

was not needed as an alternative to formal marriage. Maybe for that reason Icelandic lawmakers found it unnecessary to include in *Grágás* the paragraph about common-law marriage (*Ersitzung*) which they undoubtedly knew from the Norwegian *Gulaping* law. The global ubiquity of concubinage would suggest that the phenomenon of multiple sexual partners was not unknown in the North, although in ancient times it was not in the form of *Friedelehe*. Without specifying female choice, the expression *fylgja at lagi* nevertheless suggests a traditional aspect of cohabitation, perhaps a lingering remnant of the concept.

Seeking to illuminate the problem of mistresses from a *philologisch-literaturgeschichtlichen* standpoint in the present volume, Ebel postpones a *literaturwissenschaftliche* analysis to a later work (13). If she had included literary criticism of the texts in the present work and had made the thorough search for evidence that her subject demands, she could have justified the format of a book. Otherwise, it would appear that an article would have sufficed to refute Herbert Meyer.

Ebel ends her study with a detailed and well-annotated glossary (chap. 11, "Der awn. Wortschatz im Bereich der nicht-legalisierten Verbindungen," 147–71). She equips her work with a summary, bibliography, and serviceable indices of sources and place-names. An index of persons might have been helpful, and greater precision in the source references would have been welcomed by those who intend to pinpoint the evidence.

Jenny Jochens

Gísli Pálsson, editor. *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*. Enfield Lock, Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1992. 352 pages.

In June 1991 Gísli Pálsson, who is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Iceland, hosted a conference in Reykjavík "to explore how the sagas can be used as informative sources for medieval culture and society" (ix). (I should like to repeat here my thanks for his allowing me to attend as a guest and to receive copies of the preconference drafts.) The book under review seems to be intended less as a neutral record of the proceedings than as an independent collection of essays with a guiding editorial conception: "This book as a whole reflects this emerging 'field' of scholarship and the radical turn in saga studies which it represents" (1). For unspecified reasons several of the original Reykjavík presentations were omitted and two others replaced by their authors (Byock and Miller) with essays on different subjects. In his extensive introduction Gísli Pálsson is at pains to place all the contributions, diverse as they are, in the context of an "alternative," "social and comparative approach" to the sagas. In his editorial capacity he has also sprinkled the essays themselves liberally with parenthetical cross-references of the type "cf. ———, this volume." According to the preface, the copyediting was performed by publisher Jeffrey Mazo, who, together with the editor, deserves praise for the professional appearance of the book; typographical, grammatical, and stylistic errors are relatively few, though a number of each can still be found. All the texts are in English; credit is given to translators for two of them. (The native speakers were occasionally less careful than the non-natives: "conducive for..." [113], "to defame another was to threaten their honor" [184], etc.) Special commendation should go to Helgi Þorláksson and his translator Bernard Scudder for clear, elegant prose.

After the editor's "Introduction: Text, Life, and Saga" (1–25), the volume is

divided into six parts. In Part 1, "The Sources, Their Limits, and Their Interpretation," Preben Meulengracht Sørensen discusses methodological considerations (27–41), Jesse L. Byock the effect of Icelandic nationalism on saga scholarship (43–59), and Sverre Bagge *Heimskringla* between historiography and literature (61–75). Part 2, "Individual, Person, and Emotion," contains Aron Gurevič on King Sverrir's personality (77–87) and William Ian Miller on emotion in the sagas (89–109). In Part 3, "Myth, Ideology, and Social Structure," three contributors find reflections of social change in sagas: E. Paul Durrenberger and Jonathan Wilcox look at *Bandamanna saga*'s satirical criticism of the decay of *drengskapr* and reciprocity (111–23), Knut Odner interprets the Þórgunna story in *Eyrbyggja saga* as a Lévi-Straussian myth (125–46), and Torfi H. Tulinius sees *Hervarar saga* as the working out of tensions caused by a tightening of inheritance law (147–60). The fourth essay in this part, Jacques Le Goff's "Laughter in Brennu-Njáls saga" (161–65), ought to have belonged to Part 2. Part 4, "Politics and Friendship," includes Frederic Amory's examination of the medieval Icelandic outlaw's role in society (189–203) and two studies of goðorð: Ross Samson's socio-economic analysis (167–88) and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson's survey of the goði's "friendship" ties (205–15). In Part 5, "Production and Economics," Jón Haukur Ingimundarson offers a new view, based on his fieldwork, of the changing role of wool production in the economy of medieval Iceland (217–30), and Helgi Þorláksson looks at attitudes toward trade for profit in the sagas (231–45). Finally, the three essays in Part 6, "Gender and Sexuality," all adduce evidence for the oppression of women by men in medieval Scandinavia: Jenny Jochens argues (247–64) that "*mansöngur* originally described the sexual use of a slave woman by a man other than her owner, or ridiculed the other's sexual performance" (253), Uli Linke finds in Norse mythology evidence that a tradition of cosmogony based on female sexuality was opposed and eventually repressed by a "male" procreative model (265–88), and Ruth Mazo Karras reconstructs the sexual

