snorri may not have expected such a tough response from his brother and nephew, which would explain why he chose to retreat on this occasion rather than resort to arms. He hoped to withhold his most valuable property from Sturla and Sighvatr by transferring it to Þórðr, as they had no quarrel with him. But the conduct of

85. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:295 (translation slightly modified). "Veitti hann Sighvati átölur miklar um það er hann fór að bróður sínum á hátíðum og segir að hann mundi stór gjöld fyrir slíkt taka af guði, gamall maður. Sighvatur tók undir í gamni og með nokkurri svo græð: 'Hvorgi okkar þarf nú að bregða öðrum elli. Eða hvort gerist þú nú spámaður frændi?' Þórður svarar: 'Engi em eg spámaður en þó mun eg þér verða spámaður. Svo mikill sem þú þykist nú og trúir á þinn matt og sona þinna þá munu fáir vetur líða áður það mun mælt að þar sé mest eftir sig orðið.' 'Reiður ertu nú frændi,' segir Sighvatur, 'og skal eigi marka reiðs manns mál. Kann vera okkur talist betur í annað sinn þá er við erum báðir í góðu skapi og skal þess að bíða.'" *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:377–78.

Snorri's brother and nephew defied all expectations, and it soon became obvious that the invasion of Borgarfjörður was only the first phase in Sturla's campaign for complete control of Iceland. His next moves were to secure his authority over the whole Vestfirðir quarter, then to subjugate the southern lowlands and the north. In this respect he was no longer behaving like a traditional chieftain whose aim was to increase his power without turning the basic organization of the country upside down. Having promised to bring the country under the sway of the Norwegian king, Sturla had begun to play by rules that belonged to the field of the court.⁸⁶

The brothers were old by this stage; Þórðr was seventy, Sighvatr sixty-five and Snorri nearing sixty. For obvious reasons they had begun to give thought to the next life, about which the Catholic faith gave a fairly clear promise in those days. Thus Þórðr's obvious course was to appeal to religion when attempting to persuade Sighvatr to abandon his plans. He quite rightly pointed out to him that it was a sin to attack such a close relative, and that the sin was all the more grave if committed during a major Church festival. Snorri, on the other hand, was on safe ground in this respect since he had abandoned his plan to lead an army against his brother and nephew during Lent.

The most interesting aspect of Sighvatr's reaction is that he was just as well versed in Christian morality as his brother and did not hesitate to meet him on the same ground. When Þórðr threatened him with the wrath of God, Sighvatr retorted by pointing out that Þórðr seemed to be comparing himself to a prophet who is inspired by the Holy Spirit and thus competent to speak for God. In this Þórðr was guilty of the cardinal sin of pride. When Þórðr answered by prophesying disaster for Sighvatr and his sons, Sighvatr accused his brother of another cardinal sin: anger. By resorting to theology, he struck from his brother's hands the very weapon that Þórðr had intended to use from the field of religion.

Much of the evidence suggests that one of the main characteristics of Icelandic chieftains in this period was their skill at operating in a number of different fields. Gizurr Hallsson, Gizurr Porvaldsson's

86. On Sturla's attempt to conquer the country, see Jón Jóhannesson, *Íslendinga saga*, vol. 1, *Þjóðveldisöld* (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1956), 291–99.

grandfather, is a good example of such a man. In addition to being a powerful chieftain at home, he achieved the honor of becoming the king of Norway's marshal, was also a good scholar, and ended his days as steward of the estate at Skálholt, which seems to have brought him various powers in the religious field (pp. 192–93). Although not all excelled in this manner, one could no doubt tell a similar tale of numerous other individuals mentioned in the sources. Any attempt to explain how the *Íslendingasögur* sprang from the soil of thirteenth-century Icelandic society must therefore take into account the awareness of multiple perspectives that characterized this society.

Literature as a Field in Thirteenth-century Icelandic Society?

