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## National Identity across the North Atlantic in Sagas and Other Sources

As Medieval (13th century) texts focused on the Viking Age settlement (9th-10th) of the islands of the North Atlantic, sagas can be analyzed as vital accounts of these cultures, both in the era depicted and in the time of composition. For example, there is a wealth of literary evidence pointing to the construction of the national identities of Iceland and Norway, drawn from the numerous family and kings' sagas set, respectively, in each country. With only a handful of sagas focusing on other settlements, however, it is harder to conclude from literary analysis alone what collective identity may have developed in these countries over time. Nevertheless, extra-literary studies have backed up the idea that a transnational culture did exist among the Norse peoples outside the Scandinavian Peninsula. The archaeological record of ship burials points convincingly to the existence of a "North Atlantic" culture with commonalities between settlements and their Western Norwegian forebears. Historiographic analysis suggests the various ways Scandinavians developed national boundaries – in patriotism and politics – to effectively differentiate cultural groups. To test these theories further, we can scan the literature of the islands, specifically *Orkeyingasaga* and *Faeryingasaga*, for similar constructs of self-determination.

The first step in defining a North Atlantic Norse identity might be to look at the culture of the Norwegian settlers: how they defined their own 'Norwegianness'. Sverrir Jakobsson's 1999 history review gets at this by comparing the differing perceptions of nationhood in Medieval Scandinavian texts. References to past scholarship on sagas and annals, such as *Fagrskinna* (chosen because it is thought to have been written outside of Iceland) and *Gesta Danorum* seem, at first, to conclude that "both Danish and Swedish historians regard a common parliament as a much more important source of identification for most people than a common king. Only Norway seems to be different" (Jakobsson 96). According to some scholars, the Norwegians of the sagas, singularly out of all the accounts of Medieval Scandinavia, identified themselves with their kingdom before their country. Jakobsson refutes such an exception by asserting that the pro-monarchic texts cited by this contingent "sought to shape the common mentality, they do not reflect it" (100). If there was in later times a particularly Norwegian form of patriotic identity focused on monarchy, as seen in "legal documents from around 1300 onwards," it followed these texts, it did not necessarily corroborate them (100). Instead, Jakobsson identifies regional loyalty to the provinces, or *patria*, as a more relevant concern to the common people of Scandinavia, Norwegians included. He cites parishes, divisions of the Thing system, and the pre-saga text *Historia Norwegiae* as evidence of a more fractured identity than the writers of the kings' sagas would have us believe (99, 93). This text includes

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descriptions of the Norwegian kingdom as an assemblage of territories rather than a singular nation, in the same way that the kings' sagas refer to Danish and Swedish kingdoms (94). In his conclusion, Jakobsson acknowledges that monarchic patriotism did have a growing place in Norwegian culture, but as an emergent "*public identity*" in contrast with the latent, regional "*popular identities*" (101). The Norwegians who settled across the Atlantic were historically more likely to express their nationality in terms of regionalism; it was in the centuries after the Viking diaspora that monarchic patriotism became a distinctly Norwegian concern. If a hereditary mainland Scandinavian aspect of North Atlantic culture manifests in the island sagas, it should denote loyalty to land over leaders.

