

# Ideology and Power in Norway and Iceland, 1150-1250



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By

Costel Coroban

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*To my family, who have been extraordinarily supportive and patient  
throughout the entire period of my Ph.D. studies*



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## PREFACE

Fashioning a book on “Ideology and Power in Norway and Iceland, 1150-1250” requires outstanding research skills, solid interdisciplinary competences and subtle interpretation prowess. The author of this book, Costel Coroban, one of the youngest recipients of the Romanian Academy Prize and author of several books and articles published worldwide, possesses all these qualities at the utmost. Indeed, the result of this research is a highly innovative concept, very well designed, with clear and sound objectives and beyond state-of-the-art findings and conclusions. The book was originally defended as a Ph.D. thesis at the Doctoral School of Valahia University of Târgoviște and enjoyed the access to the research facilities of the University of Oslo, the University of Copenhagen and the Romanian Association for Baltic and Nordic Studies.

The theme of this monograph already shows the high potential of historiographical novelty. It is indeed an entirely novel research and opens a new avenue in Scandinavian studies. It picks a topic from the High Middle Ages and tackles it in a comparative and contrastive manner. On the one hand, there is Norway, an established medieval kingdom, with all its ideological, symbolical and power attributes. On the other hand, the author chose Iceland, with its chieftains, with many different ways of legitimizing their power and slightly different primary sources to be investigated. It encompasses a period of a hundred years, a period that can be reconstituted with the help of historical sources, especially literary ones, which the author literarily squeezed out of their meanings.

The research question focuses on the idealization of kings’ and chieftains’ power in Norway and Iceland in the most relevant sources of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this respect, the author investigates the sources with regard to the qualities of a king or a chieftain that were considered adequate to be enthroned, maintained in power or dethroned, the relationship between king or chieftain and their respective society, the image projected in the society by kings and chieftains and the expectations of the society from its rulers, the possible European influences on the symbolic or practical attributes of power, the uniqueness or not of Iceland in this respect, especially when related to the case of neighbouring Norway, etc. They are very well formulated and logical, preparing the ground for adequate demonstrations and articulate conclusions.

Costel Coroban roots his conceptual approach into the idea that political behaviour is intimately bound to ideology, which he soundly proves in the analysis of the leaders of the two Scandinavian political structures, a unipolar and a multipolar one. Situated at the intersection of historiography, political studies and comparative literature, his methodology is fully capable of driving the research towards genuine and meaningful scientific results. Although clustered from three disciplines as identified above, the work remains faithful to historical methodology. The author studies primary and secondary sources, integrates them with the theoretic body elaborated in the first part of his work on the basis of which he formulates rigorous conclusions. The book identifies and discusses the main concepts surrounding the notions of ideology and power and bridges the empirical findings with the theoretical and conceptual apparatus.

The discussion of past contributions proves the excellent grasping of the state-of-art in the field, the main currents of interpretations, and the limits of the corpus of knowledge. The monograph aims and greatly succeeds to go well beyond the threshold of research on this topic and achieve an entirely new understanding of this essential transition period of the Kingdom of Norway and the chieftaincies of Iceland.

All in all, I conclude that this monograph represents an outstanding success of historiography which thus won a veritable scientist of Nordic Medieval research, which brings him into the elite of Scandinavian scholars. Our comprehension of medieval Iceland and Norway is now vastly elevated with the publication of this monograph.

Silviu Miloiu

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# INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is to analyze the ideology of power in the High Middle Ages through the lenses of political power theory by utilizing a contrastive approach between Norway and Iceland. The starting point is that the transformation, maintenance and organization of power in the society are owed to the existence of an ideology, in the encompassing meaning of this term.<sup>1</sup> Political power and ideology are elements that are central to the social, cultural, religious and historical evolution of the Nordic world from the late 8<sup>th</sup> century to the 12<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>2</sup> of which special representatives are Iceland and Norway, through the multitude of historical and literary sources written there. For the Old Norse, the holders of political power were the Kings, the jarls and the chieftains (*goði*), so the purpose of this research is to explore the political history, but also sources from their literature and culture, namely the Old Norse sagas, in order to offer an overview of the ideology of political power in Norway and Iceland in the period from roughly 1150 to 1250.

This time frame, which spans from the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, is limited by two important events in the development of political ideology in Norway and Iceland. First, in 1152 the Archdiocese of Niðaros was created through the efforts of Pope Eugene III, who delegated this task to Cardinal Nicholas of Albano (Nicholas Breakspear, who in 1154 became Pope Adrian IV, the only English Pope). Jón Birgerson, the Bishop of Stavanger, was installed as Archbishop. This event represents an important moment in the development of political ideology in Norway because it marks the officialisation of the Church's effort to implement the Christian ideology of kingship over the local traditions of the Norse, in a period when the country was facing instability and turmoil as two rival parties, the *Birkibeinar* and the *Baglar*, were struggling to take control of the throne. The second limit is 1262, when

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<sup>1</sup> Göran Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*, NLB, London, 1980, pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Gro Steinsland, "Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faroes" in Gro Steinsland, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Jan Erik Rekdal, Ian Beuermann (eds.), *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages*, Brill, Boston, 2011, p.1.

following the *Gamli sáttmáli (Old Covenant)* Iceland became part of the Kingdom of Norway and its independent existence ceased, which resulted in a shift in its political ideology towards the model of monarchy and the diminution of the role of its local *goði* (chieftains) as models of rulership in its literature. The originality of my project consists in the fact that I will be one of the first to comparatively analyze the ideology of power in Iceland, looking specifically at representations of the king during the Civil Wars period, and compare the findings to those in Norway.

