



CAPITAL, FIELD, ILLUSIO.
CAN BOURDIEU'S SOCIOLOGY HELP US UNDERSTAND THE
DEVELOPMENT OF LITERATURE IN MEDIEVAL ICELAND?¹

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In the thirteenth-century treatise on rhetoric by Ólafur hvítaskáld Þórðarson, there is the following skaldic stanza which is said to have been composed by Ólafur's uncle, Snorri Sturluson:

Eyjólfi berðu elfar
úlfseðjandi kveðju
heim þá er honum sómi
heyra best með eyrum
því að skilmildra skálda
skörungmann lofag örvan,
hann lifi sælstr und sólu
sannauðigra manna.²

[Man, bring this greeting home to Eyjólfur, so he can listen to it for his honour. This is because of all generous poets I praise this outstanding man. May he live as the happiest of men under the sun, this truly wealthy fellow.]

Ólafur explains in his treatise that the Eyjólfur whom the stanza is intended for was a “very good poet and a good farmer though he wasn't very rich”. This is one of several indications in Snorri's works, or others from the period in which he lived, that poetry was an endeavour that was considered as having an intrinsic worth: Eyjólfur is truly rich (“sannauðigur”) because he is an especially good poet “skáld einkar gott”. It does seem quite remarkable that the wealthiest man in Iceland, Snorri Sturluson, who was also the most powerful, at least for long periods of his life, should express so much admiration for one who in no way could be considered as having been as successful as him. Snorri was a powerful and rich magnate, who had received great honours from Norwegian royalty, for his poetry among other things. Eyjólfur was “only” a very good poet. This is why the stanza suggests that literature – or at least poetry – did indeed have a special place in Icelandic society and helps us understand why



someone like Snorri, so active in the spheres of power, also seems to have devoted so much time and energy to literature.

I would like to use this example, and others, in order to propose the existence of what I will call, following Pierre Bourdieu, a literary field in medieval Iceland. By doing this, I believe a contribution can be made to the understanding of the relationship between the saga literature and social reality in medieval Iceland.

What is a literary field? In order to explain this, it is necessary to give an overview of Bourdieu's social theory. I will do this in a series of sections, each using examples from thirteenth-century Iceland to illustrate different concepts developed by the french sociologist. A final one will explain what a literary field is and argue the case for its existence in Iceland in the thirteenth century.

CAPITAL

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) renewed social theory considerably in his lifetime by creating and developing concepts which opened up new ways of thinking about society and how people behave as social beings. Some of these concepts appeared early in his career, while he was doing ethnographic research in Algeria. Through the study of the honour-based society of the mountainous region of Kabylia, he discovered that honour was not a uniform or discrete notion. Indeed, it was better described as a composite one since it was constituted by many different things and as a cumulative one, since it can increase and decrease depending on what one does or what happens. This led him to describe society through a three-dimensional model he calls 'social space' and in which actors are competing for different types of capital. The sum total of capital an individual starts off with, or manages to acquire, determines his position within the social space. The types of capital are essentially three: economic, symbolic and cultural, and though it is useful to think of them separately, the three types also interact considerably and can be intertwined.³

In order to illustrate this, I will take examples from Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga*, a part of the *Sturlunga saga* compilation, in which he describes how his uncle Snorri, and Snorri's two brothers, Þórður and Sighvatur, each became very prominent men in Iceland.⁴ They are the sons of Hvamm-Sturla Þórðarson, a *goði* or chieftain of the Dalir region in West Iceland, and of Guðný Böðvarsdóttir, whose family dominates the Borgarfjörður area, to the South.



Though Hvamm-Sturla probably enhanced his position within the Icelandic social space during his lifetime by taking over his rival's, Einar Þorgilsson, position as head *goði* of the area, he did not attain the highest spheres of power in Iceland in his times. However, all three of his sons managed to do that and – if we use Bourdieu's concepts – it can be said that each of them acquired more social capital than their father. How did they do this?

ECONOMIC

Let's begin by looking at economic capital. In a recent book on Icelandic *goðar* of the thirteenth century, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson sees four different types of sources of revenues they could have at their disposal. The first is some kind of tax his *þingmenn*, i.e. the free farmers whom he protected and who supported him, paid the *goði* when riding to parliament with him, or other similar payments. The second are gifts the *goði* might receive in exchange for prosecuting lawsuits on behalf of his *þingmenn* or others. The third source could be loot obtained in battle. The fourth, and this Jón Viðar believes to have constituted by far the most important part of the chieftain's revenues, was what he gained from his own property and from the *staðir* (sing. *staður*), he had control over.⁵ *Staðir* were main churches to which the church tax called *tíund* (tithe) was payed each year. Some of it went to the bishop, some of it to the poor, but part of it went to the the layperson who had control over the land on which the church was built. Usually, this person was the heir of those who had given the land and other property as well to the church. In many cases, however, it had been specified in the donation that he and his heirs would keep control over it. It was an original solution that allowed the lay chieftains to show their faith by giving to the church without keeping their heirs from benefiting in the future from their property. This right was not only transmitted to direct heirs but could be transferred to others.

