

University of Michigan Law School

University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository

Reviews

Faculty Scholarship

1986

Review of Culture and History in Medieval Iceland

William I. Miller

University of Michigan Law School

Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/reviews/124>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/reviews>



Part of the [Comparative and Foreign Law Commons](#), and the [Legal History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Miller, William I. Review of Culture and History in Medieval Iceland, by K. Hastrup. *Scandinavian Stud.* 58 (1986): 183-6.

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reviews by an authorized administrator of University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact mlaw.repository@umich.edu.

Kirsten Hastrup. *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland: An Anthropological Analysis of Structure and Change*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1985. Pp. xii + 285. 6 maps. \$34.50.

It is a common dysfunction of scholars, particularly medieval historians, to fear grand syntheses and all-encompassing explanations. This is less frequently a disease among anthropologists, and in fact in anthropologists of a structuralist bent there is no reticence whatsoever, but positive delight in the big, the general, the quasi- and the just plain theoretical. And in the best French tradition they often construct their models *par écartant les faits*. Kirsten Hastrup is a structuralist more influenced by Levi-Strauss than Evans-Pritchard; she is also a trained anthropologist. This is both good and bad news. The Icelandic materials are as well suited as any to historical ethnography and anthropological analysis, especially given the convergence of Icelandic and anthropological obsessions with genealogy and kinship. The types of questions anthropologists tend to ask, with the solid social focus they usually bring to their materials, are just what Old Icelandic studies need. Literary scholars and traditional historians can only benefit from the methodological cross-fertilization. Kirsten Hastrup's new book will serve the dual purpose of introducing scholars of medieval Iceland and Old Norse to anthropological literature and anthropologists to the world of the medieval Icelanders.

The book begins and concludes with a methodological justification of historical ethnography. The discussion reveals nothing particularly startling and is, in fact, hard to disagree with. The problems historians and anthropologists face with their subjects are found to be comparable, and the author reaffirms Maitland's and Evans-Pritchard's view that the divorce of these disciplines is harmful to both, but especially, from Hastrup's point of view, to anthropology. The book is divided into two main parts, with part one, entitled Systems of Classification, devoted to the treatment of "semantic fields." Individual chapters deal with temporal and spatial categories, kinship, social and political structure, and cosmography. Part two discusses changes in these fields through time during the period of what the author calls the Freestate. (This is a term that I would think an anthropologist would have been more wary of using, since it appears to conclude, without discussion, the very doubtful issue of whether or not medieval Iceland of the tenth–thirteenth centuries should be characterized as a state.) In this part the author devotes chapters to ecology and demographic changes, religious and social transition, law, and the fall of the Freestate. The listing of chapter topics should reveal the comprehensiveness of Hastrup's work, a strategy no doubt suggested by the conventions of the ethnographic style. The book's breadth will be considered a virtue by some; others will find that the individual topics suffer from it. Take, for instance, the discussion of temporal categories. The "aim of the . . . chapter is to reconstruct the system of time categories of the ancient Icelanders, and to demonstrate the extent to which time and temporal categories were locked into

categories of the wider social order” (p. 19). Most of the chapter is spent providing and discussing the terminology of time reckoning, largely re-presenting the work of Nilsson, Beckman, and Ólafía Einarsdóttir. Nearly thirteen pages are devoted to the naming of the months. But how these categories were locked into the wider social order gets rather short shrift. The discussion proceeds without the author considering the use of time words in narration, tense formation and adverbs of time in the language, date setting by reference to festival days, or the elaborate *Grágás* provisions for regulating date of payment (*eindagi*). It’s probably not fair to ask the author to deal with all these things, but her claims for the chapter being what they are, it would seem that, in order to connect the ways of time reckoning to the wider social order, some consideration of these matters, if only to explain why they are not relevant, should have been undertaken. Similar objections can be made to all the chapters.

The chapter on kinship serves as a useful introduction to the relevant provisions in *Grágás* on inheritance, the wergeld rings, and guardianship. They reveal, the author discovers, a cognatic kinship system with kinship determined by ego-focused stocks in some situations and by ego-focused kindreds in others with “some degree of (operative) patrilineality” (p. 72). The reader will have a hard time finding a clearly presented explanation of the differences between ego-focused stocks and kindreds (see, e.g., pp. 71ff.) and will probably need to refer to the cited secondary sources for help. The difficulty of the chapter for the non-specialist stems partly from the difficulty of the subject matter, but also, unfortunately, from a certain vagueness and generality in the presentation and from certain imprecisions in key terms. As an example of the latter, “patrilineal” is used variously to mean patrilateral or simply filiation to a father’s cognatic kindred (pp. 73, 101, 104). There are also errors of fact. I select one as a particularly telling example: “*mágar* referred only to the nearest categories of affines (apart from wife), namely, the father-in-law, the son-in-law, and the brother-in-law” (p. 90). Apparently Hastrup is following Cleasby-Vigfusson here. But even a cursory look at the sagas will show that *mágr* was used to indicate a much wider range of affine. I note a few examples: *mágr* indicates FaSiHu in *Íslendinga saga*, ch. 58, likewise in *Njáls saga*, ch. 99, and also WiFaBrSo in *Njáls saga*, ch. 148. This is one example, among many, of the kind of results one can expect when a scholar arbitrarily decides to ignore the bulk of “ethnographic” evidence the subject culture has bothered to pass on to succeeding generations. Hastrup ignores saga evidence, from both the family sagas and the Sturlung compilation. As a result much of the exposition takes place in a vacuum of fact. I fail to understand this strategy. She shows no such reluctance in using the *Snorra Edda* as her chief source for reconstructing medieval Icelandic cosmography in ch. 5. She justifies her use of the Edda thus: “We cannot use it as a historical source in the ordinary sense of the term. Once we allow ourselves to read [Snorri’s] work anthropologically, however, and to seek general patterns and structural recurrences, its validity ‘stretches out’ and comes to encompass the entire, generalized world-view of the Icelanders—whether heathen or Christian. Structural recurrences point to a conceptual continuity which exists before and outside particular literary products” (p. 147). Surely this apology is equally applicable to other narrative sources. It is probably no accident that this chapter in which she draws on narrative sources is by far and away the best in the book. The models she develops here are elucidating and have some explanatory power.