Regarding the organisation of this work, it shall be divided into the following parts: Chapter 1. *Theoretical Premises*, Chapter 2. *Kingship in Norway*, Chapter 3. *Avatars of Power in High Medieval Iceland* and Chapter 4. *Conclusions*.

In Chapter 1. *Theoretical Premises* there will be a discussion of the methodology of this research project coupled with an assessment of the up-to-date scholarly works that are dedicated to the study of power in Norway and Iceland roughly between 1150 and 1250. In the later sections, we shall deal with the theory of ideology and power and the dialogical relationship between these two concepts.

In Chapter 2. *Kingship in Norway* the analysis will begin with an assessment of the political history of High Medieval Norway and will try to provide an answer to the research questions posed above. The three major sources that shall be discussed here shall be *Sverris saga*, *Konungs skuggsjá*, and *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*. This will enable us to provide a comparative view over these three sources from the point of view of established concepts in the study of political ideology, such as the archetypes of the *Rex justus* and warrior-king, but we shall also attempt to bring different concepts in our analysis, some of which have been less researched, such as: luck, religious function, oratory and speech, tradition, wisdom and the judicial function, as well as knighthood, literacy, and the patronage of letters.

Chapter 3. *Avatars of Power in High Medieval Iceland* will refer to the avatars of power in Iceland as reflections of political ideology. Representations of leadership in family sagas and skaldic poems will provide an assessment of the ideology of power in the Icelandic literature. The analysis shall concentrate on *Íslendingabók* as well as the family sagas: *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, *Laxdæla saga* and, finally, *Þórðar saga kakala*. The concepts under scrutiny here shall range from genealogies, lineages of power, the representation of the King as Stranger/Outsider, different icons of Kings and chieftains, to an attempted deconstruction of kingship and the portrayal of chieftains with kingly attributes in the last subchapter.

Chapter 4. *Conclusion* shall summarize the results of each chapter of the research and will strive to compare and contrast the elements of the ideology of power as they have been revealed in each chapter.

Although the background to this historical period in the history of Norway has been remarkably researched by scholars such as Hans Jacob Orning, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Sverrir Jakobsson and by Sverre Bagge, the project of comparatively analyzing different Icelandic sources in regards to the ideology of power to those from Norway is entirely new, which awards originality to my research. In Norway, the *borgerkrigstiden* (Civil War), which denotes the period from about 1130 to 1240, was an age of frequent battling between rival kings and pretenders to the throne of Norway. Iceland was colonised after c. 870 and evolved from a Commonwealth ruled by about 60 chieftains to one ruled by seven families by 1220. The *Sturlungaöld* in the history of Iceland, culminating with the warring around 1250-1260, was also a period of ideological transformations for the country.

The main research question is that of explaining the way that Kings' power – in Norway – and chieftains' power – in Iceland – was idealized in a few of the most important sources from the 12<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, first, we will have to explore the ideology of Kingship in Norway and then in Iceland, as well as to elaborate on the ideology of chieftainship in Iceland. What made a king or a chief? How could a person become one? What brought an end to the rule of a king or a chieftain? Was the quality of kingship or chieftainship transmissible? What was the relationship between the Norwegian society and their kings, and what about the Icelandic chiefs and their society? Could the Icelandic society be considered unique? How did the Icelanders image the Kings of Norway in their sagas? To what extent can one say that the system of power in Iceland was closer to the Old Norse one, while Norway was more influenced by European or Christian notions of kingship? If so, what made the political system in Iceland unique? If not, what makes the ideology of power similar in Iceland and Norway? What is the role of the discovery and colonization of Iceland in this context? What is the role of the sagas and of literacy? How do the sagas portray ideal kings? How do the sagas portray unwanted kings? Do the sagas offer the “recipe” for an ideal ruler? How is political power depicted in the Icelandic family sagas as opposed to the kings' sagas? Do the qualities of different saga heroes match those of the rulers? Can a parallel be drawn between what is expected of a local ruler and what is expected of a King in Norway? What was the relationship between the rulers of Norway and the rulers of Iceland? How were the Norwegian Kings controlling Iceland through the system of

political power? How can one explain the relationship between the two? Could one say that the Kings of Norway were looking at Iceland with one paternal and one greedy eye? What is the role of myth, religion and other elements of tradition in this?