Preben Meulengracht Sørensen made the point in *Fortælling og ære* that status varies according to whether we are discussing the position one has in royal court life or in the community of chieftains and farmers. This is apparent, for instance, in his analysis of *Egils saga*.⁸⁷ Although, in my opinion, Sørensen underestimates the influence of the field of religion on the *Íslendingasögur*,⁸⁸ I agree with his general conclusion that it would be best to regard the sagas as an attempt to describe and understand the behavior of individuals within the parameters of their society. Accordingly, I believe that the picture of the complex nature of thirteenth-century society that has been presented here serves to reinforce his theory.⁸⁹ We shall have a better understanding of the behavior of individuals and their quest for prestige if we realize that their mental habits, sense of identity, and world view were formed in a society that contained more than one field in the Bourdieuan sense. Each field imposes different demands on individuals, while simultaneously giving them a chance to acquire the prestige that is available within that field,

87. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære* (1992), 144.

88. *Ibid.*, 303–11.

89. This theory is presented more concisely in Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, "Social Institutions and Belief Systems of Medieval Iceland (c. 870–1400) and their Relationship to Literary Production," in *Old Norse Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 42 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

thereby increasing their social capital. The argument that has been presented here will, I hope, support the idea that our understanding of the *Íslendingasögur* can be enhanced by viewing them as a form of expression that originated in precisely this type of complex society. I will attempt now to argue that in the thirteenth century an independent field of literary activity was forming in Iceland, which may partly explain why saga-writing became so highly developed in the country.

In his book on the novelist Gustave Flaubert, Bourdieu discusses how literature eventually came to constitute a separate field in mid-nineteenth-century French society.⁹⁰ Flaubert's attempt to create a work that required no other justification than its own beauty was a crystallization of something that had been gradually evolving in Western culture over the preceding decades and centuries: literary activity had begun to create its own value system, that is, particular types of capital and rules on how they were to be formed. In the process these species of capital became increasingly independent of the values of other fields, such as those of the Church, state, or market forces, while at the same time a rivalry for status began within the field, leading to progress and innovation in its products.⁹¹

Obviously, a great deal had changed during the six centuries that elapsed between the death of Snorri Sturluson and Flaubert's publication of *Madame Bovary*. An urban culture had developed in Europe with concomitant academic and cultural life. The art of printing was invented, triggering the long battle for the freedom of speech. But it was not until authorial copyright began to gain recognition at around the time of the French Revolution that the necessary social and economic conditions were in place for an independent literary field to come into existence. Nevertheless, the genesis and major flowering of secular literature in the West,

90. Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art* (1992).

91. There is a useful summary of the book in John Guillory, "Bourdieu's Refusal," in *Pierre Bourdieu: Fieldwork in Culture*, ed. by Nicholas Brown and Imre Szeman, Culture and Education Series (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 19–43, especially 33–39.

See also chapter 3, "Pour une science des œuvres," in Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques: Sur la théorie de l'action* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 59–80 (trans. as *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998)).

including Iceland, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries must also have had social origins.

Up to now, little attempt has been made by scholars to use Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theories to explain why literary creation acquired such importance in Western medieval society that people devoted their skills and energy to producing the masterpieces that survive from the era in the fields of poetry and storytelling.⁹² The love songs of the troubadours, the narrative poems of Chrétien de Troyes, the *Lais* of Marie de France, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and Villon's *Testaments* all testify to the existence of people for whom literature was so important that they were prepared to go to untold lengths to create it. A number of the *Íslendingasögur* deserve a place in this canon of medieval European masterpieces, and indeed the sources contain various indications that the beginnings of a separate literary field existed in Iceland in the days of Snorri Sturluson.

