THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE ICELANDIC SAGAS. A SURVEY OF TEXTUAL FIELDWORK IN OLD NORSE SOCIETY

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Resum

L’antropologia literària és una disciplina relativament recent que possibilita el treball de camp textual en societats del passat. En aquest article discutiré l’aplicació d’aquesta disciplina a l’estudi de la societat i cultura norrenes a través d’un dels seus productes literaris més rellevants: les sagues islandeses.

Paraules clau: Antropologia literària, societat i cultura norrenes, sagues islandeses

Abstract

Literary Anthropology is a relatively new discipline which allows for textual fieldwork in past societies. In this article, I will deal with the application of this discipline to the study of Old Norse society and culture by way of one of their most relevant literary products: the Icelandic sagas.

Keywords: Literary Anthropology, Old Norse society and culture, Icelandic sagas
1. Introduction

Social anthropology is a social science whose main methodological trademark, at least since Bronislaw Malinowski’s contributions, is fieldwork, i.e., the “research undertaken by the anthropologist or ethnologist in a given ethnographic area or community” (Seymour-Smith 1986:117). However, in more recent years anthropology has taken a “literary turn” (Clifford & Marcus 1986) in which the anthropological value of ethnographic writing and the texts produced thereof play a more prominent role. This literary turn has made it possible to stimulate an increasing anthropological interest not only in ethnographic writing itself, but also in other kinds of texts which so far had more strictly belonged to the field of literary studies (Wiles 2018). Among other things, this literary turn has in fact led anthropologists to do textual fieldwork and treat literary sources as native informants.

Taken as a set of valid “ethnographic documents” (Lindow 1973), the literary genre known as Íslendingasögur (sagas of Icelanders) – which is considered one of the most reliable among the several genres of Old Norse-Icelandic literature (Clover 1985; Clunies Ross 2010) – has become an interesting arena for textual fieldwork since a few social anthropologists such as Rosalie Wax (1969) and especially Victor Turner (1971) incorporated this kind of sagas to their ethnographic sources. Later scholars in Old Norse-Icelandic studies and/or social anthropology such as Byock (1988), Durrenberger (1991, 1992), Hastrup (1985, 1990), Miller (1990) or Palsson (1992a, 1995) have also published a good deal of texts concerning the interest and importance of Icelandic medieval literature in order to get to know and interpret better the social, cultural, political and economic dynamics of Old Norse society in Iceland, it is, a peripheral territory in the North Atlantic in which – thanks to its exceptional antiquarian spirit - a valuable quantity and quality of texts dealing with history, mythology and even precocious ethnographic narratives disguised in a literary fashion have been preserved to the present day.

The recent field of literary anthropology (Poyatos 1988; Iser 1989, 1993; Stoller 2015; Nic Craith & Fournier 2016; Wiles 2018) has become an essential analytical tool in order to deal with the fictive elements with which the Icelandic sagas are interwoven thus helping us to interpret them in the context of the mentality and social dynamics of the period when they were
written. On the other hand, the anthropological interest in the Icelandic sagas has also led to the incorporation of translation studies as an important means to make accessible an important amount of ancient texts to modern scholars who do not need to learn Old Norse in order to understand and interpret the ethnographic information contained in those medieval sources. In this sense, the translation of Icelandic sagas from an anthropological perspective (Durrenberger & Durrenberger 1986) can contribute to fuel further the increasing importance of translation in anthropology and consolidate the role of the anthropologist as a cultural pontifex or ”bridge-builder” (Saler 2003).

By dealing with the most representative studies in English on Icelandic sagas from an anthropological point of view, the aim of my article is to offer an overview which seeks to draw attention to the fact that, rather than being a return to a sort of démodé Frazerian ”armchair” anthropology, the use of the Íslendingasögur as valuable ethnographic documents may help our discipline to transcend the traditional ethnographic boundaries of present time and space so as to incorporate the past, not only as a ”foreign land” (Jong 1996), but also as a necessary diachronical dimension of textual fieldwork with the additional contribution of the newly developed discipline of historical anthropology (Gurevich 1992).