Regarding the originality and opportunity of this project, although less extensive articles as well as collections of studies exist, no other monograph has attempted to provide a comparative overview of the ideology of power in Norway and Iceland in the period 1150-1250. The scholars who have contributed the most to this field are Sverre Bagge and Jón Viðar Sigurdsson. Sverre Bagge, through his seminal work, *From Gang Leader to Lord's Anointed. Kingship in Sverris saga and Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*,<sup>3</sup> has provided the most complex arguments for fixing the theoretical discussion of the ideology of power in 12<sup>th</sup>- and 13<sup>th</sup>-century Norway around two models: the Viking warrior-king (who ruled thanks to his great warrior abilities and his luck in battle) and the Christian model of *Rex justus* (who rules his kingdom with wisdom and justice in the name of God). Jón Viðar Sigurdsson was the first to offer an overview of the ideology of power in Iceland, through his significant work, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*.<sup>4</sup> Here, the historian analyzed the evolution of the image of the Icelandic *goðar* from the country's founding until its annexation by Norway, through the scrutiny of numerous sources: *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Reykdale saga*, *Hrafnkels saga*, *Bandamanna saga*, *Ólkofra saga*, and many others. We should also mention Ármann Jakobsson, who is among the scholars of Medieval Icelandic literature who have offered an interesting approach to the way Kings were depicted in Icelandic sagas. One of his studies of *the official vs. the individual* in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* has recently been published.<sup>5</sup> Other literary approaches have looked at the various illnesses of kings, outlining different cultural elements, even medical ones

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<sup>3</sup> Sverre Bagge, *From Gang Leader to Lord's Anointed: Kingship in Sverris saga and Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, The Viking Collection, Studies in Northern Civilization, Vol. 8, Odense University Press, Odense, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurdsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, transl. Jean Lundskaer-Nielsen, The Viking Collection vol. 12, Odense University Press, Odense, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, "A Personal Account: The Official and the Individual in Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar", in Jón Viðar Sigurdsson, Sverrir Jakobsson (eds.), *Sturla Þórðarson: Skald, Chieftain and Lawman*, Leiden, Boston, 2017, pp. 192-99.



such as concepts of insanity.<sup>6</sup>

The primary sources that shall be consulted regarding the ideology of power in Norway are *Sverris saga*, *Konungs skuggsjá*, and *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*. These three main sources cover the period from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and provide extensive information on how political power was imagined at that time in Norway. Regarding Iceland, the analysis shall concentrate on the *Íslendingabók* of Ari Þorgilsson, as well as the family sagas *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, *Laxdæla saga*, and *Þórðar saga kakala*. These Icelandic sources, which deal with the colonisation of Iceland as well as the family histories of important Icelandic chieftains, often touch on the Norwegian monarchy from multiple points of view. As such, they represent extensive and important sources in regards to the political beliefs of the Icelanders during the historical period under scrutiny.

Concerning the family sagas (*Íslendingasögur*) which will help in the comparison of power and leadership between Iceland and Norway, the study will also mention *Sturlunga saga* in general, as well as *Njáls saga*, and reference will be made to a few of the knights' sagas that were translated in Norway during the reign of King Hákon Hákonarson. Given the verisimilar and worldly style of these writings, they represent worthy material for the study of the ideology of political power, as will be further discussed in the chapter dedicated to them.

Besides these primary sources, other sources that will be used to a lesser extent include the *Heimskringla* and other important kings' sagas and Icelandic family sagas. *Heimskringla* offers information starting with King Haraldr hárfagri and continues with the sagas of Hákon the Good, Haraldr II Greycloak, Óláfr Tryggvason, Óláfr II Haraldsson (St. Óláfr), Magnús Ólafsson (the Good), Harald harðráði, ending with the civil war period and the rule of Magnús V Erlingsson.

In regards to the part of our study that will bring in discussion of religion, we intend to focus on the *Edda*, namely the parts known as *Hávamál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* as sources, and on some *fornaldarsögur* (sagas of ancient ages). Adam of Bremen and Saxo Grammaticus will be consulted for the information their chronicles provide on religious rituals in Scandinavia, as well as on the Christianization process.

Taking everything into account, we hope to have outlined the originality of this approach and importance of the study of political ideology in Norway and Iceland during 1150-1250, a period of great

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<sup>6</sup> Idem, "The Madness of King Sigurðr: Narrating Insanity in an Old Norse Kings' Saga", in Sally Crawford, Christina Lee (eds.), *Social Dimensions of Medieval Disease and Disability*, BAR, Oxford, 2014, pp. 29-35.

transformations and cultural changes for both countries as part of a similar process in the Scandinavian world, whose traditional order was challenged and slowly replaced by European influence and Christianization in an emblematic shift of paradigm.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THEORETICAL PREMISES

The aim of this chapter is to provide a theoretical basis for the rest of the research process by detailing the methodology that shall be applied, by offering a presentation of the most important works that have dealt with political power theory in medieval studies and by offering a synthesis of the concepts of ideology and power according to political theory.