At the other end of the North Atlantic, geographically and chronologically, is the development of Icelandic identity. There is less ambiguity in the relevance of saga analysis to Icelandic cultural history, because the texts in question were verifiably written by Icelanders in Iceland. Christopher Fee argues in his chapter of a 2012 edited volume on the Medieval Atlantic that the main hallmark of Iceland's contribution to Viking North Atlantic culture is the nation's identification with law. The title of his article, "Med lögum skal land vort byggja," is a quote from *Njalssaga*, wherein the titular hero proclaims, "with law shall the land be built" (Fee 135). Fee picks out this saga quote as "a phrase indicating the centrality and necessity of law to the cultivation of civil society and Iceland," specifically referring to the system of Thing assemblies that was already ingrained in transatlantic Norse culture (135). Before focusing on the specific importance of law to Icelanders, he defines the Medieval Icelandic legal system as "the archetypical manifestation of the ancient Germanic assembly system" that was carried across the Viking world before the age of the sagas (125). Fee's evidence for the system's broad reach is the ubiquity of "-thing" place names from the confirmed Icelandic assembly-ground Thingvellir, across Scandinavia and the settled islands, to Tynwald Hill on the Isle of Man (126-127). As for the specifically Icelandic character of law, Fee holds up the "saga record strewn with references to judicial and parliamentary assemblies, which are often significant landmarks in the text" (132). He specifically contrasts the idea that "settling disputes nonviolently is a central goal of *Njalssaga*" with the feudal narrative of *Orkneyingasaga*, in which "an assembly often is explicitly concerned with the nature of [an] earl's authority" rather than a democratic decision-making process (136, 134). Fee explains this division with Jessie Byock's observation that "[t]he Orkneys were nearer Norway and the British Isles, and were threatened by both" (133). Here, we see that depending on its proximity to danger – and hence its need for centralized military leadership – a North Atlantic settlement may drift from the ancestral, decentralized rule of law. Iceland, being far from raiders, took the other course and, at least by the time of *Njalssaga*'s composition, made its Althing "a model of public authority," in the words of law historian William Ian Miller (125). The law of the assembly is a social structure that is shared across the Atlantic, but, specifically in Iceland, it appears as the very core of national politics. So, an area of the Atlantic that shares more of a convergent cultural arc with Iceland than the countries of the Scandinavian Peninsula might be reasonably expected to have a saga

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identity focused on law above both land and leadership. Or, as we have already seen with *Orkneyingasaga*, a divergent island culture might share the concept of the Thing, but have transmuted it into a structure more supportive of a nation-defining rulership.

As well as from the ubiquity of the law assembly in place names, common North Atlantic culture can be inferred from archaeological evidence. The ritual of burial is a known signifier of cultural identity, expressed by archaeologist Erin Halstad-McGuire as “a tool for the creation of memory within a society” (Halstad-McGuire 166). Social memory, or the passage of traditions through generations, is especially relevant to migrant cultures that, by definition, draw their traditions from the identity of a past community. The comparison between graves drawn from these different cultures can show the links or splits between migrant identities because “the symbolism embedded in grave-goods . . . can serve as a tool for the creation of idealized identities of individuals, families, and communities” (167). Halstad-McGuire’s study focuses on the uncommon, but clearly significant, burial practice of ship internment. Of the “over 250 clinker-built boats dating from AD 800-1100 [that] have been found in Northern Europe,” three special cases are compared in detail: “one from Western Norway representing the point of origin for the migrants, and one each from the emigrant communities in Scotland and Iceland” (167, 166). She concludes that both of the emigrant sites are reasonably derived from a specific mainland Scandinavian burial tradition. For example, “the [Orkney] boat-grave has strong connections with northwestern Norway. Small-boat burial was a common feature of the region,” “whalebone plaques are primarily found in western and northern Norway,” and “virtually identical examples of the rare Troms-type brooch have been found in the far north of Norway” (171). It’s fairly clear that the burial in Orkney is composed of traditions transplanted from the settlers’ homeland. Meanwhile, the Icelandic grave “is unusual not because of what is present in the grave but rather what is not; there is neither evidence of a horse nor horse equipment,” as there is in “approximately 40% of graves” in Iceland (174). Halstad-McGuire reasons that this is because the Icelandic grave is a deliberate throwback to the burial style of the northwestern Norwegian people who spiritually and materially valued ships over horses. The Norwegian and Orkney graves also share the rare presence of high-class female internment, suggesting that whatever deviations from local customs were intentional, and possibly tied to the high status of the women being buried. Halstad-McGuire argues that, in the Orkney burial’s case, this is because the women settlers were able to prove their worth to a greater extent than in their homeland, possibly with knowledge brought over in oral tradition. Both settler graves are dated to the late 9th to early 10th centuries: after the early waves of expansion, but well within the time that Viking Age settlers would be developing a cultural identity for their settlements derived from their Norwegian progenitor culture (171, 172). Archaeology confirms that social structure, manifested in something as significant and unique to Viking culture as ship burial, evolves between societies. The social identity of the buriers and the buried resembles that of their ancestors, while it also includes its own set of customs. A unique North Atlantic identity is therefore synthesized from Norwegian tradition and new developments in gender status and

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religion.