2. Literary Anthropology: The Text as Cultural Artifact

Although the trope of culture as a text to be read and interpreted can at least be traced back to Ruth Benedict, of whom Lolphere (2005: ix) says that she «anticipated the ways in which some anthropologists now stress the symbolic, metaphorical, and semiotic aspects of culture, much as literary critics analyze novels, plays, or poetry», the current – but yet not fully recognized – interdisciplinary canon of Literary Anthropology can be directly related to the early “literary turn” started by renowned anthropologists as Victor Turner, Mary Douglas and Claude Lévi-Strauss and their interest in literary theory and practice (Nic Craith & Fournier 2016: 2). However, it was Clifford Geertz who in his celebrated collection of essays titled The Interpretation of Cultures (1973) openly proposed that the «culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong» (Geertz 1973: 452). This semiotic approach to culture led him to state as well that anthropology is «not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning» (Geertz 1973: 5), distancing thus anthropology from its positivistic counterparts.

All in all, Literary Anthropology began to be regarded in its own right as an independent research field thanks to the studies and publications of the Spanish-born Fernando Poyatos, Professor
Emeritus in nonverbal communication at the University of New Brunswick, Canada. Poyatos (1988a: xii-xiii) defines Literary Anthropology with these words:

The interdisciplinary research area of Literary Anthropology [...] is based on the anthropologically-oriented use of the narrative literatures of the different cultures (and, in a lesser degree, their theater, chronicles and travel accounts), as they constitute the richest sources of documentation for both synchronic and diachronic analyses of people’s ideas and behaviors. From early epics to the contemporary novel, the various types of realism we can differentiate can be systematically studied as invaluable sources, often the only ones [...] for the documentation of (a) sensible systems, i.e., verbal language, paralanguage [...] culture-specific kinesics [...], proxemities [...] chronemics [...] and the objective and environmental systems [...] including man-animal interaction as shaped by each culture; and (b) intelligible systems: from religious thought, rituals, values, etiquette, household activities, etc., to politics, folklore, popular beliefs, games and the arts.

Unlike literary studies, the aim is thus to shift the emphasis from texts themselves to the texts as vehicles of information (Loriggio 1988: 309). The relationship of this shift to anthropology resides in the fact that, for Literary Anthropology, culture – i.e., the anthropological concept par excellence – is seen as “a system for the creation, preservation and transmission of information [...] Information is understood here in a broad sense to include cognitive, aesthetic and emotive dimensions” (Portis Winner 1988: 127). In this way, literary texts become cultural artifacts. Although not necessarily accepted by other Literary Anthropologists, Poyatos states that “nonverbal communication systems constitute the basis of literary anthropology, for it is by and through the display of those behaviors that cultural patterns, as well as universal or anthroponemic ones, are perceived” (Poyatos 1988b:4).

According to Wiles (2018), Literary Anthropology can be conceptualized as a central stem with three branches: a) the use of literary texts as ethnographic source material (which is the approach I take here concerning the study of Icelandic sagas as ethnographic documents); b) the use of literary modes of writing ethnography, e.g., the perspective displayed in the groundbreaking collection of essays edited by Clifford & Marcus (1986) which implies shifting from ethnos in ethnography to the graphia -the process of writing-, as Tedlock (1991: 79) puts it, and c) the anthropological examination of literary cultural and production practices, a field focused upon traditional or oral cultures which often intersects with performance studies (this branch can thus be related to Victor Turner’s ideas on performance and his concept of “social drama”, which he applies to the anthropological study of Icelandic sagas, as we will see later on).

