Editorial

Dear Subscriber,

A new year and new fresh ideas of what is to come. From our side, we know that the Viking Heritage Magazine will be coming to you as usual this year and, as far as we can foresee, for years to come. We begin the year with the aim of reaching many more subscribers and developing the Magazine, both by expanding the content as well as our covering of different activities on the Viking theme.

To enable us to reach our goals, we have re-organised our operations and also increased our staff. Mia Göransson will be working with us for the next 6 months, both with the database and the Magazine. Alexander Andreeff, whose main task is to adapt the results from the excavation at Fröjel (http://fröjel.hgo.se) to a Visitors' Centre, will work partly with marketing the Magazine. Here we would like to ask all our subscribers to help us become a worldwide magazine, by getting more subscribers, but also by telling us about new interesting discoveries, news or research results concerning the Viking world. For those of you who manage to get 3 new subscribers, a genuine gift awaits you.

At the moment, we are working on publishing a book about Viking attractions in the North Sea region as a part of our co-operation with North Sea Viking Legacy. Next autumn we are also planning to produce a book of the most interesting articles during the last 5 years of the magazine, as a sort of celebration of our 5th anniversary.

We hope you will enjoy our first issue for the year 2001.

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Words of Wisdom

"It is best for man to be middle-wise,
Not over cunning and clever:
The learned man whose lore is deep
Is seldom happy at heart"

From Hávamál
(“The High One”)

About the front page:
Silk painting based on the rune stone from the Island of Lidingö, Stockholm. Read more on page 22-23. Artwork by Valentina Kuprina / Photograph by Manx National Heritage

http://viking.hgo.se

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Dear Reader!
Sagas and Society III

How credible is the picture of slavery in Icelandic Literature?

BY MICHAEL NEß

This is the third and final part of the series of articles dealing with the phenomenon of slavery on Iceland in the Viking Age. The two previous parts were published in VHM 3/00 and 4/00.

Questioning the picture of slavery, we will now focus on the Landnámabók (landtaking-book) as one of our main sources for social structures during the colonisation phase. That book has been preserved in different editions/versions. However we should emphasise a lack of historical authenticity; in some cases texts exhibit the narrative-fictional style of the Sagas.

The Landnámabók’s prime concern is the first person present at a place colonizing land — or donating land to another. So as to leave no doubt about owner rights the book also mentions the generations to come, including the family tree; in that way the ancestor is not only placed locally but also genetically, so to speak. Slaves are only mentioned when of some importance in the course of the events. This means all cases when slaves were liberated and received land, when a freedman colonized land on his own, when an enslaved noblewoman was redeemed, when a colonizer kidnapped freedmen, when slaves ran away, when they killed their master or if anything out of the ordinary happened to slaves or freedmen. However thralls are never mentioned for their own sake. In many cases the main objective is to express contempt for slaves.

Fitting quite well into that picture, the late Viking version of the Landnámabók tells us about the importance of keeping the memory of the colonisation phase alive,”so that we can better answer strangers when they accuse us of originating from thralls or criminals”. The lack of this very preface in the two later manuscripts gives us some clue of how the importance of a proper ancestry had declined during the Sturlunga Age.

As further sources for the picture of slavery in Icelandic writing, Áris Íslandisgabók and literary models from the Continent can be mentioned, remembering that both types of literature were accessible to the late medieval educated elite on the island. On the other hand, invectives about slaves were less exclusive, common knowledge to all Icelanders.

According to popular expression, slaves are not only fools, cowards and thieves but also extremely ugly. In that context our texts tell us with special affection about the dark skin and hooked noses of enslaved men. There are scholars who would like to see anthropological evidence in these descriptions, pointing out that many slaves had Celtic blood. However we must be extremely cautious with this kind of interpretations. More likely, the darkness is meant symbolically (a common theme not unknown in our own culture). This typified picture of slaves becomes part of the vernacular, a common phrase that was readily recognised by all listeners when used in literature.

We should recall that slaves are not mentioned in all the Sagas. The number of slaves depends on the story’s milieu. As is the case in the Landnámabók, slaves are never described for their own sake but in order to spur on the course of the events. We cannot suppose that all events are fictional; hence there is some strong evidence for embellishment by some authors.