When Snorri is thirty, he obtains control over Reykholt, a rich *staður* which brings him a secure and generous revenue. Those who sought to become major players in Icelandic politics in Snorri's lifetime all seem to have tried the same strategy, Snorri's brothers also. Þórður lives at Staður on the peninsula of Snæfellsnes and it can be safely assumed that he controlled its revenues. Sighvatur acquires Grenjaðarstaður in northern Iceland, after having had control over Hjarðarholt, which he probably received from his father. Snorri not only has Reykholt, but also Stafholt and Melstaður. Recently, an Icelandic historian has expressed doubts over whether it was as lucrative to control the *staðir* as it has hitherto been believed to have been.⁶



Given the confrontations between Church authorities and the chieftains over the *staðir*, both in the late twelfth century and the second half of the thirteenth, this does not seem plausible. The chieftains would not have brought over themselves the anger of the Church unless they stood to lose a vital source of revenue by handing the *staðir* over to the Church.⁷ Also, they would not have gone out of their way to acquire control over them, as Snorri most certainly does, unless it was important to them.⁸

As soon as Snorri has moved to Reykholt, his nephew, Sturla Þórðarson the saga-writer, says of him: “He then became a great lord, and that he could because he had no lack of money.”⁹ This is a telling remark, because it means that economic power was an important factor in becoming more than a simple *goði*, i.e. in attaining the position of *höfðingi*, which means chieftain or even lord as the word is translated here. However, great wealth was not an end but a mean.¹⁰ Considerable resources allowed the chieftain to carry himself in a lordly way, enabling him to have an imposing retinue, wear fine clothing and live in comfortable and beautiful dwellings.¹¹ He could use his wealth to give his friends costly gifts, thereby enhancing his position and it also served as a security, permitting him to pay fines or compensation if he lost a law-suit.

SYMBOLIC

For chieftains (*goðar*) striving to become lords (*höfðingjar*), like Snorri and his brothers, wealth was thus very important. However, it seems mainly to have served the purpose of increasing their prestige in society, allowing them to increase their honour by other means. One can therefore say that the possession of economic capital is very much entwined with that of another type of capital which Bourdieu calls symbolic. This type of capital is non material but one can say that it is an attribute, a faculty, a position or a possession which others within the social space recognize as having value. In medieval times, this type of capital was of course very important because of a greater sense of the sacred than in modern times. To be part of holy orders had great symbolic value and the highest church officials were intrinsically the bearers of considerable symbolic capital. This was also true of royalty in neighbouring countries since only those who had royal blood could accede to the throne.

By the time the three sons of Hvamm-Sturla were coming of age, a certain symbolic value seems also to have been attributed to *goðar* and their offspring, which might be a reason for considering them as a type of aristocracy. Indeed, though a *goðorð* could in theory be bought



by or given to anybody, there is no credible example of anybody becoming *goði* without being born into a family of *goðar*. This means that Snorri and his brothers, even though they were the common heirs of only one *goðorð*, that of their father, had considerable symbolic capital which they could use in order to increase the total amount of capital at their disposal.

Let's begin by looking at Þórður, the eldest. He inherits his father's chieftaincy when Hvamm-Sturla dies. Though it is the common inheritance of the three brothers, he administers it alone to begin with. Thus, he is already a chieftain though not yet twenty, and can start to make a name for himself. He then marries the daughter of Ari sterki, the chieftain of the region of Snæfellsnes. He would not have been able to do this, had he not been himself of a *goði* family.

Þórður's father-in-law does not seem to have any other heir, so when he dies Þórður receives his chieftainship. This allows Sighvatur, who now has come of age, to take over the paternal *goðorð* in the Dalir region. He also marries very well, since his wife is a sister of Kolbeinn Tumason, who controls the Skagafjörður district and the most prominent lord in the north of Iceland. Both of Sighvatur's brothers-in-law die prematurely and he moves north to administer their *goðorð*, until the rightful heir comes of age. In addition, Sighvatur's son has been given the *goðorð* of the Eyjafjörður district, so his control over the north of Iceland is quite solid during part of his life. This is all linked to his marriage to Halldóra Tumadóttir, which would not have taken place unless Sighvatur had been of *goði* blood.

The same can be said of Snorri. He marries the daughter of one of the richest men in Borgarfjörður, the priest Bersi Vermundarson. He is of *goði* blood, being a descendant of Egill Skalla-Grímsson and thus a distant relative of Snorri and his brothers. Indeed, their mother is the daughter of a *goði* of a neighbouring part of the Borgarfjörður region. Because of Snorri's ascendance, and probably also because his maternal uncles gave him parts of *goðorð*, Snorri could marry Herdís Bersadóttir and gain control over her father's wealth and probably the *goðorð* that went with it.

These marital stories show how important blood was for social promotion. There was a sphere of power, that of the *goðar*, which was reserved for some families. This allows one to conclude that they formed some kind of aristocracy, i.e. a social group endowed with symbolic capital unattainable by other social groups. As we have seen, this symbolic capital created opportunities for acquiring economic capital, which in turn allowed the chieftain to increase his prestige, i.e. his symbolic capital. The two types help each other, but both are essential, as



a counter-example shows, that of Kolskeggur auðgi, a very rich man in southern Iceland who was not a *goði* and therefore had less social status than the local lord who could use Kolskeggur's wealth as he pleased.¹²

I cannot leave the subject of symbolic capital without mentioning the fact that the most prominent family in Iceland in the late twelfth century is not only a *goði* family, but also has blood ties with the Norwegian royal family. Indeed, Jón Loftsson's mother, Þóra, was the illegitimate daughter of King Magnús barefoot and Jón Loftsson had been officially recognized as a relative of the royal family at court. Jón's family seems to have been a center of propagation of royal ideology in Iceland and it is not a risky assumption that Jón's family ties with kings considerably reinforced his prestige in Iceland. It may indeed have been an important component of his power.

