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## Abstract & Keywords

This study deals with the so-called ‘post-classical’ *Íslendingasögur* which mostly met with rejection and devaluation from saga research for a long time. Although the last years saw a growing interest in the texts and more detailed analyses, their depiction in literary histories and handbooks is not satisfying. The sub-genre just seems to contain those texts not fitting the generally accepted image of an *Íslendingasaga* and gives the impression of being a mere appendage to the actual genre. The ‘post-classical’ *Íslendingasögur* are supposed to be more fantastic than their realistic predecessors. It is, however, not possible to define their ‘fantastic element’ exactly – neither as a unifying element of the ‘post-classical’ sagas nor as a definite parameter to distinguish them from the early and classical ones. A closer look at related discussions reveals that the distinction of realistic and fantastic is actually based on the distinction of history and fiction, which, however, is highly problematic, and can also not be clearly drawn in the context of saga literature. This distinction is, moreover, irrelevant if the *Íslendingasögur* are understood as representations of the Icelanders’ cultural memory; a perspective offering a convincing approach to their deeper understanding as saga research in recent decades has shown.

The present study follows this path and relates the ‘post-classical’ *Íslendingasaga* to cultural studies. The approach combines Jürg Glauser’s adaption of Jan Assmann’s concept of cultural memory to saga literature with Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory, in order to answer the following questions: What exactly is the ‘post-classical’ *Íslendingasaga*? How can we best describe the late medieval writing of *Íslendingasögur* in order to come to an understanding of the actual texts as well as the differentiation drawn by contemporary saga research? Part I of this study demonstrates that instead of considering the *Íslendingasögur* a definite literary genre, they should be understood as a genre of cultural texts. In terms of Jan Assmann, they are concrete in space, time and identity: in their stories, they combine the Icelanders’ emigration, settlement and Christianisation, i. e. the three fixed points and central memory figures forming the cornerstones of Icelandic identity. The *Íslendingasögur* thus establish the so-called *söguöld* (saga age) as the literary representation of an Icelandic *Ursprungszeit* (time of origin) on the basis of orally transmitted memories of origins as well as earlier literary representations of it, particularly *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*, and foreign models. Taking into account the setting of space and time in the different saga genres and their underlying group identity, all genuine Norse saga genres can be distinguished as different cultural text genres defining different aspects of Icelandic identity in the Middle Ages. The past they reconstruct for the Icelanders is a historical past, but not in a modern sense. It is not a past remembered for its own sake, but to derive orientation for the present. A specific Icelandic *Ursprungszeit* comes first into being in orality, probably as soon as in the 10th century, when while establishing a new society on the island, the immigrants remember their beginnings in order to define their identity and to ensure their group cohesion. The advent of writing leads to major changes in Icelandic cultural memory, as oral and literal societies have different strategies for stabilising memory, which is in consequence of human neurogenetics in a permanent flux. With the

amalgamation of indigenous oral culture and imported European written culture comes the scripting of oral memory in form of eddic and scaldic verse, but above all the development of Icelandic historiography. The *Íslendingasögur* take part in this development and therefore the textualisation of Icelandic society.

This study does not regard the ‘post-classical’ *Íslendingasögur* as products of a decline of classical saga writing, as has long been assumed, but instead as a result of the progressive textualisation of Icelandic society showing quantitative and qualitative changes in the use of writing from 1300 onwards. Whereas from a modern perspective, the ‘post-classical’ *Íslendingasögur* seem starkly different from their predecessors, no distinction is drawn in medieval times. Rather, the composition of the ‘post-classical’ texts as well as their transmission and reception in the Middle Ages indicates an awareness of considering all *Íslendingasögur* including *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* as a unity of “landnámssögur” (settlement histories). Although the *söguöld* consolidates Icelandic founding memories in form of a historic past, they are still fluid in an oral-written continuum. The gradual shift from orality to literacy makes writing in the Middle Ages a “memory stabilizer ready for modulation” as Johannes Fried puts it. The *Íslendingasögur* stabilise Icelandic memories of the origins by converting them into written form as *söguöld* thereby establishing a new form of cultural memory. The so-called classical saga style, which gives the impression of objectively reporting what has happened, replaces the credibility of the narrator, who guarantees the truth of culturally binding traditions in oral transmission. It develops fully in the 14th century, after the lineage of Icelandic authorities the lineage of authorities confirming the authenticity of their community’s memories of origins – from Ari to Sturla Þórðarson – comes to an end in the late 13th century. From then on, the *Íslendingasögur*’s claim to truth as memories of origins is only formally expressed and no longer needs to be confirmed by any living authority. Oral tradition independent of the *Íslendingasögur* gradually ceases to exist independently of the *Íslendingasögur*.