exploitation of medieval Icelandic slave or servant women by their male masters (289–304).

Although most of the essays contribute at least something and a few are very good (Bagge's, Amory's, Helgi Þorláksson's), on the whole the book is satisfactory neither as saga scholarship nor as social science. One reason lies with its conception: it has more than its share of what Colleen Batey has called "the proverbial tub-thumping concerning the perceived inability of medieval scholars to utilise 'modern, multi-disciplinary approaches'" (in a review of another anthology, *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 23 [1992]: 390), and, in my opinion, the loudest tub-thumpers have the least of value to contribute.

Gísli Pálsson has edited the book with two types of readers in mind, he says: "saga scholars and others who know the sagas rather well, on the one hand, and, on the other, those who are unfamiliar with the sources but wish to embark on a comparative, 'ethnographic' study of medieval society" (ix). Ideally, these groups will cooperate in interdisciplinary study of the sagas, producing both "ethnographically-oriented saga scholarship and saga-oriented ethnography" (5). But the division of labor that Gísli Pálsson apparently envisions between the "traditional" and the "alternative" scholars seems a bit skewed: the reader gets the impression that although each of the camps stands to gain in some measure from the other, the principal beneficiary will be traditional scholarship, which needs to be cured of its "bookish and somewhat ethnocentric bias" (3).

According to Gísli Pálsson, "the sagas are potentially valuable ethnographic documents with various kinds of information on early Iceland and medieval Scandinavia" (1). But are the new comparatists really the first to see this, and are we really witnessing a "radical turn in saga studies" which "reverses the [traditional] priority of text over life" (1)? These rather overstated premises form the basis of the introductory essay. Most of the space in it is occupied by a survey of the new scholarship that Gísli Pálsson admires, together with thumbnail sketches of the papers in the volume itself,

but he also brings up the methodological questions involved in using the sagas as sources for social study (especially in the section "Ethnographic Authenticity," 17–21) and concludes quickly that there is nothing to fear: the sagas may not be perfectly accurate reports, but they are no less reliable than other sources used in ethnography and historiography, and they are in any case rooted in a social and intertextual matrix which they necessarily reflect (20–21). The position—and tone—taken by Meulengracht Sørensen in the first essay of the collection, interestingly enough, is quite different: he warns explicitly that the sagas are a product of the "textually aware" Middle Ages, though they generally hide this (the same arguments are now in his *Fortælling og ære: Studier i islændingesagaerne* [Århus: Aarhus universitetsforlag, 1993], 17–32). The history of the sagas and their reception he sketches as follows: individual accounts were "transformed into convention"; the conventional patterns were then "established as parts of historical culture," so that the "idea of a historical reality" was created. Thus "life became genre" as the texts were created and stylized, and then "genre became life" in the early modern interpretation of the sagas as historical reports (40–41). "The reality of the text thus cuts itself off from the historical reality, and the study of the latter must therefore be preceded by the study of the text as a text" (28). This reasonable position, ironically, earns Meulengracht Sørensen the distinction of being the only contributor whose views are treated with skepticism in the editor's introduction (14). To make the comedy of errors complete, in the next essay Byock presents a polemic argument for just the opposite view (with Gísli Pálsson's evident approval, 3, 20) — namely, that the Icelandic school's insistence on treating the sagas as texts amounted to an "exclusionary prejudice" that "stunted [Iceland's] own cultural maturity" (58–59).