The Sturlung brothers did not have royal blood in their veins, since they only had very distant ancestors who were related to kings.¹³ Though this does not seem to have halted their rise to power, it may have imposed an upper limit on it. Though nothing in the sources states this explicitly, it might be a possible explanation of some of the severe tension between Snorri on the one hand and his brother Sighvatur and Sighvatur's son Sturla on the other. Indeed, though their quarrel started because Snorri and Þórður felt that their brother had treated them high-handedly when he gave his son, without consulting them, control over the *goðorð* which they had all inherited, the sources seem to say that Snorri already had a motive for initiating the conflict. Indeed, when Sturla marries Sólveig Sæmundardóttir, a grand-daughter of Jón Loftsson, and heiress to part of his domain, *Íslendingasaga* tells us that Snorri became angry and that people felt that he had had other plans (p. 286). It is shortly afterwards that he gets Þórður to go along with him in pursuing their claim to their father's *goðorð*.

What could be have been at stake? There are geopolitical reasons for both Snorri and Þórður not wanting an ambitious nephew to acquire too much power over the sensitive Dalir region. Both brothers had links to the Western fjords and Sturla could control traffic between the fjords and their domains. But this only explains why they wanted the *goðorð*. What about Sólveig? She was, of course, the heir to quite considerable wealth in southern Iceland, but so was her cousin, Hallveig Ormsdóttir, who became Snorri's concubine shortly afterwards. What she did have was royal blood, her father being the legitimate son of Jón Loftsson.



To have royal blood running in one's vein was a prerequisite for becoming king in the European ideology of kingship that had already been accepted in Norway by the time of Snorri and his brothers. The historian Andrew Lewis has shown the importance of having royal ancestors in political thinking in the medieval West in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, focussing especially on the French monarchy. The power of kings was legitimated by their royal forebears and there was a particular sacrality attributed to the royal family.¹⁴ The impregnation of Icelandic chieftains by this ideology has been made quite clear by scholars in recent years.¹⁵ However, marrying into the royal family or not would probably not have mattered if the Norwegian king had not been trying to gain control over Iceland from 1220 onwards and this had not entered into the Icelandic chieftains' planning for what lay ahead. Indeed, as came to pass when the Icelandic chieftains pledged allegiance to the king in 1262, one of them became earl over Iceland. This means that the most ambitious among them may already have been thinking of this possibility in the third decade of the century, when Sturla married Sólveig. No one is more likely to have been thinking along these lines than Snorri. He had recently returned from Norway, where he had promised to convince the Icelandic chieftains to submit to the king. It is likely that he knew that the law of the court (*Hirðskrá*) did not allow anybody who did not have blood-ties or ties through marriage to the king's family to become earl.¹⁶ Given his ambition, it is quite probable that he planned for his son Jón murti to marry Sólveig. Jón would then have been a very good candidate for the earlship and Snorri's ambition would have been fulfilled vicariously through his son.

This is of course only speculation based on a few elements of fact. However, it is slightly strengthened when we see that Gissur Þorvaldsson who finally became earl of Iceland, was a great-grandson of Jón Loftsson, and thus eligible for the position. This indicates that royal blood did have value in Iceland and was a type of symbolic capital that was becoming increasingly important as Icelanders became increasingly drawn into the sphere of influence of the Norwegian monarchy.

But symbolic capital was not always positive. Indeed, one's total social capital could be weighed down in different ways. An example of this is when a chieftain enters into conflict with the Church and becomes guilty of a breach of canon law so severe that he incurs the danger of excommunication. Here, another of Bourdieu's concepts, that of social magic, becomes useful. Social magic is when symbolic capital is used to create beliefs of an



immaterial kind.¹⁷ In medieval times, it was of course the Church that was in the best position to use this kind of power. Snorri's brother Sighvatur and his son Sturla, brought over themselves this kind of danger when they attacked the see of Hólar in retaliation for the killing of Sturla's elder brother Tumi.¹⁸ When they received a letter from the archbishop severely condemning them, Sturla had no choice but to go to Rome to obtain pardon for his father and himself. Otherwise, he would not only have jeopardized their chances for an afterlife in the Christian scheme of things (in which there is no reason to think that they didn't believe) but also their status as leaders of men. It is interesting to note that it is after having gotten rid of this negative symbolic capital that Sturla makes friends with the Norwegian king who entrusts him with the task of submitting Iceland to his authority. It is probable that the prize for doing this would have been the earldom over Iceland for Sturla and his descendants.¹⁹

CULTURAL

There is a third kind of capital which was no less necessary for a chieftain and which we can put into the category of what Bourdieu calls cultural capital. Cultural capital is in part socially transmitted through upbringing and in part acquired through education. It can be useful in a practical way, as will be shown with a few examples from medieval Iceland. It can also have an emblematic value, be a sign of belonging to a certain category of the population, often dominant, as will also be illustrated with examples. The fact that individuals of *goði* families were felt to be more or less apt to become chieftains means that in order to become a successful one, it was necessary to have something more than economic and symbolic capital.²⁰ Both needed to be enhanced by a variety of features which we can call cultural in a broad sense.