### **1.1 Methodology, Medieval studies**

Since the purpose of this research is to analyze the ideology of 12<sup>th</sup>- and 13<sup>th</sup>-century Norway and Iceland through the lenses of political power theory by utilizing a contrastive approach between the two mentioned historical spaces, in the beginning an exposition should be made of the major notions of ideology and power in order to establish a list of concepts that should be followed in the investigation.

The methodology proposed is that of historical research, which is understood as the formulation or identification of a research topic, followed by literature review and sources' collection, assessment of the sources in an order that is logical and/or chronological, information and findings' synthesis, and finally the narrative exposition of the research results and the finding of a general conclusion that draws on the findings of each segment of the research.

As the main purpose of the current book is to provide an overview of how the ideology of power was understood in 12<sup>th</sup>- and 13<sup>th</sup>-century Norway and Iceland, the main method of research shall be the *historical method*, complemented by *critical text analysis* through *philological methods* that are commonly employed in the analysis of medieval sources.

The *historical method* accredited to Leopold von Ranke (the “father of modern history”)<sup>1</sup> and the Göttingen School of History involves the study and commentary of primary sources as the foundation of the historian’s work. Supposedly, the purpose of this research, that of identifying elements of the ideology of power over the period of a century, perhaps requires some of the elements of the *Annales School*, which emphasized enduring patterns of culture and civilization (or their change), laid emphasis on the concept of *mentalité* and promoted interdisciplinarity.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the intention is not to provide explanations on this school of thought as more details shall be provided in the following sections together with clarifications on the notions of the ideology of power.

The three main steps of the *historical method* that shall be used are:

- *the heuristic (investigative) stage* – the process of obtaining and selecting the source materials for the research project. This has been done with the help of many professionals and institutions who deserve our gratitude and acknowledgment.
- *the (historical) criticism stage* – the evaluation and judgement of the material under scrutiny from the viewpoint of the theory, in the present case, the ideology of power. For this research, this step of the historical method is the most important because the purpose is not to reveal new sources (sagas, runic inscriptions or archaeological evidence) relating to the ideology of power in Medieval Scandinavia, but to carry out an analysis from an innovative perspective on different primary as well as secondary sources.
- *the stage of synthesis and exposition* – the findings of the investigation and critical analysis shall be coherently stated in the conclusions of the thesis, thus bringing the scientific contribution to the foreground.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Leopold von Ranke, *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514 (History of the Latin and Teutonic Peoples from 1494 to 1514)*, Duncker & Humblot, Leipzig, 1885.

<sup>2</sup> Discussing the *Annales School* is rarely done without mentioning the seminal contribution of Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996. See Marine Hughes-Warrington, *Fifty Key Thinkers on History*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 17; Traian Stoianovich, *French Historical Method. The Annales Paradigm*, Cornell University Press, London, 1976.

Other research methods that shall be used as auxiliaries in fulfilling the objective of the present thesis encompass *critical text analysis* through *philological study*. The criticism of the primary source text through historical as well as philological methods represents an advantage in any scientific endeavour and is beneficial for identifying more suitable arguments that support research hypotheses. In the field of medieval studies, which is where this research project fits, interdisciplinarity is not at all a novelty. On the contrary, medieval history departments, programs and studies throughout the world have benefitted from the “interdisciplinary turn” beginning with the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Interdisciplinary history refers to “historical scholarship that makes use of the methods or concepts of one or more disciplines other than history”.<sup>3</sup>

The use of structuralist (and post-structuralist) critical methods have permitted medieval scholars to shed new light on old topics and to revive longstanding debates with interesting new arguments.<sup>4</sup> Epistemologists, philosophers of history and historiographers have attracted attention towards some dangers posed by interdisciplinarity: dilettantism, difficulty in attaining expertise, etc.; notwithstanding these epistemological downsides, more recently, it has become clear that Medieval studies (Germ. *Mediävistik*), which is a remarkably unitary field, can actually be seen as the ideal “interdisciplinary interdiscipline”.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2 Historiographical Observations on the Subject

The first who wrote about the realities and the myths of High Medieval Norway and Iceland were – not surprisingly – the Norwegians and Icelanders themselves. Although we shall discuss the authorship and the possible bias involved in the writing of each of the sources that we will treat in this work, we begin with some general considerations regarding authorship and writing during what was called by Régis Boyer the *Icelandic miracle* – the period of unparalleled literary production in Iceland in comparison to the rest of Europe from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> T.C.R. Horn, Harry Ritter, “Interdisciplinary History: A Historiographical Review”, *The History Teacher*, no. 19, 1986, p. 428.