Regardless of the branch we choose to approach to or do textual fieldwork from, Literary Anthropology raises a series of definitional and epistemological problems which still remain unsolved in many cases. One of them is the concept of literature itself: should Literary Anthropology be only focused on written, prose, fictional and aesthetic texts such as novels (or the Icelandic sagas I deal here with)? If so, a very narrow definition of literature would restrict
literary anthropologists to just a few cultures in the world such as the West, India, China or Japan (Poyatos 1988: 334), thus excluding graffittis, brochures, reports and other relevant products of cultural communication such as orality, one of the most important research areas of social anthropology in past decades. As Enninger (1988: 250) points out concerning orality:

Should the emerging paradigm of literary anthropology prove to achieve insights which other approaches to anthropology have not been able to produce, it can be assumed that it should produce better results, if it is conceived [sic] of as a complement of “oral” anthropology.

On the other hand, Loriggio (1988: 308) asks rhetorically: «Which anthropology are we talking about when we speak of literary anthropology? Structural, cognitive, cultural, semiotic, symbolic, etc.?>» Wolfgang Iser, one of the most outstanding literary anthropologists together with Fernando Poyatos,1 replies indirectly to this question by stating that the task that confronts literary anthropology is

[T]o devise an adequate heuristics […] The frameworks so far developed by various branches of anthropology offer no adequate modes of access [to human plasticity revealed by literature], for neither evolutionary nor teleological approaches will work here, as practiced by an ethnologically oriented cultural anthropology. (Iser 1993: xi)

Therefore, «an anthropological approach to literature should not borrow its descriptive framework elsewhere» (Iser 1993: xii). Given that fictions are «human beings’ extensions of themselves» and «ways of world making» (Iser 1989: 270), it is the «interplay between the fictional and the imaginary» which forms the heuristics of a literary anthropology (ibid.: 279).

Whatever the definitional, epistemological or even methodological challenges Literary Anthropology may face, some scholars claim that a literary text can never substitute for traditional fieldwork, although it can serve as corroborating documentation, if used together with other sources (Winner 1988: 53).2 However, traditional fieldwork is not an option when we study past cultures and societies. Moreover, the diachronic (i.e., documentary and historical) approach that, according to Poyatos, should be incorporated into Literary Anthropology makes it necessary to count on related disciplines such as historical anthropology since

[T]he historical approach to narrative literature seems, for all the descriptive passage it contains, an indispensable companion tool in direct [textual] field work as the only possible way for us to relate the present living culture to the sensible or intelligible forms of the past. (Poyatos 1988b: 16-17)

1 Oddly enough, the two most recent surveys of Literary Anthropology (Nic Craith & Fournier 2016; Wiles 2018) do not mention the contributions of Poyatos and Iser, the pioneering figures of the discipline.

2 Palsson (1995: 7), for his part, remarks that literary texts «may be revealing and perceptive, but they are not equivalent to natural dialogues», it is, the kind of living communication carried out during fieldwork. But this does not apply to fieldwork in the past, where almost only texts lato sensu, and occasionally material rests studied by archaeology, can provide some information.
As we will see later on, this diachronical approach and the role of historical anthropology in it are especially relevant for the study of the Icelandic sagas as ethnographic documents. Last but not least, we should always take into consideration the fact that for the writer of fiction (be it novels, plays or sagas) reality is made to fit an idea, whereas for the ethnographer or anthropologist the idea is made to fit the reality (Erickson 1988: 123). Without this consideration in mind we could run the risk of missing the point and turn Literary Anthropology into Anthropology of Literature. Or to put it with other words: do literary criticism instead of textual fieldwork (see, e.g., Lindow et al. 1986).

3. Old Icelandic Prose Literature: Echoes from the Northern Periphery

Before I survey the application of Literary Anthropology to the study of Old Norse society, I will briefly refer to genre classification\(^3\), origins and main structural and stylistic features of vernacular\(^4\) Old Icelandic prose literature:

Iceland, the cradle of most saga literature, is a 103,000 km\(^2\) volcanic island located in the middle of the North Atlantic at some 1,300 km from the west coast of Norway and some 1,200 km north from Scotland. Although there already lived a few Irish-Scottish Christian eremites called papar in Old Norse, the substantial colonization of Iceland was carried out in the late 9th century mainly by west-coast Norwegians and some immigrants from Old Norse colonies in the North Atlantic, particularly the Hebrides (Foote & Wilson 1970: 52). Due to the so-called “Little Climatic Optimum” (LCO) the Icelandic environment had at that time a rather mild temperature considering the latitude. The estimates of Icelandic population during the “Commonwealth Period”, i.e., between the end of the initial settlement phase (ca. 930 AD) and the Norwegian takeover of Iceland in 1262, range from less than 30,000 to over 75,000 (McGovern et al. 1988). However, the Little Ice Age (LIA) which started ca. 1250-1300 and several forms of environmental degradation due to overstocking of domestic animals and the depletion of trees related to building and farming activities led to a series of negative changes in the structure and dynamics of Old Icelandic society that culminated in the bloody turmoil of the Sturlung Era in mid-13th century, which is the time when many sagas were written (ibid.).

\(^3\)As Zilmer (2009:70) reminds us: «The genre-concept does not represent the understandings and practices of the actual period of saga writing in Iceland. It is first and foremost a suitable modern convention projected upon the available body of material». On the other hand, Swenson (1991:27) alludes to an «ethnic system of genres», i.e., «a self-contained system by which society defines its experiences, creative imagination, and social commentary».

\(^4\)Vernacular Icelandic literature was written in Old Icelandic, an ancient north Germanic language related to modern Norwegian. It is a very close offshoot of Old Norse and, in fact, both languages are often considered to be practically the same.
Following Schach (1993), the oldest sagas (ca. 1150) are apostles’ sagas (postola sögur) and saints’ lives (heilagra manna sögur), i.e., Old Norse-Icelandic renderings of Latin biographies of apostles and saints. Around 1190-1230 several biographies of Norse kings (konungasögur) were compiled, but the most important one is the Heimskringla (Circle of the World) by the Icelandic writer and politician Snorri Sturluson. Apart from these groups of texts, Kristjánsson (1992) summarises the classification of the main Old Norse-Icelandic literary genres in prose thus:

- **Íslendingasögur** (sagas of Icelanders, or family sagas), of which some forty have been preserved. Most of them were composed during the 13th century and deal with Icelanders during the first half of the Commonwealth Period, i.e., from the period of settlement (870-930) to the mid-11th century, right after their conversion to Christianity. Some outstanding Íslendingasögur are Njáls saga, Egils saga, Laxdæla saga, Eyrbyggja saga or Gísla saga Súrssonar, to name a few. This is the genre mainly approached by some literary anthropologists to this day.

- **Samtíðarsögur** (contemporary sagas), a collection of sagas which mainly includes the Sturlunga saga describing events that happened between 1117-1264. They are called “contemporary sagas” because their authors witnessed many of the events they describe. These sagas have a considerable ethnographic value as well.

- **Fornaldarsögur** (sagas of ancient times), characterized by their fondness of ancient/legendary settings, faraway geographies and one-dimensional heroes. Most fornaldarsögur are products of the 14th century and later. Völsunga saga, Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks, Örvar-Odds saga or Ragnars saga loðbrókar are some of the best known. According to Clunie Ross (2010:122), the fornaldarsögur are «a kind of ethnography of a past world, with the narrator its ethnographer».

- **Riddarasögur** (sagas of knights, or chivalric sagas), are Old Icelandic-Norse adaptations of continental (especially French, Anglo-Norman and German) romances such as the Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar, composed in Norway in 1226. However, Iceland developed its own version of this genre from the 14th century onwards: the so-called “indigenous” riddarasögur (Kalinke 1993). The riddarasögur, taken as Old Norse-Icelandic translations or adaptations of foreign texts, offer as well an interesting source for anthropologically-oriented translation studies such as Rikhardsdottir’s (2012).

- Although they do not qualify as literature stricto sensu, legal texts such as Grágás and Jónsbók are also a valuable category of Old Icelandic prose for anthropological purposes.