If we look at the practical use of knowledge of a cultural type by chieftains in thirteenth-century Iceland, the first that comes to mind is how to get farmers to follow them, i.e. how to persuade to leave their homes and risk their lives. Though this was part of the implicit social contract, it was however necessary for the chieftain to know how to keep his men happy, encourage them when that was called for, keep them in check when necessary. This was a skill one learned through experience but that also depended on talent. Sturla Sighvatsson seems to have been much better at this than his elder brother Tumi, whose men behaved badly on a military trip to the South in 1221, while Sturla had good control over his own men.²¹ Skill at arms as well as at devising strategy in battle must also have been an important part of what



made a good chieftain. Both were acquired through education but talent was obviously also a factor.

A special mention must also be made of the knowledge of law. A significant part of the *goði*'s activity involved making legal decisions and enforcing them. It is probable that young members of *goðar* family were taught law at a young age. Indeed, *Íslendingasaga* tells us that Gissur Þorvaldsson was only twelve years old when he prosecuted the case of his elder brother's killers (p. 269) and Snorri's son Jón murti only twenty when he did the same against his cousin Sturla (p. 295). Snorri's illegitimate son Órækja was eighteen in a similar case against Þorvaldur Snorrason of the Vatnsfirðingar family (p. 286). Though all three brothers were engaged in legal activities, Snorri seems to have excelled in law. The fact that he was elected law-speaker in 1212 is an indication of this. Here we have an example of interaction between two types of capital since considerable cultural capital in the form of legal knowledge, was necessary to become law-speaker which in turn brought prestige, i.e. symbolic capital.

But Snorri seems also to have been very good at legal maneuvering, as can be seen in a case described in some detail in *Íslendingasaga*. Snorri bore a grudge against a prominent member of the Oddaverjar family, a grandson of Jón Loftsson, Magnús Guðmundsson (not a member of the Oddaverjar family since dynastic lines were mostly confined to the male line and the access to power. Magnús was a member of another dynasty – see). In a test of political strength between them, Snorri had to bow to the greater power of Magnús's family. In order to restore his position, he finds an opportunity for a lawsuit against him. It comes to him when Magnús takes control of the inheritance of a rich widow who had died without heirs “who had any kind of credentials”.²² Snorri manages to find a plausible heir and takes over the case, has it tried in his own jurisdiction and gets Magnús condemned to outlawry. In the political maneuvering that follows in order to find an acceptable settlement for both, Snorri comes out as the winner and his nephew says that at no other time did he have more credit in Iceland than by the way he handled this affair.²³

It is interesting to note that Sturla the saga writer immediately adds that he also “became a good poet, showed good abilities in all his undertakings and gave good explanations and orders for all things that had to be done. He composed a poem about the Norwegian jarl Hákon galinn who sent him in return as a present a sword, a shield and a hauberk”.²⁴ The connection



between great respect, knowledge and ability indicates that, in the eyes of his nephew at least, Snorri's cultural capital served him well and considerably enhanced his position within the social space. This is specifically related to the additional prestige he will gain from his links with the Norwegian court, a prestige he seems to owe, in part at least, to his poetic talents. Indeed, when Snorri makes the trip to Norway from 1218 to 1220, he recites poetry he has composed in honour of the rulers and is richly rewarded for this. He receives titles, first that of *skutilsvéinn* and then becomes a *lendur maður*, the first Icelander ever to gain this position at the Norwegian court.

It is obvious that his visit to Norway has taken him up to a higher level. He was admitted to the highest spheres of power in the kingdom and was expected in return to get Icelanders to submit to the authority of the Norwegian king. Sturla presents this in *Íslendingasaga* in a way that suggests that he owes this to his poetic ability, but if we look more closely at the text we see that the Norwegian rulers were probably looking just as much at Snorri's political position in Iceland and what he told them of his ability to get his brothers to work with him. Indeed, he told them that after Sæmundur of the Oddaverjar family, no one was as powerful in Iceland than he and his brothers and the latter would defer to his opinions.²⁵ Of course, Snorri was wrong here, because his brother Sighvatur and his son Sturla turned out to be the most serious obstacle in Snorri's attempt to gain control over Iceland.

What was the role of poetry, and in a larger sense literature, in allowing Snorri to attain this high position? Probably, the poetry served as a way to attract attention to him at court. It was very likely a sign of distinction, to use Bourdieu's concept, i.e. a sign that he belonged to the more valued part of society, a sort of external indication of symbolic capital. It was also evidence of knowledge of the distant past, through the poetry of the skalds, which probably had value at a court where position depended, in part at least, on ancestry. As cultural capital, it was a welcome addition to the other types of capital Snorri may have had and probably enhanced his position considerably.

If we come now to other types of literature than poetry, there is no evidence that Snorri's brothers wrote sagas. However, there is considerable evidence that Snorri did. The strongest is a remark made in *Íslendingasaga* about Sturla Sighvatsson's desire to have copied the books of history (*sögubækur*) that Snorri composed (*setti saman*).²⁶ This is a very interesting piece of evidence, not only because it is the only explicit statement of Snorri's saga-writing from



contemporary sources. For our purposes it also suggests how the composition of books of history could be understood in the wider context of chieftain activities in the first half of the thirteenth century. Indeed, mention is made of saga-writing in the period after Snorri's first stay at the Norwegian court. This might indicate that this activity was something he decided to work on after his sojourn there, perhaps as a way of ingratiating himself with the rulers by sending them beautiful books about their forefathers. It is also significant that this activity attracted the attention of his main competitor in Icelandic politics, his nephew Sturla Sighvatsson.