The phenomenon and status of the court poet and the role of poetry in society are naturally closely related to this issue, as already mentioned. Here evidence will be gathered that literature was assigned a special value, independent of other fields.⁹³ Nearly all the examples are connected to poetry, rather than saga-writing, and mostly gleaned either from the life of Snorri Sturluson or else from *Egils saga*. The first one, from *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, concerns the reciprocal assessment by Hrafn Öundurson and Gunnlaugr ormstunga of the poems each had composed for Óláfr, King of the Swedes.⁹⁴ This example proves the existence of aesthetic evaluations of poetry: standards were applied to poetry

92. Bourdieu's theories have been little used by medieval scholars, although I have come across a study on the origins of the English state in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in which they are used to explain the role of literary activity in that development. See Jean-Philippe Genet, *La genèse de l'état moderne: Culture et société politique en Angleterre, Le nœud gordien* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2003), especially 261ff. In the field of Old Norse-Icelandic studies, Kevin Wanner's 2008 *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda* must be considered a landmark.

93. For example as a way of winning the friendship of chieftains, cf. Snorri's poems about Earl Skúli and King Hákon, or to express suitably ambiguous interpretations of contemporary events, such as the verses that pass back and forth between chieftains after the attack on Sauðafell (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:315–19).

94. *Íslendinga sögur og þættir* (1987), 2:1180.

that were exclusive to that art. That people were judged differently according to their merits as poets is attested to by numerous instances in historical texts of men being described as great poets.⁹⁵ In this respect poetry can be said to resemble a field: it is governed by rules people apply to greater or lesser aesthetic effect. The example in *Gunnlaugs saga* is all the more interesting because the king asks the poets to judge each other's contribution. The agents in the field, that is, the poets, are judged more competent than others to assign symbolic capital in the form of recognition. This judgement supports still further the idea of an independent field of poetry.

The existence of manuals on the rules of poetic composition, such as Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* or his nephew Óláfr hvítaskáld's *Málskrúðsfræði* (Rhetoric), part of his *Third Grammatical Treatise*, confirms that this activity was taken seriously in medieval Icelandic society. Both men were chieftains and court poets. One wonders whether they dedicated themselves to acquiring skill in this art expressly in order to ingratiate themselves with foreign magnates. Óláfr's composition of a *drápa* on St. Þorlákr, however, could be described as belonging to the religious field in the same way that court poetry belongs to the field of the court, telling us nothing about the existence of a separate literary field.

Snorri's touchiness in 1220 when the southerners mocked his poem on Earl Skúli (pp. 263–64 and 269), despite the fact that he had by this time reaped all the rewards he could expect from the royal court for his verse, does suggest that poetry was an independent pursuit that conferred special prestige on its practitioners. It is perfectly conceivable that it was not merely a means of gaining prestige in other fields but formed an independent component of Snorri's identity. Snorri was ambitious, and the prestige of being a chieftain was almost certainly not enough to satisfy him; he wanted to enjoy the additional respect that came with being a poet, due to his awareness of the different fields that existed within the social space. He wished to increase his combined social capital, or

95. See *Hrafnas saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* (1987), 35; *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:18 and 1:254; *Íslendinga sögur og þættir* (1987), 1:75 (*mikið skáld* (a great poet); *ibid.*, 1:77, 2:1166 (*skáldmenn miklir* (great poets)); *ibid.*, 2:1169, 1171, 1196, and 3:2217, (*skáld mikið* (a great poet)).

in other words his standing, by excelling in as many of these fields as possible.

The contemporary sagas sometimes feature men who seem to possess little social capital beyond the fact that they are good poets. This is further evidence that competence in the field was regarded as having an independent value, that is, it formed a separate species of capital. Here again Snorri is our source, for in his *Third Grammatical Treatise* Óláfr hvítaskáld records a stanza by his uncle, composed to his friend Eyjólfur Brúnason. The verse describes Eyjólfur as *skáld einkar gott ok búþegn góðr, en eigi férik*, “an exceedingly fine poet and good farmer, though not wealthy.” At the end of the verse Snorri expresses the wish that Eyjólfur should *lifi sælstr und sólu sannauðigra manna*, “live as the happiest of men under the sun, this truly wealthy fellow.”⁹⁶ The notion that a poor poet could be “truly wealthy” is a decided indication that Snorri took for granted the existence of a field in which being “an exceedingly fine poet” had immense value, over and above that of the capital men competed for in other fields.