The author does not spend much time troubling with primary sources other than *Grágás*. And even with *Grágás* we see provisions cited as evidence of various things, as, for instance, kinship systems, without any critique of the intentions with which the law text might have been written. The author works primarily from older secondary material. In

fact one of the real values of the book is to re-present the work of Scandinavian scholars to a wider, non-specialist public. This is a salutary effort. But when one purports to write ethnographic history it may be risky business to rely on earlier results that were achieved by other, non-anthropological methods. An historical ethnographer should have some duty to do field work, just like an ethnographer, by independently gathering data from the informant's mouth, so to speak. For example, the whole value of the discussion of kinship is substantially diminished by the author's failure to take into account the effect of residence patterns and residence rules on group formation. Again, this oversight seems to be a consequence of ignoring saga evidence.

The author is mainly concerned, however, with a bigger picture, with determining structure and identifying models in the "semantic domains" she studies. The theoretical and modelling bent of the author will appeal to some, especially Levi-Straussian structuralists. It is likely to be received quite differently by more empirically oriented types. In all her topic areas Hastrup discovers competing and contradictory models, one vertical, the other horizontal; one involving boundaries, the other distances from a center. I cannot here give an adequate demonstration of how she does this in each instance, but I was never able to rid myself of the impression that there was something rather forced about the models. At times they seem to be generated not from the data but from preconceptions, with the selection of data arranged so as not to embarrass the construct. Although she stresses that she's interested in structural properties and not in historical cases (pp. 90, 106, 146), structures do not present themselves full blown. Ethnographers as well as historians have to trouble themselves with the particular, even if the particular is not their ultimate interest. Even in those cases where the models may describe some grand feature of a structure they do not seem very useful as heuristic devices. They range from trivial, as in the "boundaries of the two halves of the year (*misseri*) and the centres of these (that is, *miðsumar* and *yule*," p. 238), in the domain of time reckoning, to misleadingly simplistic in the case of political and social structure. There we find a contrast between the vertical boundary model of social class and the horizontal centre model of the *goðorð* ("chieftancy," p. 239). (The horizontality of the latter utterly escapes me. Given the very real power of the *goðar* ["chieftains"], it seems to reflect, if anything, another vertical relationship). None of this would be a very serious drawback if the author were not so committed to the reality of her models. But, to her, it was the structural contradictions between vertical and horizontal, bounded and centered models, that generated the disruption in the social system that caused the fall of the Freestate (pp. 229–30). This is a strong claim, indeed, for the reality of one's models.

Sometimes the models make for scholarly melodrama. Thus, a disorder in the models prompts a kind of private apocalypse causing the disorder of the model to spill into the real world. We find, for instance, that "the juridical pin-pointing of the 'anomalous' categories leaves us with a picture of the Icelandic Freestate as if in a permanent battle against acute disorder" (pp. 117–18). This is not a reference to the turmoil of the Sturlung period, but to the introduction into the laws of the classifications of *leiglendingr*, *leysingr*, *hrisungr*, and *hornungr* ("tenant, freedman, son conceived by a slave woman but born after she was freed," and a "son born to a slave and a free woman"), which to Hastrup are the "anomalous categories" that upset the symmetry of a supposed original opposition of free and unfree (p. 117). The proposed cause of the acute disorder is as counterintuitive as it is anti-climactic.

As long as the author avoids the private language her models often engender, her exposition is clear, in spite of a very intrusive use of inverted commas to indicate private or specialized meanings for particular words and phrases. On page 176 alone there are eleven

such instances. I offer an example of the difficulty one frequently encounters in some of the more theoretical discussions:

Generally, by multiple reference to 'demographic' information obtaining at many levels and in a variety of sources, there seems to be circumstantial evidence that Icelandic society became gradually more and more marked by 'distorted class-structures and group ratios' (cf. Ardener 1972b: 125). Here the distortion is viewed primarily in relation to the classification into classes. In this sense demography worked against the reproduction of the social reality. The parameters of self-identification comprised a specific relationship between classes and groups of people; that is, they comprised the 'vertical' model of social classification based on clearly digital distinctions between the social classes (cf. ch. 4). The realization of this model was impeded by socio-demographic changes. This is where demography can be said to have caused (further) social changes.

It will be recalled that the Icelanders had available an alternative system of social classifications, one of center and periphery, or of 'analogue' differences between more or less powerful and worthy people. This model was left unaffected by the demographic changes; or it is perhaps more correct to say that while the vertical model was gradually undermined, the horizontal model was continuously enforced—not only in population numbers but also by the constitution of the population [p. 177].

The first paragraph is a rather complicated way to say that social classes were gaining or losing members at different rates. The second is an assertion for which very little evidence is adduced, but which is true, I suppose, by definition, since the horizontal model disposes of the issue of variable class reproduction by disposing of classes.

In spite of the negatives in this review I expect this book to have a fairly great impact in the world of Icelandic studies. It represents a fresh approach, and there can be no doubt that its anthropological focus will benefit Icelandic studies. But the value of the book for the literary critic and the historian will be in the concerns it evinces, in the questions it raises, rather than in the substance of its arguments and the conclusions it draws.

WILLIAM IAN MILLER
University of Michigan Law School