Instead, the *söguöld* becomes the main representation of the Icelandic *Ursprungszeit*. Still transmitted orally – in reading aloud from manuscripts, oral retelling after memory or *rímur* adaptations that were composed in writing but mainly recited orally – it is, despite its existence in written records, in a permanent state of flux in the Middle Ages and beyond, as is shown by the variance of surviving manuscripts. The emergence of *Íslendingasögur*, referred to as ‘post-classical’ in later times, is also a result of the *söguöld*’s change in the flow of memory. Like their classical models, the ‘post-classical’ *Íslendingasögur* participate in the construction of an Icelandic past and are thus founding memories. They also represent an authoritative truth for the medieval audience and are no less normative and formative, however unrealistic their way of constructing Icelandic origins may seem to the modern reader. Formally and in terms of narrative space, they connect to their classical predecessors and contribute to the construction of the *söguöld*, even if their way of doing so differs from earlier *Íslendingasaga* writing. They are, however, not merely imitations for entertainment reasons, as is often claimed, but expressions of a cultural memory that has shifted to writing much more decisively than in the 13th century.

A closer look at the reception of the *Íslendingasögur* from the Middle Ages to modern times reveals that denying the ‘post-classical’ *Íslendingasögur*’s contribution to the construction of an Icelandic past and with it an Icelandic identity is a quite recent and primarily academic phenomenon. My analysis shows how scholarly construction of the

‘post-classical’ *Íslendingasaga* finally emerges as a result of several breaks in the *Íslendingasögur*’s transmission and reception, leading to changes in their mythomotrics, i. e. their collective guiding function, as well as in how the “post-classical” representatives are regarded. After coming into existence to guarantee cultural continuity across the break that the advent of writing is for Icelandic society, the genre establishes itself in the wake of the break that the loss of independence in 1262/64 represents for society. The ‘post-classical’ texts emerge after the end of personally authorized oral tradition representing an essential break in the process of cultural memory. After the founding of Icelandic society in form of *Íslendingasögur* comes to an end by the early 15th century at the latest, the new medium of *rímur* poetry, which translates sagas into verse, helps to keep them alive past the end of the Middle Ages. Questions of identity seem to fall somewhat out of fashion at that time, but acquire new salience with the Reformation, which represents an enormous break for Icelandic society, leading to a return to medieval literature. Along with this post-Reformation rediscovery of saga literature comes the re-evaluation of the *Íslendingasögur* as testimonials of a lost golden age and consequently a turn to pronounced counter-present mythomotrics. In order to gain orientation for the present from the *Íslendingasögur*, the *söguöld* is no longer updated by writing new sagas, but rather primarily by interpreting or transforming them into other types of texts, such as *rímur* in particular, which also entails interpretation.