I believe however that it would be reductive to consider the sagas Snorri may have written as only serving the purposes of creating gifts for kings. *Heimskringla* certainly gives a nuanced image of monarchy, drawing up contrasting images of good and bad kings. As many other king's sagas, it certainly contains evidence that their authors were not only creating pleasing mirror-images of monarchy for ideological purposes but were also thinking about different problems the king posed for other members of society. Therefore, the kings sagas probably were also destined for internal consumption, giving an image, through narrative of kings' past, which was useful for Icelandic chieftains in their relationship to kings, in their dealings with each other, and maybe also in their efforts to become themselves rulers of Iceland.

The same can be said of the *Edda*, though it contains Snorri's praise poem about King Hákon and Earl Skúli, there is no evidence that it was composed for others than the aristocratic entourage of Snorri. But what gave Snorri this edge over his brothers and, we can suppose, other chieftains of similar stature. Part of the explanation probably lies in the education he must have received at Oddi. He was brought up there, instead of with his parents and brothers, and the home of Jón Loftsson is generally believed to have been a place where young aristocrats got an education in courtly ways, among other things skill at poetry and a knowledge of history. In many ways, his upbringing at Oddi can be seen as comparable to when sons of aristocrats were sent to monasteries in order to be educated and then join holy orders. Snorri can be seen as having been in his youth a sort of aristocratic oblate, acquiring thus cultural capital which served him well in later times.

It is tempting to use Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" to suggest a difference between Snorri and his brothers. Habitus is a disposition of mind and feeling which the individual integrates through his belonging to a social class. It is a complex concept which can be said to be



Bourdieu's synthesis of phenomenology and structuralism, both very dominant in French intellectual life when he was coming of age in post-war Paris. Habitus is structuralist because it is a defined set of mental relations which can be formalised as a structure. But it is also a phenomenological (or constructivist) concept because it structures the way the individual organises his perception of the world and his behaviour in it. Bourdieu therefore calls it a "structuring structure" and it is what defines us, posing a serious limit to what we believe to be our free will, since even what we like or want is conditioned by our habitus, i.e. what we have been socialised to want or like.

Did Snorri acquire an aristocratic habitus through his upbringing in Oddi which made him more likely than his brothers to structure his experience and behaviour in a way that was relevant and pleasing to the highest Norwegian aristocracy? It might be, but any answer to this question must also have to take into account the probability that aristocratic culture had already been developing in Iceland since the early twelfth century at least. The difference between Snorri's habitus and that of his brothers can only have been one of degree but not of kind.²⁷

FIELD

The description that has been proposed here of Icelandic society in the early thirteenth century and Snorri's trajectory in it is that of a complex society. A chieftain like Snorri would be dealing with all kind of other social actors who held very different positions in society, did not pursue the same goals and probably had equally dissimilar viewpoints on the various issues. I believe that the question of the complexity of Icelandic society in the Middle Ages is an important one and can be addressed in terms of Bourdieu's sociology.²⁸ One of his tools for describing complexity in social space is the concept of 'field'. Field is a part of the social space in which the actors are playing by the same rules for the same stakes. In most if not all societies there are many fields within the social space. To describe this, Bourdieu uses the analogy of a room in which one observes many groups playing separate games. The observer assumes at first that they are all playing the same game but when he studies each group more closely he discovers that each group is playing by different rules and the game does not have the same meaning for them. If this analogy is projected on society, each game corresponds to a field and the players are actors who are active within that specific field, playing by the rules of the field and for what is defined as desirable within that field.



But what are these fields in terms of social reality? If we look once more at thirteenth century Icelandic society, we see that somebody like Snorri had vested interests in at least three different fields, the field of what could be called the traditional Icelandic field of power-brokering between chieftains, of the Norwegian court and of religion. In the field of chieftains, the rules the actors play by are those of law and tradition and the stakes are honour and power within Iceland, with honour being probably more important than power in a country difficult to submit to a central authority and with no pressing need for such centralisation given the absence of external danger. The law is more or less what can be read from *Grágás*, the law collection from the Commonwealth period, while the sagas, both contemporary sagas and the sagas of Icelanders, are a mine of information on the different means and strategies a chieftain could traditionally use to get an edge over others.

They also tell us a lot about relations between chieftains and others within this field. *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds* is a case in point here, since the protagonist is not a chieftain, but the son of a latecomer who has to buy land in a region already settled and therefore submit to the authority of an already well entrenched *goði* family, that of the Vatnsdælir. The function of what has been called the two wooing episodes in the early part of the saga is to show the difference of position of the two families within the field.²⁹ When the son of the *goði* engages in the illicit wooing of Hallfreður's sister, the *goði* is perfectly willing to do what he can to keep his son in check. However, he will not tolerate a lawsuit against him and coerces Hallfreður's family to leave the region. On the other hand, Hallfreður's similar wooing of the daughter of another farmer of similar status as his father leads to Hallfreður's defeat and humiliation. In short, he cannot behave as badly as the son of the *goði*, because he lacks the social capital necessary to move as 'freely' within the social space.