What one sorely misses in the introduction and in many of the essays is an informed perspective on the history of saga scholarship. Again and again, "traditional saga scholarship" is condemned in effigy, and the editor and some contributors are

curiously unable to entertain the possibility that they and their friends might not be the first to have looked at the sagas from any point of view other than the literary-philological. The straw-man caricature that is set up as the "traditional saga scholar" resembles at best the members of the Icelandic school, and those only remotely. Meulengracht Sørensen does hint at the fact that "scholars in the romantic period of the nineteenth century experienced no difficulties in uniting these approaches [historical and literary-philological study]" (27), and Amory makes a point of rehabilitating four older dissertations on Germanic outlawry; but otherwise, the innocent nonspecialist can read the volume cover to cover without receiving the slightest inkling that there is a whole shelf of books, some already more than a century old, with titles like *Altnordisches Leben, Privatboligen på Island i Sagatiden, Kindheit und Jugend in der altnordischen Literatur, Ruhm und Ehre bei den Nordgermanen, Das alte Island, Nordmændenes private Liv i Oldtiden, Familielivet på Island i den første Saga-periode, Altnordische Frauen*, etc. Whatever the faults of such books may be, it is nevertheless the duty of would-be saga anthropologists to find out that they exist, read, criticize, and improve upon them as necessary. It is not acceptable to use propaganda slogans such as "the long-standing exclusion of the sagas from social and historical analysis" (45) as an excuse for ignoring previous research altogether, as if none existed.

Even the reader who subscribes to the idea of the collection will probably be disappointed in its realization. There is certainly nothing wrong with diversity of field and method, which Gísli Pálsson apparently strove for; it is rather the uneven quality that betrays the volume's origin as conference proceedings. At their best, the contributions do indeed demonstrate the value of comparative study. But too many of them are characterized by sophomoric platitudes and anachronistic value judgments, circular and hazy argumentation, and ignorance or intentional disregard of previous scholarship. I shall give two examples of papers which, in my opinion, were not thought through.

Karras discusses the sexual exploitation of status disparity and its political and economic context in a number of cultures (there is still more in her preconference draft), but — strangely, for a medieval historian investigating medieval attitudes — she does not consider medieval narratives outside the sagas. (Does this reflect a desire to escape the alleged tendency of saga scholars, as described by Gísli Pálsson, to “restrict” their horizons to “Norwegian society, the Germanic world, or the literary tradition of medieval Europe,” if they “venture beyond Iceland” at all [4]?) In fact, she does not even mention the clearest case of sexual exploitation in the sagas, that of the notoriously lecherous Hákon jarl Sigurðarson (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* [*Heimskringla*] chaps. 45, 48 in Íslenzk fornrit 26; *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sögum* chaps. 12–13 and *Fagrskinna* chap. 22 in Íslenzk fornrit 29). (Hákon was brought to Karras’s attention by Knut Odner in the discussion following her presentation in Reykjavík, so it is not clear why he is still missing.) True, Karras had included a sentence from the *Ars amatoria* of Andreas Capellanus in her preconference draft, but he is hardly representative of the medieval textual world; if one looks at narrative, one can find a number of accounts of sexual exploitation of the kind in question (e.g., on the Holy Roman emperor Henry IV in the *Sächsische Weltchronik*, ed. Ludwig Weiland [Hannover: Hahn, 1877], chaps. 202–3).

A more fundamental difficulty lies with the two theses which form the framework of Karras’s investigation: she argues (a) that sexual exploitation existed in medieval Iceland, but notes (b) that the sagas do not “bring [this fact] to the foreground” (289). Anyone who understands that power corrupts will agree that thesis “a” must be true, even though the evidence for it in the sagas is sparse; “medieval Iceland is not likely to have been the only Western society where men in power did not have some form of advantage in terms of sexual access to women subordinate to them” (302). But Karras goes further: she seems to think that sexual exploitation not only existed, but was routine (though this is not established), and she wonders why the saga writers were

so “reticent” about the subject. It is difficult to share Karras’s surprise at this self-created paradox, which is supposed to motivate the paper. She considers several possible explanations for the sagas’ “lack of emphasis” on sexual exploitation, and the answer she finally gives is almost absurdly anticlimactic (as it had to be, given her formulation of the problem): “The saga writers’ lack of focus on this particular dynamic reflects the distance between their world view and our post-Freudian, post-Foucauldian one” (303).