Unlike the textual sources of the Viking Age that purport to represent the lives of the early settlers, but are just as likely to reflect the medieval milieu of the sagamen and learned scribes, burial shows a snapshot of the culture between both eras. So, archaeology backs up the possibility that the saga record, when it is trusted as a source of Viking Age cultural history, can testify to the existence of a hybrid identity in the North Atlantic. As we move into analysis of the sagas themselves, it is helpful to keep in mind Christopher Fee's disclaimer of being able to rely utterly on literature of the Viking Age. As he begins to analyze accounts of the Thing process, he writes: "Saga texts, of course, hardly offer us unadulterated historical evidence, and Icelandic visions of the greater Norse community are even more fraught, especially looking back as they do over the course of centuries and biased as they are by regional and family prejudices . . . Still, the sagas often touch upon Scandinavian communities throughout the North Atlantic, and in situations where other records or material evidence help to corroborate key points, the sagas can add a rich texture of detail to our knowledge of Scandinavian life" (132). All of this is true for our analysis. We have place-name and archaeological evidence for transatlantic commonalities and history-backed saga details for Icelandic and Norwegian divergences. All that is left is to see where the saga record of island communities fits into these documented trends of national identity evolution. It is important to note, however, that "the world we reconstruct in this way may belong more to the author of a given saga than to the subjects he purports to record" (132). In any case, the inter-epistemic approach identifies a solid view of Viking Age culture, so literary concepts from the Middle Ages that match that view give credence to the idea that the sagamen were accurately expressing their ancestors' identities. When the views don't match up, or seem to do so coincidentally, then the sagas are more indicative of their own cultural context in Medieval Iceland.

Melissa Berman, in a 1985 paper comparing them with the Baltic-set *Jómsvíkingasaga*, identifies *Orkneyingasaga* and *Faeryingasaga* as sagas particularly associated with diaspora identity. In contrast with the local family and kings' sagas, these three "political sagas" are characterized by international settings and conflicts. *Orkneyingasaga* features the jockeying of power between earls, landed men, and Norwegian kings. Overall the text is conservative and apparently factual, but some literary slant is present: "even though the saga scarcely questions Norwegian hegemony, it does imply that Norwegian kings never serve the best interest of the Orkney Islands" (Berman 120). *Faeryingasaga* is more obviously dramatic and nuanced, as it follows the clashes between a well-developed hero, Sigmund, and villain, Thrand, It is actually the villain that craftily fights for independence and slays the hero, before losing his life and land in retribution. Berman takes this to mean that "resisting monarchy is wisest – but the historical perspective teaches otherwise" (125). As with the depiction of law in *Orkneyingasaga*, the literary perspective of heroism is flexible. According to Berman, it is used for ironic effect, and the actions of the hero result in the outcome that by the end of the saga, "the Faroe Islands pay

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regular tribute to Norway” and the old ways of living are unsustainable, even though that is judged as morally right from a Christian perspective (125). Berman supports the dual possibility that these sagas can be read as reflections of historical Viking culture hybridization, or as allegories for Medieval Icelandic concerns. She first argues that “political sagas represent a technique for examining historical movements by focusing on an emblematic and dramatic conflict” in which “the conflict between the individual rebel and the established leader reflects the larger conflict between colony and national power” (125). This push for independence is a distinct concern for islands besieged by international claims. Its appearance as a common throughline of the island-set “political sagas” is indicative of the national identity of these islands. Their oral tradition of earls and landowners fending off Scottish and Norwegian forces suggests that Viking Age North Atlantic identities were formed in opposition to the dominant ones of Europe. Berman later decides that this culture is also indicative of “a real (if unconscious) convention in Icelandic historical narration: an attempt to understand power through the relationship of colony to national power” (Berman 126). Christopher Fee reaches the same conclusion in his analysis of *Orkneyingasaga*: “such references to overlordship . . . would have been a subject of intense interest during the era in which the political sagas were composed, which saw increasing movement toward the subjugation of the Icelandic free state under the Norwegian crown” (Fee 135). To these two scholars, the debate over island independence in the sagas is less an indication of independent-minded Viking Age identity than an expression of medieval politics in literary form.