A common theme, picturing the slaves’ stupidity is the stereotype of the delayed messenger. While a freeborn is able to distinguish between important and unimportant, a slave is not capable of such perception. In the Erbyggja Saga, Arnkel is killed by pursuing enemies just because the only surviving slave forgets about help for his master, even in a situation of extreme danger. Quite interestingly, there is scarcely mention of a slave in the story’s prototype in the Landnámabók. Consequently, the author of the Erbyggja Saga has embodied the original story with a thrilling episode and found the theme of the half-witted slave a suitable addition.

There is one more story from the Landnámabók that illustrates this narrative embellishment, telling us about a slave called Nagli who ran away from a bloody fight. There is no further attention is paid to the destiny of those killed. Only thralls would be stupid enough to be killed by a senile, almost blind man...

The legal parallels indicate that there must be some connection to another text. And in fact, thanks to the Landnámabók we know about the colonizer called Ketilbjörn who killed his two slaves (in that case a man and a woman) in a similar situation. However the author shows hardly any signs of pity here either. A slave seems to be nothing but a tool, which one can get rid of at any time and without any bad conscience.

Saga literature has many examples of masters making their slaves commit crimes. In Njáls Saga, Hallgerðr a thoroughly evil woman, charges the slave, Melkoff, to commit larceny and arson. According to the listeners’ prejudice those were typical slave-like crimes. Nevertheless in the beginning even the inferior...
Melkhoff refuses to do such things, making Hallgerðr appear even nastier.

Characterizing the master by describing his slave is a popular stylistic method in Saga literature. Thus one could describe any difference in character while his slave is a popular stylistic method in similarly to livestock when they stray to a appears, the slave can be punished for his an objective Saga-style. Sometimes, it law, a criminal thrall could be punished, having lost his rights to protection, similarly to livestock when they stray to a foreign meadow.

**Two other well-known slave-themes** in Icelandic literature are the "untied shoelaces" and "fatal presents" motives. This is self-explanatory through the ritual concept of a present as a sign of esteem between equals. Consequently, a thrall is excluded from such things to begin with. If not, the exchanged objects will be cursed. Melkolf's arson is uncovered in this way, since he left his knife at the place of crime. However his sword is found in a great shame and by doing that the exchanged objects will be cursed. If deemed from such things to begin with. If not, the exchanged objects will be cursed. A certain interest on the authors' part can also be perceived by reading about the chieftain daughters Melkorka and Arnheid (Laxdalsaga/Droplangarsaga). Both of them are sensationally beautiful. Especially in Melkorka's case it seems quite obvious that her entire description is contrived to prepare for the later uncovering of her true identity: she actually shows signs of some intelligence! Porkelig Knufa, on the other hand, was the son of an enslaved noblewoman. Throughout the story, his handsomeess is stressed such an extent that there is hardly any doubt that the average thrall is supposed to be rather ugly. Even the Vatnsdalasaga offers some fine examples of insult, when our hero is called an "ambitatorson".

**To summarize** our investigation we can note that Saga literature developed a definite picture of slaves, with a given position in the narrative structure of the story, that being that a thrill is meant to be stupid, cowardly, thievish and ugly. One might wonder about the origins of that stereotype. In that context we should remember that there are a few centuries between the days the Sagas were meant to take place and the time they were written down. It seems quite unlikely that surviving invectives alone are to blame in filling that tradition gap. Probably we have to deal with the more complex formation of a narrative theme.

For some text examples we are able to stress the influence of other literal sources, like the Landnámabók, Átri's Ísendlagabók and the written law. Nevertheless the possibility that some continental tradition might have influenced Saga literature cannot be rejected either. Actually, one would expect all these books to be part of the average monastery library on Iceland. Consequently, that very fact increases the probability of our hypothesis that Sagas were written in the monasteries, at someone else's request. In this context we should make a remark of some interest: in Saga literature even representatives of the lower classes, such as beggar women, can act in slave-typical functions. Furthermore there is hardly any clear distinction made between ískvart (= farm-hand) and Þráll. From the perspective of the late medieval upper class such distinctions had simply lost their relevance: referring to the new ideology, freeborn were not regarded as equals anymore. On the contrary, a strong feeling of contempt had developed for all people "down there", whether slaves or not!

**Literature sources:** Hastrup, Culture and society on medieval Iceland, 1985; Wilde-Stockmeyer, Sklaverei auf Island, 1978