What makes this saga so interesting, like many other sagas of Icelanders, is that it portrays a character who is ignorant of his place within the social space. Hallfreður believes he can behave like a superior towards his father's neighbour, Ávaldi father of the young girl, Kolfinna, he is wooing. This may have been true in Norway, where Hallfreður's father seems to have held a higher position than Ávaldi. It is no longer true in Iceland. Given this limitation of his possibilities for action, Hallfreður's only way to climb in the social ladder is by going to Norway and becoming a member of the royal court. There he gains social prominence and



marries well. He has, despite some difficulties, learned the rules of this new field and done quite well in it.

This is a second field that Snorri and his contemporaries knew well, as we have seen. The rules of this field are basically to please the king, serve him well in battle, counsel him wisely and, accessorially, compose poetry in his honour. *Hallfreðar saga* shows Hallfreður doing this in the tenth century, like quite a number of Snorri's contemporaries did too. But like Snorri, Hallfreður not only learns the rules of the field of the royal court. When his wife dies, he goes back to Iceland and molests Kolfinna's husband by sleeping with her. His aim is to deal with him as an equal, which he can do now, because of the social status he has gained through royal service. They are about to fight a duel when the Norwegian king, Ólafur Tryggvason who had also christened Hallfreður, appears to him in a dream in order to ask him to not fight.

Here, we see another field, equally as important as the field of Icelandic power-brokering or that of the court. It is that of religion. It is important not to forget that Snorri and his contemporaries are living in a period when the world-view of the Church was dominant in society and was more or less that of each and everyone. It is therefore highly unlikely that individuals did not also have their minds on what would become of their immortal souls after their death. This depended quite a lot on how one behaved during one's life and the rules of behaviour likely to bring one success in the religious field were not all the same as in others. King Ólafur Tryggvason is a Christian missionary king and when he appears to Hallfreður, he exhorts him to act against his interests in the field of Icelandic power-brokering in order to gain a higher reward in heaven. The end of the saga tells us how King Ólafur continues to care for the fate of Hallfreður's soul, even after his death.

Thus we see how three fields are present in the representation of the social space in which the largely fictional protagonist of the thirteenth century saga moves. The same can be said of Snorri and his brothers. The examples of how Snorri takes care of his interests within the religious field are numerous. One of the most interesting, if not totally unambiguous, is from the late winter of 1236 when he refuses to wage war against his brother so near to Easter.³⁰ This attitude can be understood in light of medieval Christian attitudes to sin and penance. If Snorri commits the sin of fratricide he will not be able to take communion at Easter and he will jeopardise his chances of being absolved before his death.



Many contemporary readers of this passage have made little of Snorri's religious feeling here, preferring to see the invocation of religion in these circumstances as a rather lame excuse for not having the courage to fight. I don't think we can seriously know anything about Snorri's courage or lack of it. However, the exchange between Snorri's brothers after he has fled his domain that Sighvatur and his son Sturla are on the verge of invading is to my mind quite significant. Þórður rides to meet Sighvatur and tries to convince him not to attack Snorri. The arguments he gives are all theological. Sighvatur will put himself into a state of mortal sin, attacking his brother on a holy day – it is Palm Sunday – and he must not forget that he is an old man that can die any time and therefore must take special care of his soul.³¹

As these examples show, as also the above-mentioned example of how Sturla Sighvatsson had to go all the way to Rome in order to redeem himself and his father for attacking the see of Hólar, an Icelandic chieftain from the thirteenth century needed to be constantly attentive to his position within the religious field. Not only because it probably had an influence on his status within the other fields, as the example of Sturla Sighvatsson suggests, but also because it is most likely that he believes in the Church's message about the afterlife.³²

ILLUSIO: A MEDIEVAL LITERARY FIELD

Here another of Bourdieu's concepts becomes useful, it is that of "illusio", i.e. the fact that actors within social space usually believe that the capital they are striving for within their respective fields has an intrinsic value. To take examples from modern life, an actor will likely believe that fame and success in cinema or theater is something worth working, fighting and risking failure for, while a schoolteacher will believe the same of educating children, etc. To go back to the Middle Ages, Snorri most certainly believed that power in Icelandic society was worth fighting and/or maneuvering for. The story of his life is a witness to that fact. For a time at least, he probably also felt that success in the Norwegian court was also worth the efforts. Finally, he must, as a medieval Christian, have believed it necessary to be in God's good graces. Snorri Sturluson was therefore a typical actor of a complex society.

The question I would like to end this paper on is whether something that could be called a specifically literary field existed in Iceland in Snorri's times and whether it may have been an important factor in the considerable development of literature in the country during that period.



What is a literary field? Bourdieu's answer to this question is in his book on Flaubert from 1992.³³ In it he studies how a very long evolution of western culture led, in the middle of the nineteenth century, towards the constitution of a field within French society where literature is an independent endeavour with its own rules and stakes. Flaubert and his milieu believed that a work of literary art should need no other justification than its own existence, and should only be judged on that basis. This idea of art for art's sake is new in Western culture but had been prepared by the increasing autonomy of the writer from the appearance of literature in the vernacular in medieval times, to the invention of print, the long fight for freedom of print, the elaboration of a legislation on copyright and the progressive discredit of any idea of censorship over literary expression. For Bourdieu, it is very significant that the literary field came into full existence in France after the failure of the 1848 Revolution, which once more was stolen from the 'true' revolutionaries, among them writers and artists, by a member of the Bonaparte family. Under the bourgeois emperor, there was no possibility to use literature to fight within other fields, political, religious, philosophical. It had to become a field of its own.