My own view is more in line with Berman’s first point, because the sagas each share an aspect of the transatlantic culture identified in studies of the Viking Age. However their subtext connects to Icelandic anxieties, the sagas are first and foremost about the islands’ cultural history. For example, the attention given to land-rights fits Jakobsson’s concept of a hereditary, land-focused *public identity* for the North Atlantic. In *Orkneyingasaga*, this is seen in the common refrain of land divisions that comes with each feud. By the end of the narrative, multiple rulers have traded, granted, merged, or conquered the same halves or thirds of the island territory. A good example of this frequent device is the complicated feud between the brotherly earls Thorfinn, Einar, and Brusi. Einar starts out with two thirds of the islands under his overbearing, famine-inducing rule, with Brusi claiming another third, and Thorfinn holding onto Caithness and Sutherland (*Orkneyingasaga* Ch. 13). Thorfinn claims two thirds of the islands as well, leading almost to a fight, but ultimately to the reconciliatory settlement that “Thorfinn was to have his rightful third of the Orkney earldom, while Earls Einar and Brusi would unite their shares under joint rule” (15). In the aftermath of Einar’s murder at the hands of Thorfinn’s kinsman Thorkel, Brusi takes Einar’s third (17). This, of course, angers Thorfinn, who wishes to split the lands in half, and asks King Olaf of Norway to support him in this claim (17, 18). Olaf actually decides to split the land three ways because he sees Einar’s third as proper recompense for a retainer’s death (19). Olaf puts his third under Brusi’s control, but in the end, Thorfinn holds onto it in exchange for supplying Brusi’s share of the island’s defenses (19).

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Later earls employ this same land-bargaining tactic of promising island territories to allies in exchange for military aid (22, 26, 38). So, the national identity of Orkney is not founded on continuous rule, but on the parceling of land, just as it was for the Viking Age Norwegians. But, as mentioned before, this lack of concentrated power did not lead to an evolution of the assembly system, as it did in medieval Iceland. Rather, the system of feudal earldoms took hold as a means of defining the nation in response to external threats.

Following Fee and Byock's claim that military protection of the land is what mattered most to the Viking Age Orkneyers, it makes sense that *Orkneyingasaga* would focus on a feudal identity concerned with land rights. Outside of strict nationalism, *Faeryingasaga* reflects a social development of the Viking Age North Atlantic identity. The saga's heroic anecdotes of Sigmund's widow and daughter are in accord with Hallstad-McGuire archaeological thesis that women's roles were expanded in North Atlantic island culture. In the saga, the viking's wife Thurid, identified with the high status title "the chief of widows," is said to have once "seized a sword and used it no worse than any hero" (Ch. 36, 34). Her daughter, Thora, also actively enters a conflict with men when she burns ships (52). Both women invade the traditionally male realm of honorable violence, but are not chastised for it, as women in other sagas have been (See villainous depiction of Freydis in *Graenlandingasaga*, lack of sympathy towards goaders in others). We must be skeptical in applying the characteristics of saga heroines to the entire people of the islands, but the fact that these brave women are celebrated suggests something about the Viking Age Faroese. They could perhaps have had a greater appreciation of women's agency, more in line with their Norwegian ancestors than their Icelandic chroniclers. This saga account in some way contradicts the evidence that high-class women's ship burial was rarer in Iceland, and the usual depiction of family saga heroines as housewives and goaders (Hallstad-McGuire 176, Moen). This gives more validity to the idea that *Faeryingasaga* reflects more the values of its Viking North Atlantic subjects than those of its Medieval Icelandic writer and audience.

Through the combined analysis of historiography, philology, archaeology, and literature, specific strands of North Atlantic national identity can be isolated. Some are widespread, such as the embrace of the Thing in one form or another, and some only appear in regional contexts, such as the earldoms. All together, they are outgrowths of early Norwegian settler culture, distinct from the later developments in Iceland that could have influenced saga authorship. The presence of these strands in the two sagas studied indicates that, despite the distance in time and culture between the saga writers and the events they describe, some essence of settlement identity remains. Within the understanding that these historical stories have been partly fictionalized – but with the uncertainty of when this fictionalization happened in their literary lifespan – one can conceivably conclude that *Faeryingasaga's* and *Orkneyingasaga's* particular literary styles are drawn from the attitudes of the Viking North Atlantic.

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