<sup>4</sup> Examples might include works of Mikhail Bakhtin, Johan Huizinga, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault. See Albrecht Classen (ed.), *Handbook of Medieval Studies*, Vol. 1, *Terms – Methods – Trends*, Walter de Gruyter, New York, 2010, p. 716, *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Fürbeth, “Was heißt, wozu dient und wohin führt uns Interdisziplinarität?” in Wilhelm G. Busse, Hans-Werner Goetz (eds.), *Interdisziplinarität*, 1999, pp. 7-16, *apud* Albrecht Classen, *op. cit.*, p. 712.

century.<sup>6</sup>

The same author, Régis Boyer, noticed that history-writing had always been a “*temptation*” of Icelandic saga writers. He points to the fact that this may have been owed to the fact that these prolific historians were “exiles” that were looking to forge a sense of national belonging among themselves, people who lived far away from their ancestral lands, who wanted to better know their own “roots” through continental Scandinavian culture, which they turned into a real art: the story-telling genius of the North.<sup>7</sup>

Icelandic literature began through writings that were historical in character: the *Book of the Icelanders* (*Íslendingabók*) written by Ari Thorgilsson (*hinn froði* – the wise, the learned) remains the oldest such source. Ari, who mastered the style of writing sagas, used techniques of the modern historian: he always detailed his sources, named witnesses, compared differing evidence and made references to well-known events, attempting to write as objectively as possible.<sup>8</sup> The one who preceded Ari in his literary and historical efforts was Saemundr Sigfússon the Learned, who wrote in Latin as opposed to the vernacular used by Ari, detailing the lives of the legendary kings of Norway.<sup>9</sup>

Shortly after these first writings, a new type of works appeared in Iceland: colonization stories (books of settlement) or *landnámabœkr*, the most prominent of them being written by Sturla Thórdarson. *Landnámabók* offers a list of the first settlers including their own genealogies in order to establish itself as a legal source of legitimacy of the Icelanders’ right to hold their own lands. Announcing the development of the saga style of writing, the work then illustrates captivating anecdotes.<sup>10</sup> Further, two important compilations of (hi)stories of the Norwegian kings were produced: *Fagrskinna* and *Morkinskinna*. One more argument that Régis Boyer introduces in trying to explain the Icelanders’ preference for literature is the fact that the authors were clerics of Anglo-Saxon extraction who were formed in the Augustinian school of writing, which promoted St. Augustine’s *cyclical* theory of history,<sup>11</sup> therefore being perpetuators of a long tradition of scholarship.

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<sup>6</sup> Régis Boyer, *Islanda medievală. Vikingii* [*Medieval Iceland. The Vikings*], transl. Vlad-Alexandru Macri, Bic All, Bucharest, 2002, pp. 159 et passim.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 188.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 188-189.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 189.

A very important dimension of the medieval writings of the Icelanders, which can be used to extract knowledge on their political ideology, was that of genealogy and family history.<sup>12</sup> These played a fundamental role in Icelandic society as it was not enough to simply know the names of one's ancestors, it was equally important to be able to recollect the deeds their renown was owed to.<sup>13</sup> Another and equally important fixation of the Icelandic writers was that of narrating the history of Norwegian kings. Asking himself why were these authors so preoccupied with putting to paper stories of the monarchs of Norway and Denmark (*konungasögur* – kings' sagas), Régis Boyer concludes that it is possible that the Icelanders, who rejected the monarchy during the times of the Icelandic Commonwealth up to 1261, may have been fascinated by the sacred aura of royal power that had been instilled in their forefathers' culture through the themes of ancient religious beliefs. Therefore, the sagas appeared due to "multiple and pertinent reasons".<sup>14</sup>

The same French scholar defines the saga as a

"prose exposition – always in prose, a capital aspect – of the life, deeds, and gestures of an individual worthy of committing to memory for various reasons; the exposition spanning from birth to death, without omitting neither his ancestors nor his descendants as long as they are of importance: *therefore the more or less historical character of the saga is obvious* [our emphasis]. The texts are highly variable in length. If they are short [...] they are called *thoettir* (singular *tháttir*) and they have the character of news reports, but they contain all the elements of the sagas.

The term saga derives from the verb *segja* (*to say* in English, *sagen* in German), to narrate, to tell a story. It is important to specify that a saga is not a legend, nor a fairy-tale (with very rare exceptions), nor a poetic text (under no circumstances, it is the most common mistake to assume so because a well-written saga may sometimes contain a few skaldic verses, keeping in mind that skaldic poems are considered older than the prose)... neither epic stories nor religious compositions even though it happens that sagas, being written between the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, record religious facts and deeds with the intention of providing historical reconstitutions [...] the most adequate comparison of this genre would be with the *historical novel* of the Romantic period".<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, pp. 189-190.

Bearing in mind that sagas represent the greatest part of the sources to be analyzed according to our research aim, the clarifications offered by the definition given above come as extremely useful.