French cultural life in the second half of the nineteenth century is obviously very far from what the social reality in which Snorri and other practitioners of poetry and saga-writing were experiencing in the first half of the thirteenth century. Any attempt to see traces of something resembling a literary field in that particular social space would have to take this into account. However, there are indications of a special value attributed to poetry and poets in many of the sources from the period. This brings us back to the stanza cited in the beginning of this paper. The fact that people like Snorri and Ólafur felt that poetry was worth spending time and parchment on handbooks for poets is already an indication that they valued it as a pursuit which needs not to be justified. This was true even though poetry also was of use as capital to use within other fields, such as the court (encomia for rulers), the field of faith (religious poetry) and even the sphere of power-brokering within Icelandic society as is shown by numerous examples in *Sturlunga saga* of verse being used either to celebrate the deeds of a chieftain or to comment wittily on current events.

One indication of the semi-independence of the literary field in medieval Iceland is the fact that poets seemed to come from widely different social backgrounds, which means that you could be a respected poet, even though you belonged to the Church or were from a poor family. Poets such as Guðmundur Oddsson or Guðmundur Galtason, who both are mentioned



in *Sturlunga saga* and are part of the entourage of chieftains such as Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson or Sturla Sighvatsson were evidently not from chieftain families. Even though it is probable that they saw their poetic talent as a way to move upwards in society, allowing them for example to become members of aristocratic households, it is also likely that it was an independent pursuit, and that they had acquired the taste for poetry and practice in composing elsewhere.

The numerous sagas of Icelanders who have poets as their main protagonists is an indicator that poetic talent was valued and that there was interest in the poet's place in society.³⁴ *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* is perhaps the most interesting of these sagas, at least in the way poetry is consistently portrayed as a life-saving talent, saving Egill not only from the wrath of a king, when he composes *Höfuðlausn*, in the middle of the saga, but also from his own desire to die of grief when he composes *Sonatorrek* near the end.³⁵ In my own work on the saga, I have insisted that it must however also be considered in light of the religious ideology which was dominant at the time and have found what I believe to be conclusive evidence for the legitimacy for such a reading of the saga.³⁶ However, I do not believe it to be a religious work in the strictest sense. Instead, it takes account of religious discourse but uses it for its own purposes, which is to express a view of society and an individual within it that is most probably that of somebody like Snorri, i.e. an aristocrat who has a complex and ambivalent attitude to both Norwegian monarchy and the Christian God. To my mind the saga is telling us something that can not be expressed within either the dominant ideology of the Church or the increasingly dominant one of the monarchy.

Whether or not the literary field of Iceland already existed in any sense close to what Bourdieu means by the concept, it is safe to say that with works like *Egils saga*, and several other of the sagas of Icelanders, we are definitely in presence of literature. The author of *Egils saga* – whether it was Snorri or somebody else – is an individual who is using the poetry of saga composition to tell us about desires and constraints within a complex society, something ideological discourse does not allow. With *Egils saga* and other sagas of Icelanders, we have already left ideology and entered into a new realm, that of literature.



NOTES

¹ Some of the material presented here as already been the object of publication in two recent articles in Icelandic: “Snorri og bræður hans. Framgangur og átök í félagslegu rými þjóðveldisins”, *Ný Saga. Tímarit Sögufélags* 12 (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2000), p. 49-60, and “Virðing í flóknu samfélagi. Getur félagsfræði Pierre Bourdieu skýrt hlutverk og eðli virðingar í íslensku miðaldsamfélagi?”, *Sæmdarmenn. Um heiður á þjóðveldisöld* (Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun, 2001), 57-89.

² Bjarni Einarsson, 1992: 34-35.

³ For a useful overview of the background of Bourdieu’s theories, see Calhoun et al., 1993: 1-13. Bourdieu himself gives a succinct description of what he means by social space in “Espace social et pouvoir symbolique”, *Choses dites* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1987), p. 156, or in English translation, “Social space and symbolic power”, *In Other Words: Essays towards a Reflexive Sociology* (Stanford, 1990), 123-139.

⁴ The page numbers will all refer to the following edition of the saga: Örnólfur Thorsson, 1988.

⁵ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 1999: 102: “The four most important sources of income were: the assembly attendance dues (*þingfarar kaup*) and other payments, payments for conducting lawsuits, revenues from the chieftain’s own farms and local ecclesiastical institutions and loot.”

⁶ Gunnar F. Guðmundsson, 1997.

⁷ The main sources on these conflicts are *Oddaverja þáttur* (*Byskupa sögur* I, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1953) and *Árna saga Biskups* (see *Sturlunga*).

⁸ *Oddaverja þáttur* (142) tells how Snorri acquires control over the *staður* of Stafholt. Its holder is sick and Snorri promises to take care of his daughter and eventually find her a husband. However, Snorri doesn’t keep his promise, and maintains control over Stafholt. Things are a bit more complicated for Reykholt. The father of the holder of the *staður* was not legitimate and there are cousins of Snorri who claim to be the rightful heirs. Snorri gets them to transfer their right to him and now he has the means to exercise pressure on the poor fellow,



who finally agrees to give the *staður* to Snorri, who instead promises to ensure that his sons be taken care of as well as possible (*Sturlunga saga*, 211).