Two different ways of looking at the *Íslendingasögur* develop in post-medieval times which gradually drift apart. Whereas the Icelandic reception in a cultural context adheres to the truth of the *Íslendingasögur* as representatives of the Icelandic origins, the European scholarly reception for which Arngrímur Jónsson (1568–1648) is the main starting point increasingly shows signs of criticism. Essential breaking points shape both perceptions, neither of which can be reduced to a common denominator and which interfere in different ways. Two of those breaks are crucial to an understanding of the ‘post-classical’ *Íslendingasaga*: firstly, in the course of social evolution in Europe, the dichotomy of truth and lie which is characteristic for cultural memory and pre-modern discourse, is replaced in scholarship by the dichotomy of history and fiction around 1800. Secondly, in the Icelandic struggle for independence from Denmark in the late 19th and early 20th century, the interpretation of the *Íslendingasögur* is actualised in order to achieve the aim of national independence, making their mythomotrics revolutionary. From a cultural studies perspective, the ‘post-classical’ *Íslendingasaga* can be understood as scholarship in the service of myth. Analysing the reception of the *Íslendingasögur*, the present study not only demonstrates how the ‘post-classical’ *Íslendingasaga* comes into being as a scientific concept, it also reveals why Luhmann’s systems theory is an appropriate approach to come to an understanding of the ‘post-classical’ *Íslendingasaga* as a scholarly construct as well as the late medieval development of the genre of texts that are separated in later times. The ‘post-classical’ *Íslendingasögur* come into existence at a point in time when writing is used in Icelandic society not only for recording purposes, but has also become a medium of communication, which is an important step in the evolution of society. The basis for distinguishing them from the other *Íslendingasögur* is the dichotomy of history and fiction, closely connected to the next important step in social evolution, the functional differentiation of society, which is initiated by writing and accomplished by the medium of print around 1800.

In part II of this study, systems theory is therefore used to analyse the writing of the late medieval *Íslendingasaga*. In understanding the *Íslendingasögur* as self-descriptions of the Icelanders and therefore communication of a social system, the distinction of medium and form, used in systems theory to treat communication, can be applied to them. It is argued that after the establishment of writing as a medium for communication and the *söguöld*'s construction as a clearly contoured *Ursprungszeit* by 13th *Íslendingasögur*, the *söguöld* itself becomes a medium of communication for Icelandic society. Bound to a specific three-stage communication process "between body and writing", it is a symbolically specialized medium of communication produced by the system. It consists of the fixed points of Icelandic cultural memory, emigration, settlement and Christianisation, and the *Íslendingasaga*'s conventions concerning style and storytelling as well as central narrative components, and generates the forms of the different *Íslendingasögur*. These are typically mutable and ephemeral and in turn regenerate the medium. In combining the "immanent whole" of Icelandic memories of origins with the potential of writing to represent mere possibilities, the medium is able to produce new forms that actualise the Icelandic memories of origin in the late Middle Ages. The main difference between 13th century *Íslendingasögur* and their late medieval successors is that whereas the first create the *söguöld* as a new textual reality, the latter do not only react to lived reality and a few written representations of Icelandic past and identity, but in particular to this new reality created by earlier *Íslendingasögur*. The difference between past and present in Icelandic society, which becomes obvious through writing down their own origins, is overcome in the 'post-classical' *Íslendingasögur* by using the *söguöld* as a mediating instance between past and present as well as between body and writing. In this way, tradition can be both continued and updated. The late medieval *Íslendingasögur* continue to integrate orally transmitted memory and presume the knowledge of such for their full understanding; their main characteristic, however, is the construction of the Icelandic *Ursprungszeit* on the basis of other written texts. In order to give additional meaning to the superficial saga texts, the late medieval *Íslendingasögur* make use of the symbolic significance that certain elements of saga literature have acquired by representing cultural memory, or they acculturate and assimilate elements of foreign texts in order to enrich Icelandic memories of origin. The significance of the human body for transmitting memory in oral tradition is transformed into written form by the narratives' use of personification as a central means of conveying and debating immaterial aspects of Icelandic identity. In late medieval *Íslendingasaga* writing, the protagonists do not only represent Icelandic society, but picture it, and thus give shape to the past.

The medial construction of Icelandic origins developed by the late medieval *Íslendingasögur* is a result of the first step in the evolution of society that is initiated by writing. The main consequence of writing is, as Luhmann shows, an evolution of the way systems observe themselves. First-order-observations are increasingly replaced by observations of a higher order, i. e. instead of observing the world as such, observations are observed. This eventually leads to a functional differentiation of society and, in the course of this, to an awareness of the "post-classical" *Íslendingasaga*'s distinctness. The late medieval *Íslendingasögur* are still first-order observations and consequently have no auto-reflective or fictional potential. However, by using the *söguöld* as a medium for communication, they broaden the view on Icelandic origins and can thus communicate about topics not