It is instructive to examine *Egils saga* in the light of this, since the poem *Sonatorrek* expresses an interesting attitude to poetry. Poetry is *íþrótt vammí firrð*, “the craft that is beyond reproach” (stanza 24) and a life in poetry is *lastalaust*, “unflawed” (stanza 3).⁹⁷ Implicit in the description of poetry as beyond reproach is the idea of comparison with another activity, such as that of a warrior, courtier or chieftain. In contrast to these fields, the man who makes his name in the field of poetry implicitly need not contend with others for the benefits that are available in the field. In this field he is free from the dangers, obligations, and contradictory demands

96. Bjarni Einarsson discussed this in his article, “Skáldið í Reykjaholti,” in *Eyvindarbók: Festskrift til Eyvind Fjeld Halvorsen*, ed. Finn Hødnebo et al. (Oslo: Institutt for nordistikk og litteraturvitenskap, Universitetet i Oslo, 1992), 34–35. The verse has been published in Óláfr Þorðarson, hvítaskáld, *Den tredje og fjerde grammatiske afhandling i Snorres Edda: Tilligemed de grammatiske afhandlingers prolog og to andre tillæg*, ed. Björn Magnússon Ólsen, Islands grammatiske litteratur i middelalderen 2, Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur 12 (Copenhagen: S. L. Møller, 1884), 127.

97. It should be pointed out that there is some uncertainty as to how this stanza should be interpreted. See Sigurður Nordal’s explanatory notes in his edition of the saga, ÍF 2:247.

of the other fields. The wealth that poetry brings a man is therefore “true.”

The kenning in stanza 5 of *Sonatorrek*, which seems to originate in the Bible, as I have pointed out earlier, is important here. The poet compares his craft to the work of the Holy Spirit—a rather bold, not to say impertinent, comparison. That such a comparison should be possible strengthens the notion that poetry formed a separate field within Icelandic society at the beginning of the thirteenth century.

We must now ask whether the activity of composing sagas had also developed into an independent field within society alongside or in connection with the art of poetry. There are various indications of the close links between poetry and saga composition. First, the handful of saga-writers we know by name were mostly also renowned poets, such as Snorri Sturluson and his nephews Óláfr hvítaskáld and Sturla Þórðarson. Second, numerous sagas about early Icelanders revolve around poets. In addition to *Egils saga* there are the four poets’ sagas: *Hallfreðar saga*, *Kormáks saga*, *Bjarnar saga*, and *Gunnlaugs saga*, as well as *Fóstbræðra saga*, *Gísla saga*, and *Grettis saga*. This ratio is natural, given that composition of the kings’ sagas seems to have begun before that of other medieval saga genres. Skaldic stanzas were used as sources of information about earlier kings and were often accompanied by prose accounts of the poets’ dealings with kings. But we may well ask what motivated people to start composing sagas about subjects other than kings. The explanation must lie partly in the fact that social units such as royal courts and the homes of chieftains had a pressing need for entertainment. And this entertainment had of necessity to be superior to that enjoyed by the common people.

The use of literary activity as a means for a chieftain to distinguish himself from the common herd was a pan-European phenomenon. The development of vernacular prose literature in France, England, and Germany in the twelfth century is explicitly connected to the court, and we have every reason to assume that the same was true of the Nordic countries, which had undergone similar social changes.⁹⁸

98. For a recent discussion of these developments in Europe, see Martin Aurell, *Le Chevalier lettré* (2011), 191. For the situation in Iceland and other Nordic countries, see my “Kynjasögur úr fortíð og framandi löndum,” in *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, vol. 2 (1993), 181ff.