⁹ “Gerðist hann þá höfðingi mikill því að eigi skorti fé.” (*Sturlunga saga*, 212).

¹⁰ See Helgi Þorláksson’s fine discussion of the complex relationship between economic capital and the honour of chieftains in his article “Fé og virðing”, *Sæmdarmenn*, 91-134.

¹¹ See *Sturlunga saga*, 314, where the author speaks of the contrast between the how plentiful Sturla Sighvatsson’s home in Sauðafell was before the attack and plundering of the place by his enemies and how poor it seemed afterwards.

¹² See *Sturlunga saga*, 213.

¹³ As can be seen by a genealogy probably constituted for Snorri’s nephew Egill Sölmundarson: “Skrá um ættartölu Sturlunga, til Egils Sölmundarsonar í Reykjaholti og Gyðu systur hans í Kalmanstúngu”, *Íslenskt fornbréfasafn I* (Copenhagen 1857-76), 501-507.

¹⁴ Lewis, 1981: 104-105. See also Le Goff, 1999: 988-990. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson discusses the holiness of Norwegian kings in his *Norsk historie 800-1300* (Oslo, 1999), 93-97. For a debate on whether this sacrality is of Christian origin or has its roots in Norse heathendom see Steinsland, 1991: 307-324, and Lönnroth, 1986: 73-93.

¹⁵ See Sverrir Tómasson, 1992: 280-281, for evidence of Jón Loftsson having been considered as royalty. For an overview of royal ideology in Icelandic texts of the period see Ármann Jakobsson, 1997: 143-171.

¹⁶ See *Norges gamle love indtil 1387* Vol. II (Ed. R. Keyser and P.A. Munch, Christiania: 1848), 402: “Sá er en fyrsti hatr er Noreghs konongr gefr sunum sinum skilegetnom iarls nofn, en stundum broedrum sinum skilgetnom eda namaghum.” This is from the law of Magnús Hákonarson, i.e. a few decades later than the period that concerns us. It means that the king of Norway usually gives his legitimate sons the title of jarl, and sometimes legitimate brothers and close in-laws. It is however not unlikely that it was already valid in Snorri’s time.

¹⁷ Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 117.

¹⁸ *Sturlunga saga* 275-279.

¹⁹ *Sturlunga saga* 350-351.



²⁰ See for example *Sturlunga saga* 289 and 338.

²¹ *Sturlunga saga*, 271.

²² *Sturlunga saga*, 253: “Í þann tíma andaðist Jórunn og átti engan erfingja þann er skil væri að.”

²³ *Sturlunga saga*, 254: “Snorri hafði virðing af málum þessum og í þessum málum gekk virðing hans við mest hér á landi.”

²⁴ “Hann gerðist skáld gott og var hagur á allt það er hann tók höndum til og hafði hinar bestu forsagnir á öllu því er gera skyldi. Hann orti kvæði um Hákon galinn og sendi jarlinn gjafir út á mót, sverð og skjöld og brynju.”

²⁵ *Sturlunga saga*, 262-263: “Hann sagði og svo að þá vour aðrir eigi meiri menn á Íslandi en bræður hans er Sæmund leið en kallaði þá mundu mjög eftir sínum orðum víkja þá er hann kæmi til.”

²⁶ *Sturlunga saga*, 329.

²⁷ For a clear and succinct discussion of habitus, field and *illusio*, see Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), 94-115.

²⁸ For a convincing analysis of the interaction between church and society from the Conversion onwards and how it led to increasing complexity in society, see Orri Vésteinsson, 2000. Vésteinsson does not use Bourdieu’s concepts.

²⁹ For a much more detailed and careful analysis of how this saga reflects social reality in Iceland in the thirteenth century see my “Virðing í flóknu samfélagi”, *Sæmdarmenn*, 66-76.

³⁰ *Sturlunga saga*, 376: “Snorri var ekki búinn til þess að fara að bróður sínum á þeim hátíðum er þá fóru í hönd.”

³¹ *Sturlunga saga*, 377-378: “Veitti hann Sighvati átölur miklar um það er hann fór að bróður sínum á hátíðum og segir að hann mundi stór gjöld fyrir slíkt taka af guði, gamall maður.”

³² For a thorough study of lay religious attitudes and behaviour in twelfth and thirteenth century Iceland, see Boyer, 1979.



³³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, (Paris: Seuil, 1992). English translation: *The Rules of Art. Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford University Press, 1996).

³⁴ For a varied approach to these sagas, see the collective volume *Skaldsagas. Text, Vocation and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. R. Poole (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde 27, 2001), in particular Margaret Clunies-Ross's opening contribution.

³⁵ See Margaret Clunies Ross's ground-breaking article (Clunies Ross, 1978: 2-12).

³⁶ See my *Matter of the North. The Rise of Literary Fiction in Medieval Iceland*, (Odense: Odense University Press, Viking Collection 13, 2002), also my contribution to the *Skaldsagas* volume and my article "Snorri and women in his life and literature", *Sagnaheimur: Studies in honour of Hermann Pálsson on his 80th birthday, 26th May 2001* (Vienna: Fassbaender, 2001), 263-275.

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