

Abstract

The study is focused on the Old Norse “contemporary sagas” (texts composed with a short time distance from the events of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that are recorded in them) and some of the bishops’ sagas as images of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelanders’ identity and their relationship to other lands, especially Norway. It aims at analysing the roles and meanings of various identity bearers portrayed in these sources – chieftains, royal representatives, ecclesiastical dignitaries, and saintly bishops. The approach to the sources is based on an analysis of how recent historical events were transformed into a narrative discourse, in which they were connected to the more distant past that formed the medieval Icelandic society’s cultural memory. That way, these events themselves became a part of this society’s cultural memory, and the given historical knowledge was endowed with specific meanings, which were not inherently present in the knowledge itself, but were based on its contextualization. The study shows how the narrativization of the recent events and their integration into the cultural memory creates a meaningful relationship between the past and the present.

The objective of the study is to show how the narrative sources reflect the society’s perception of its recent past and of the various elements of continuity and change in the political system and in the relationships to other lands. Firstly, the sources provide insight into how the society evaluated its internal development, which included gradual concentration of power and some considerable changes in the political structure of the society. Secondly, the texts depict the gradually changing extent and form of contact between medieval Iceland and Norway. On the political level, the power structures of both lands became interconnected through alliances and cooperation, which finally led to the formal acceptance of Norwegian royal rule in 1262. On the social level, this development gradually broadened the horizon within which the medieval Icelanders constructed their identity, as their perception of their own identity was increasingly formed by their relationship to the European social space. Neither of these changes was abrupt or immediate, however – they were long-term, gradual processes. The study emphasizes the balance between new developments and continuity in the Icelandic society around the time of the establishment of Iceland’s union with Norway and in the preceding and following decades.