The account in *Sturlu þáttur* of how Sturla Þórðarson acquits himself so well in telling the story of the troll–woman Huld that he is commissioned to write the saga of King Hákon Hákonarson shows that there were bridges between the “serious” business of writing kings’ sagas and the more frivolous activity of composing such stories that “delighted King Sverrir, who said such lying stories were very enjoyable,” to cite *Porgils saga og Hafliða*.⁹⁹ Whether the saga of Huld existed solely as an oral narrative or had been written out by Sturla—as the episode’s wording implies¹⁰⁰—it would doubtless have been related to the *fornaldarsögur*, or legendary sagas, which differ greatly from the *Íslendingasögur* in subject matter and style.¹⁰¹

It is relatively easy to explain the genesis of the kings’ sagas and legendary sagas in terms of the requirements of the fields of the court and chieftains, but the sagas about early Icelanders remain an enigma, standing out as a unique genre in their era. These fields did not apparently have any specific need for literature like the *Íslendingasögur*. The theory that they served the same purpose for certain aristocratic families as the kings’ sagas did for the court can hardly be considered a satisfactory explanation, though it no doubt sheds light on the genesis of some works.¹⁰² For although the sagas about early Icelanders have considerable entertainment value, they are more complex and serious than works that have been composed purely as a diversion. Nor were they committed to

99. “. . . sem skemmt var Sverri konungi og kallaði hann slíkar lygisögur skemmtilegar,” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:22. *Sturlu þáttur* is published in the same edition, 2:765–67.

100. “En er menn voru mettir sendi drottning eftir Sturlu, það hann koma til sín og hafa með sér tröllkonusöguna,” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 2:766, italics added, (When the men had eaten, the queen sent word to Sturla asking him to come to her and bring with him the saga about the troll–wife; *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 2:496, emphasis added).

101. The *loci classici* for descriptions of oral entertainment in the sagas are the account of the wedding–feast at Reykjahólar (1117) in *Porgils sögu og Hafliða* (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:22) and the *þáttur* of the story–telling Icelander in the kings’ saga (*Morkinskinna*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, 2 vols., Íslenzk fornrit 23–24 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2011), 1:235–37; *Morkinskinna* (2000), 222–23). Neither, however, depicts the telling of an *Íslendingasaga*.

102. Ármann Jakobsson, “Konungasagan Laxdæla,” *Skírnir* 172 (1998). See also Axel Kristinsson, “Lords and Literature: The Icelandic Sagas as Political and Social Instruments” (*Scandinavian Journal of History* 28 (2003).

parchment with the sole purpose of preserving information, as they contain much material that is clearly borrowed from other writings and can therefore hardly be based except in part on narratives of past events that were preserved in the oral memory.

How then can we account for the unique nature of the *Íslendingasögur*? Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has pointed out that Icelandic society lacked an executive power, which meant that every individual was forced to defend his own position. The sagas about early Icelanders were therefore society's method of uncovering and reflecting on the part played by status in each man's life.¹⁰³ To my mind, this explanation is insufficient to account fully for the uniqueness of these sagas, whether in the context of Icelandic or Western medieval literature. Executive power was not so highly developed in the rest of Western Europe in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries for the contrast with Iceland to be particularly striking. Both abroad and in Iceland individuals, particularly those belonging to the class of major landowners, had to be prepared to defend their position if it was attacked. Indeed, the main literary genres from this period, the *chansons de geste* and romances, are full of examples demonstrating that individuals in these societies had just as great a need to defend their honor as their Icelandic counterparts. Although the quest for status is naturally an important part of understanding the sagas about early Icelanders, of greater significance is the fact that this quest took place in a more complex society than literary historians have hitherto acknowledged, a society that supported a range of different types of prestige according to the respective field.

The rich sources that survive for the social milieu and historical background to the composition of the sagas about early Icelanders give us a unique opportunity to understand how and why they came into existence. I will now go a step further toward understanding the purpose and genesis of *Egils saga* by looking in more detail at Snorri Sturluson and his literary milieu.

103. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære* (1992), see for example 331–32.