Comparatively, Norwegian literature and history writing boasts less known authors and is considerably less voluminous than the Icelandic one. Icelandic influence together with oral tradition helped create a period of flowering for Norwegian literature in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, resulting in works such as *Historia Norwegie* or *Konungs skuggsjá*.<sup>16</sup> In regard to early historiography, or most types of writing, in Norway these were done in Latin and in service of the Church, consisting in missals, sermons and saints' legends, hagiographic stories about St. Oláfr, homily books (most notably the *Homiliubók*), Old Norse panegyrics written on gravestones in runes, codes of law (*Tryggðamál* – truce formulas), skaldic poetry (*gamanvísur* – jokes in verse, although most courtly poetry was composed by Icelanders) and kings' sagas (*Heimskringla*, *Sverris saga*, *Boglunga sogur*, *Fagrskinna*, etc.).<sup>17</sup>

The first historiographers, other than the Norwegians or Icelanders themselves, who approached the subject of Norwegian and Icelandic political history in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries were medieval historians or chroniclers, most of them monks. These historians had a long tradition of criticism towards the Germanic peoples behind them, dating as far back as Tacitus (56-117 AD) and his *De Origine et Situ Germanorum*. Later, the author Jordanes, himself a Romanised Goth of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, wrote *Getica* (or *De origine actibusque Getarum*), where he gives a lower profile of the importance of the personality and deeds of Theodoric, the ruler of the Goths.<sup>18</sup> Inheriting this historiographical tradition, the chroniclers that witnessed the Viking expansions portrayed the Norse people in a negative image, in which violence and disloyalty culminated, while they certainly were not the only populations to act in such ways that survival dictated.

The Normans responded centuries later by commissioning their own histories, written by masters such as the Frankish cleric Dudo of Saint-Quentin, whose *Historia Normannorum (De moribus et actis primorum Normannorum ducum)*, written from 996 to 1015, represents a

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<sup>16</sup> More details and clarifications on these are left for the following chapter, which deals with ideology and power in Norway.

<sup>17</sup> Harald S. Næss (ed.), *A History of Norwegian Literature*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1993, p. 21-30.

<sup>18</sup> Emily Albu, *The Normans in Their Propaganda, Myth and Subversion*, Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2001, p. 5.



Romantic history of oral tradition with considerable legendary elements.<sup>19</sup> Dudo's continuator, William of Jumièges, a Norman cleric contemporary to the battle of Hastings, wrote *Gesta Normanorum Ducum*, which continues the deeds of the dukes of Normandy in a similar romanticized style.

Another category of writing related to Scandinavia from the early and high Middle Ages are ecclesiastical treatises such as *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (*Deeds of the Bishops of Hamburg-Bremen*) written by Adam of Bremen in the period between 1073 and 1076. Although it is a description and history of the Hamburg-Bremen bishopric and its prelates, since the same bishops had jurisdiction over the Christianization of Scandinavia, it remains one of the few reports on Old Norse paganism, beliefs and struggles with the transition to the adoption of the Cross, and it provides details on the practice of human sacrifice at Uppsala.<sup>20</sup> Yet, the critical significance of Adam of Bremen's writing is that of a missionary history. It places the sacrifice of the bishops who dedicated their lives to spreading the Holy word above anything else and shuns the bishops at home for their complacency (*genus ignavum, quod tecto gaudet et umbra*) and for not continuing the struggle to bring the Cross to the people in the North (*legatio ad gentes*<sup>21</sup>).

Therefore, during the Middle Ages, the Northmen who led the expansion during the 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries were seen either as oppressors by the historians of the countries they invaded or as skilled warriors and intrepid explorers in their own accounts.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a shift in the historiographical paradigm. In the context of modernizing cultural developments and of the development of social and economic history, the Vikings/Old Norse began to be seen less as violent and rancorous empire builders – the issue of how far the Old Norse can be considered more ferocious than their neighbours still being an acrimonious one among historians – and more as a people

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<sup>19</sup> Idem, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> “There is a festival at Uppsala every nine years [...] The sacrifice is as follows; of every kind of male creature, nine victims are offered. By the blood of these creatures it is the custom to appease the gods. Their bodies, moreover, are hanged in a grove which is adjacent to the temple. This grove is so sacred to the people that the separate trees in it are believed to be holy because of the death or putrefaction of the sacrificial victims. There even dogs and horses hang beside human beings.” Adami, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, Hahniani, Hannover, 1876.

<sup>21</sup> *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, I.44.

who were characterized by innovativeness, influence, and nobleness.<sup>22</sup> Emphasis shifted from describing the great events in the political history of the Scandinavians, or the military exploits of their leaders, towards the rediscovery of the Old Norse society and culture in all its levels.<sup>23</sup>

Historical research and historiography that approached the subject of Medieval Scandinavia are both numerous and slightly divisive.<sup>24</sup> The *Handbook of Medieval Studies*<sup>25</sup> signals a few historiographical perspectives in respect to Medieval Scandinavia and the research approach and category of sources that interest this present research:

- in regards to the preference of scholars in the field of Medieval Scandinavia – which enjoys the existence of abundant primary sources – methodologies are more empiric and less theoretical or aesthetic;<sup>26</sup>
- each manuscript is in itself an important source regarding contemporary (political) attitudes<sup>27</sup> and, especially, the endeavour of the composition, redaction or copying of kings' sagas in Iceland is to be understood as an explanation of the relations with the Norwegian “motherland” and with the Norwegian monarchs;<sup>28</sup>
- the “elite” skills of producing literature in the vernacular were exploited by important families in Iceland as “tools of power” in parallel with Latin scholarship that served the same purpose;<sup>29</sup>
- the myths and cosmography presented in the *Eddas* or sources like *Landnámabók* were not meant as antiquated curiosities for the audience or sources of “flamboyant” ancient knowledge,

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<sup>22</sup> Clare Downham, “Viking Ethnicities: A Historiographic Overview”, in *History Compass*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2012, p. 2 (1-12).