Byock’s paper falls into two parts. One is a sketch of the historical background of Icelandic nationalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (There is useful information here for those who know little about the history of Iceland; nevertheless, I would refer readers instead to the article which was Byock’s principal source: Gunnar Karlsson, “Icelandic Nationalism and the Inspiration of History,” in *The Roots of Nationalism*, ed. Rosalind Mitchison [Edinburgh: Donald, 1980], 77–89.) But this part functions only as a springboard for the core of the paper, a self-serving polemic against Sigurður Nordal and the Icelandic school, who according to Byock “virtually banned” social and historical analysis of the sagas; their “narrow approach to saga studies,” “a dogmatically-embedded belief system rooted in political expediency[!],” succeeded in “stunt[ing] intellectual growth in a whole field of study” (43). This is a gross, and possibly disingenuous, oversimplification. Its most perverse aspect is the charge of political expediency, by which Byock means that the members of the Icelandic school “were prepared to make the most” of Icelanders’ “yearnings for cultural maturity,” “harnessing the forces of their period to advance their particular interpretations” (57). No one will dispute that the Icelandic school’s emphasis on the quality of the old literature meshed with nationalistic sentiment, but it was hardly *caused* by it; the relationship is far more complex than Byock makes it out to be. (The intellectual background of the Icelandic school is the subject of several articles in a special issue of *Tímarit Máls og menningar* [45.1 (1984)]; see especially those on

Sigurður Nordal's literary criticism, historiography, and ideology [the latter *cum grano salis*] by Vésteinn Ólason, Gunnar Karlsson, and Árni Sigurjónsson, respectively. Byock cites these but ignores their content in his essay.) A look at the history of our disciplines shows, in fact, that if anyone is to be "blamed" for the stricter separation of historical and literary study at the beginning of this century, it should probably be the historians, not the philologists. Historians (such as the Scandinavians Lauritz and Curt Weibull and Kristian Erslev) were beginning to grapple with the question of what a text is, to recognize that their sources had a "literary" as well as "historical" dimension, and their primary reaction was to apply more stringent source criticism; Sigurður Nordal and other literary scholars followed the historians' lead in this, not vice versa.

Byock knows this, but for some reason has chosen to suppress it. An earlier version of the polemic presents a more balanced picture (*Medieval Iceland* [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988], 38–48). In 1988, after citing a passage from *The Historical Element in the Icelandic Family Sagas* ([Glasgow: Jackson, 1957], 14) in which Sigurður Nordal explains why modern historians "tend to brush these sagas aside as historical records," Byock had put it in perspective: "The modern reader may find this attitude to history limited, and perhaps even naive, *but it was not so regarded* when Nordal was formulating his position in the first half of the twentieth century. Nordal wrote at the end of a period during which scholars were attempting to separate truth from fantasy in early Norse sources." A footnote continues, referring to the Weibulls: "In order to determine the chronology of events in Scandinavia's earliest historical period, *historians* of the early twentieth century began implementing a stricter source criticism than had been practiced in earlier studies" (*Medieval Iceland* 40, my emphasis in both quotations). In the corresponding section of the 1992 version (46–47), however, this perspective is missing; the same quotation from *The Historical Element* is used to make Sigurður Nordal seem incomprehensibly conservative and naive. Byock wonders why Sigurður Nordal

did not follow the example of "Max Weber, Karl Polanyi, Talcott Parsons, R. A. [sic] Tawney, Arnold Toynbee, Marc Bloch, and Lucien Febvre," who according to Byock had made social history a flourishing discipline already by the late 1940s, and gives the (preposterous) answer: nationalism (47).