accessible to pure first-order observations: the emergence of Icelandic society as well as immaterial changes it undergoes over time. The late medieval sagas continue the construction of Icelandic origins against the backdrop of and with recourse to a wide range of other written texts, indigenous and foreign. They all update the *söguöld* so that, despite profound changes in society and an increasing difference between past and present, it can continue to serve society to found the present and provide orientation for the future. The detachment from the pagan past as well as the transformation of important identity-forming memories with pagan connotations in order to enable society to hold on to them in a Christian context are prime concerns of late medieval *Íslendingasaga* writing. Another key feature is the texts' keen interest in boundaries and outsiders in different contexts. In this way, they thematise the difference between system and environment, which writing as a medium of communication makes more explicit. Through a medial level of meaning inscribed in the sagas via direct or indirect references to other written texts, personification makes these immaterial changes in the figure of the saga protagonists visible, which at the same time allows for an actualisation of founding memory.

Readings of several 'post-classical' *Íslendingasögur*, detailed and in passing, present concrete examples that demonstrate this mediality of the *söguöld*. A medial construction of Icelandic origins, albeit to varying degrees, is shown to be the unifying element in late medieval *Íslendingasaga* writing. As different as the texts may be in other respects, they all use personification and the textual realities other texts create to make their contribution to constructing an Icelandic past. Whereas Christianisation is embodied by the protagonists in *Hávarðar saga*, *Finnboga saga* and *Bárðar saga*, the protagonists in *Harðar saga*, *Kjalnesinga saga*, *Flóamanna saga* and *Bárðar saga* personify the distancing from paganism by turning away from and fighting pagan gods who appear in person. The ambivalence associated with the change of faith is in particular dealt with in *Bárðar saga*, *Kjalnesinga saga* and *Grettis saga*. Both *Bárðar saga* and *Kjalnesinga saga* construct a specific Icelandic pagan prehistory which integrates positively connoted aspects of paganism, like the belief in helpful beings in nature, whereas negative aspects, in particular the belief in pagan gods, are dissociated. *Bárðar saga* makes the borders of human society visible and creates an Icelandic *orbis alius* to locate supernatural beings who no longer have a place there. *Kjalnesinga saga*, in contrast, performs an integration in society through historicisation and Christianisation and finally its reconciliation with its pagan roots. *Grettis saga* transforms Grettir, the most famous outsider and borderliner of Old Icelandic literature, into a saint who plays an important part in the divine plan of the Icelanders' Christianisation. Through ingenious references to classical and medieval literature, both theological and secular, his death is medially staged as a sacrifice that atones for the Icelanders' pagan past while also setting up a monument to it. Two of the late medieval *Íslendingasögur* which show a pronounced mediality completely Christianise the Icelandic pagan past: *Víglundar saga* combines the myth of Icelandic independence with the new late medieval status of the country as part of an empire, thus updating the *söguöld* in a formative sense. Most remarkable, however, is the saga's normative updating, using the frame of a feud to convey late medieval Christian norms, particularly on sexual behaviour. *Króka-Refs saga* is the biography of an extraordinary hero who starts as a good-for-nothing and finds success, reflecting the Icelandic development from a society structured by honour and feud to a feudal society, the grand finale of which, from a late medieval perspective, is Iceland's

integration into the Christian world, accompanied by incorporation into a kingdom. Using the past as a medium in this way enables the saga to maintain the myth of Icelandic independence as well to actualise Icelandic self-image from a late medieval perspective. The 'post-classical' *Íslendingasögur* thus create illusions of reality that can only be recognised as such through higher-order observations. In the process of the Icelandic society's textualisation, the late medieval development of the genre has to be understood as an innovation of cultural memory in the wake of writing, which can be explained as a specific form of mediality in terms of systems theory.

**Keywords**

'post-classical' *Íslendingasögur*, reception history, cultural memory, textualisation, systems theory, intertextuality, mediality

,postklassische' *Íslendingasögur*, Rezeptionsgeschichte, kulturelles Gedächtnis, Textualisierung, Systemtheorie, Intertextualität, Medialität