<sup>23</sup> Idem.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, “Tendencies in the Historiography on the Medieval Nordic States (to 1350)”, in James S. Amelang, Siegfried Beer (eds.), *Public power in Europe: studies in historical transformations*, Pisa University Press, Pisa, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Albrecht Classen, *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 705.

<sup>27</sup> Sverre Bagge, “How Can We Use Medieval Historiography?” in M. Dallapiazza et al. (eds.), *International Scandinavian and Medieval Studies in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber*, Edizioni Parnaso, Trieste, 2000, pp. 29-42.

<sup>28</sup> See Ármann Jakobsson, *Í leit að konungi: Konungsmynd íslenskra konungasagna*, Reykjavík, Háskólaútgáfan, 1997.

<sup>29</sup> Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, pp. 339-346.

rather they had a prominent role as means of reinforcing the existing political and social organization, as well as the “tenure, legitimacy, and kinship links”.<sup>30</sup>

- some historians prefer to view the sagas as embodiments of high or late medieval ideology and culture rather than an accurate description of the times they narrate since the evaluation of sagas based on archaeological excavations or foreign sources – such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* – has resulted in inconsistencies being discovered.<sup>31</sup>

Corroborating the above findings while keeping in view the objective of providing an analysis of the ideology of power in Norway and Iceland during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, one can notice that the mentioned research aim – based on a theoretical analysis of the sources – relies on some tangible advantages:

- the nature of the methodology is focused on theoretical analysis and, as such, shall contribute towards balancing the ratio between empirical and theoretic approaches in this field.
- the primary sources – consisting in kings’ sagas, Icelandic family sagas, and oeuvres like *Konugs skuggsjá* – are considered as elucidatory regarding the political beliefs and concepts in the high medieval period.
- the primary literature that shall be analyzed is recognized as highly relevant for the research questions, and references to earlier sources, earlier events or myths and cosmology are also appropriate for revealing the political milieu of 12<sup>th</sup>- and 13<sup>th</sup>-century Norway and Iceland.

Reminiscing that the current research is based on the purpose of approaching an important segment of the Icelandic and Norwegian civilization from the perspective of the ideology of power, in order to explain how power relations operated on as many levels as possible, so as to provide an encompassing analysis, it must be added that, in order to do

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<sup>30</sup> Albrecht Classen, *op. cit.*, p. 700. See Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society. Vol. 1: The Myths*, Odense University Press, Odense, 1994.

<sup>31</sup> Albrecht Classen, *op. cit.*, p. 702-703. See Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, Odense University Press, Odense, 1999; Vesteyn Olason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age. Narration and Representation in the Sagas of the Icelanders*, Heimskringla, Reykjavík, 1998.

so, in the following subchapters the concept of “ideology” and “power” must be described and fused into a theoretical framework that shall serve as a standard in the following thematic chapters.

### 1.3 Remarks on Political Theory and its Historiography

Before delving into the theory of the ideology of power, it would be worthwhile to provide a few remarks regarding the academic interrelation of two fields: political theory and medieval history (or medieval studies). It is important to realize, from the beginning, that by analyzing sagas and other primary sources through the lens of the theory of the ideology of power it is not implied that the mentioned texts contain extensive explicit notions of political theory.

Medieval writers obviously did not understand the notion of the “political” as the term is understood today. A millennium ago, politics and political ideology were regarded as intrinsically connected to philosophy, religious beliefs, and moral standards. Therefore, it is useful to quote here the explanation from *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought c. 250–c. 1450*:<sup>32</sup>

“... if one accepts a definition of political as comprising those manipulable interrelationships in a particular area of life involving power, authority or influence, it is clear that even in the early Middle Ages theory was implicit in the institutions and procedures of society.”<sup>33</sup>

The above quotation helps us clarify that, while there exist some examples in which the primary sources used in this research convey direct information on the political ideology from 12<sup>th</sup>- and 13<sup>th</sup>-century Norway and Iceland, in almost all the analysis provided henceforth the research results shall be based on deductions from institutions or events relating to the monarchy that are described or presented in the sources.

What must be added is that the present research does not aim to delve into medieval political ideology by way of study of codes of law (which are quite extensive for the period of Early Medieval and High Medieval political developments in Europe), as many historians, as well as notable academics from the field of Law, have done.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> J.H. Burns, *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought c. 250–c. 1450*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988.

<sup>33</sup> Albrecht Classen, *op. cit.*, p. 1111.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1118.