A recurring problem in the volume under review is the incomplete or misleading representation of the sources, both primary and secondary. Naturally, we do not expect of a Jacques Le Goff or an Aron Gurevič a specialist's command of saga studies, and they do not pretend to possess it (Le Goff, in fact, makes a gracious disclaimer to this effect); we are eager and grateful to hear what such eminent medievalists have to say about the sagas from the point of view of their own expertise. But in other contributions the reader is occasionally fed dubious, third-hand information about the sagas and other primary sources. A group of the Gotland stones, for example, "dated to around 800 A.D.," is said to display "pictures which show scenes, rituals, acts, etc., connected to the *Nibelungenlied*. But they also refer to *Völsunga saga*, a saga from thirteenth-century Iceland" (127). Another example of third-hand information is the discussion of *drengskapr* on page 116, which includes the erroneous translation "well spoken of" for "vel talaðr" (the source cited has the correct translation "well-spoken"). And even Miller, who knows the sagas well, oversimplifies the context of Hallgerðr's laughter in *Njáls saga* chap. 17 (because he is writing for nonspecialists?) when he identifies Þjóstólfr only as "the man who has just killed her beloved husband" (90).

The scholarly record, too, is incompletely represented by some contributors, as we have seen. An additional instance: in none of the three papers addressing humor (by Miller, Durrenberger/Wilcox, and Le Goff) is there so much as a single reference to other work on humor, laughter, emotion, gesture, etc., in Old Icelandic or other Germanic literature (though Le Goff does refer to Bakhtin and Gurevič). The contributors could have availed themselves of at least half a dozen books and numerous articles (e.g., Fritz König, "The Comic in the Icelan-

dic Family Saga" [Diss. Univ. of Iowa 1972]; Gertraud Schillinger, *Das Lachen in den isländischen Familiensagas und in den Liedern der Edda* [Diss. Freiburg; Freiburg im Breisgau: n.p., 1962]). The crowning example of indifference to previous scholarship, however, is surely the following pronouncement, one of the book's most ridiculous moments: "At this point there arises a difficult question which, to my knowledge, has not been asked in the modern study of Iceland. This distinction between fact and fiction, the one upon which the bookprosisists placed so much weight, wasn't it always a bit too simple?" (47).

An opportunity for professional interdisciplinary cooperation was missed here. The contributions could have used less hype and more hard work; Gísli Pálsson's valiant effort to transform congress proceedings into a scholarly anthology was thwarted in the end by the uneven quality of the material. In one respect, the volume's conference origins could have been put to advantage: namely, if the Reykjavík discussions had been taken into account more conscientiously in the revised papers or been reported on in a special addendum. (I would have been interested especially in seeing Helga Kress's challenge to Jenny Jochens reflected in the anthology somehow.) But this chance was missed, too.

Marvin Taylor

Gro Steinsland. *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi: En analyse av hierogami-myten i Skírnismál, Ynglingatal, Háleygjatal og Hyndluljóð*. Oslo: Solum, 1991. 366 pages.

For the reader who is not a native speaker of Scandinavian, Gro Steinsland gives a rather bald summary of her findings in this doctoral thesis on pages 348–52. Her conclusions are bold, even shocking; non-Scandinavians may be tempted to spare themselves three hundred and twenty pages of argumentation and dismiss them out of hand. They should not. Gro Steinsland's analysis of *Skírnismál*, *Ynglingatal*, *Háleygjatal*, and *Hyndluljóð* is tightly argued, calling on a wealth of sources, mythological, historical, and legal, and on archaeological and iconographical evidence to delineate her central thesis: that the "sacred marriage" myth contained in *Skírnismál* should be understood in the context of Norse ideas of kingship; that the marriage between god and giantess results in a new type of being, the prototypical king; that the contradictions embodied in the ancestry of the royal lineage make the king peculiarly subject to fate, as evidenced by *Ynglingatal*'s fascination with the bizarre deaths of the kings of the race; and that, after Ragnarøk, the new ruler prophesied in *Hyndluljóð* is neither Christ nor some version of Baldr, but a hypostasis of Heimdallr, freed from the ruler's destiny as the apparently fatherless son of nine giant mothers. Gro Steinsland modestly suggests that her findings are of consequence particularly for the "sacral kingship" debate, but her thinking ranges far more widely and interestingly.

*Det hellige bryllup* is a closely argued and complex work; fortunately its thesis format encourages summarizing conclusions to each part of the exposition. The argument emerges gradually, thus in the early pages of the book the reader has to take on trust certain assertions which are proven later. Some, such as the reference on page 85 to "the remarkable antagonism between Óðinn and Freyr in the poem" (scil. *Skírnismál*),