The study of medieval political thought using modern means of research began with Otto von Gierke (famous for “Die publicistischen Lehren des Mittelalters”) and its translation by Frederic William Maitland,<sup>35</sup> who was the author of *The History of English Law before the Time of Edward I*<sup>36</sup> and who is also considered the father of legal history. The importance of the ideas proposed by von Gierke and sustained by Maitland consists in revealing the theoretical cleavage between the concepts of *Herrschaft* in Roman law and the notion of *Genossenschaft*<sup>37</sup> from Germanic law.<sup>38</sup>

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century came the publication of the monumental work *A History of Mediaeval Political Theory in the West* by Robert Warrand and Alexander James Carlyle.<sup>39</sup> This work, which is remarkably rich in Latin quotation and primary texts, introduced the idea of the primacy of law in medieval political thought, “the notion that in many important respects, law preceded and legitimized government, rather than vice versa”.<sup>40</sup>

Medieval political theory studies took a more philosophical turn with the publishing of Georges de Lagarde’s *La naissance de l’esprit laïque au declin du Moyen Age*<sup>41</sup> whose contribution, a rather qualitative analysis – an approach that was contrary to von Gierke’s tendencies – discussed the political thinking of Ockham<sup>42</sup> or Marsilius<sup>43</sup> in terms of

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<sup>35</sup> Otto von Gierke, *Political Theories of the Middle Age*, F.W. Maitland (transl.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1968, after “Die publicistischen Lehren des Mittelalters”, in *Das deutsche Genossenschaftsrecht*, vol. 3, Weidmann, Berlin, 1881.

<sup>36</sup> Frederic William Maitland, Sir Frederick Pollock, *The History of English Law before the Time of Edward I*, 2 vols., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1898.

<sup>37</sup> *Domination* (i.e. vertical powers exercised by the lords over their tenants) vs. *Cooperation* (horizontal relations between the class of the commoners). See John Ragnar Myking, Gertrud Thoma (eds.), *Bauern zwischen Herrschaft und Genossenschaft*, Akademisk Forlag, Trondheim, 2007, p. VII.

<sup>38</sup> Albrecht Classen, *op. cit.*, p. 1118.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Warrand, Alexander James Carlyle, *A History of Mediaeval Political Theory in the West*, vols. I-VI, William Blackwood and Sons, London and Edinburgh, 1903-1936.

<sup>40</sup> Albrecht Classen, *op. cit.*, p. 1119.

<sup>41</sup> Georges de Lagarde, *La naissance de l’esprit laïque au declin du Moyen Age*, 5 vols., Nauwelærts, Louvain-Paris, 1956.

<sup>42</sup> William of Ockham (c. 1287-1347), known for the eponymous principle according to which among multiple possible solutions, the simplest explanation ought to be selected (*lex parsimoniae*).

subjective rights and legal resistance against the ecclesiastic institutions.<sup>44</sup> Concomitantly to these developments, Ernst H. Kantorowicz developed a methodology which can, to a great extent, be considered a model for the present research project (though not in respect to its interdisciplinarity with theology). His seminal work, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*,<sup>45</sup> a multidisciplinary project between history, theology and political philosophy, established the English idea of the theology of the king's mystical dual body (the body political and the natural body) as having its roots in the ancient dictum "*duas personas habet gubernator*"<sup>46</sup> and as the source and foundation of the modern laic political system.<sup>47</sup>

Another important opus based on opposition against ecclesiastical political ideology, but this time the concept of order *versus* the Germanic interpretation of the same notion, was Fritz Kern's *Gottesgnadentum und Widerstandsrecht im früheren Mittelalter*.<sup>48</sup> A more important dichotomy in medieval political thinking was that between "ascending" (from the people) and "descending" (from God) theories of authority detailed by Walter Ullman in *A History of Political Thought: The Middle Ages* where he showed that "The history of political ideas in the Middle Ages is to a very large extent a history of the conflicts between these two theories of government".<sup>49</sup>

Beginning with the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the historiography of the field of analysis of medieval political theory we see this methodology reflected in a paradigm of dichotomy. As detailed in the introductory part of this work, Sverre Bagge similarly based his research on the dichotomy Viking warrior-king vs. Christian *Rex Justus*. Starting with Walter Ullman, who avoided the simplification of the rulership by popular acclaim vs. rulership by God's grace dichotomy (as both are evinced in Roman and canon law<sup>50</sup>), historians have embraced this line of

<sup>43</sup> Marsilius of Padua (c. 1275-c. 1342) author of the political treatise *Defensor pacis*, a refutation of the papal doctrine on "plenitude of power".

<sup>44</sup> Albrecht Classen, *op. cit.*, p. 1119.

<sup>45</sup> Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1957.

<sup>46</sup> Seneca, *Epistolae*, LXXXV, 35, apud Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 496.

<sup>47</sup> Albrecht Classen, *op. cit.*, p. 1120.

<sup>48</sup> Fritz Kern, *Kingship and Law in the Middle Ages*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1939.

<sup>49</sup> Walter Ullman, *A History of Political Thought: The Middle Ages*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1965, p. 13.

<sup>50</sup> Albrecht Classen, *op. cit.*, p. 1120.