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5 Since the stateless Commonwealth Period is the main focus of the socio-political analysis of the Íslendingasögur I must remark here that this term suggests «a loose association of political assemblages, united by law and minimal agreement but without a centralized executive body» (Pálsson 1992a: 3). As Hastrup (1985: 208) points out, the proverbial saying með lögum skal land byggja (with laws shall the country be built) had a very real meaning for early Icelanders: they became Icelanders by a legislative act».

6 As Clunie Ross (2010:14) makes clear, the term “Old Icelandic-Norse” acknowledges the contribution of the Norwegian cultural base, while highlighting the unique and extensive contribution of Icelanders to Old Norse literature. I use Old Norse, or Old Icelandic-Norse, when Norway, Iceland and occasionally other Nordic colonies are involved, and Old Icelandic to refer only to Iceland, excluding Norway.
The origins of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, especially the Íslendingasögur, are a traditional bone of contention due to the confrontation existing between the so-called Freiprosa (“freeprose”) and Buchprosa (“bookprose”) theories set forth by the Swiss scholar Andreas Heusler (1914). The Freiprosa theory claims that the main source for a written saga was an oral saga, although the saga writer could also use secondary sources such as oral prose and poetic traditions or written sources. On the other hand, the Buchprosa theory states that there were no oral sagas, just disconnected oral traditions which an author used to compose a written saga (Mundal 1993: 52-53). As Clunies Ross (2010: 40) puts it:

They [bookprose scholars] assumed that the origin of the Icelandic saga, although based originally on oral sources, was fundamentally in written sources and that saga authors crafted their narratives from a variety of written works that were available to them, including, in some cases, works in Latin or foreign vernaculars.

Since, as Pálsson (1995: 19, 83) points out, the Buchprosa theory maintains that sagas are pure fiction, written documents devoid of any ethnographic or historical value, the predominance of this approach has traditionally hindered the development of an anthropological interest in the study of the sagas. As a reaction to the excessive textualism of the Buchprosa theory, some scholars have recently resumed the basic tenets of Freiprosa theory emphasizing the historical and ethnographic authenticity of the sagas as oral tradition. This is especially the case of Gísli Sigurðsson (2004), who explores how our reading of the Old Icelandic sagas must change if they are assumed to have grown out of a tradition of oral storytelling comparable to those described by modern fieldworkers and theorists of other oral traditions. For his part, the Old English scholar John D. Niles states that « oral narrative is and for a long time has been the chief basis of culture itself » (Niles 1999:2). It should be noted that the Buchprosa nor Freiprosa theories do not nullify each other: they just put different emphasis on the role of written and oral sources in the genesis of the sagas or, for that matter, on the role of realism and the fantastic in them (Clunies Ross 2002).

Concerning the structure of the Íslendingasögur, Andersson (1967:3-30) argues that these narratives center first and foremost around a conflict between groups (clans and families) and/or particular individuals. This conflict is framed in six main stages:

1. Introduction (the characters and their genealogies are introduced).
2. Conflict (tension gradually builds up between the groups or individuals).
3. Climax (violent confrontation and death of at least one of the main characters).
4. Revenge (the killer or one of his relatives is slain by a friend or a relative of the killed man).
5. Reconciliation (compensation is paid for the killing(s) or the antagonists are reconciled by other means).
6. Aftermath (information on later deeds of the main surviving characters or their descendants).
Since feuding is the underlying substrate of the Íslendingasögur, Byock (1988:36) claims that «feud served as a cohesive and stabilizing force in Old Icelandic society» and is expressed in the sagas through narrative particles he calls “feudemes”. These feudemes, which occur in no particular order as in real life, fall into three categories: «conflict, advocacy and resolution» (ibid.). Byock tries thus to surpass the structural inflexibilities of Andersson’s six stages.

In terms of their style, the Íslendingasögur are known for a presumed “objectivity” due to the fact that the writer or sagamaðr does not speak in the first person, nor a reader or listener is ever addressed (Ólason 1993: 335). However, sympathies and antipathies do exist, although they are often expressed by discreet means (physical description, indirect comments on individual acts, etc) thus biasing the reader or listener of the saga. The saga style is also dominated by parataxis and the display of brief and interspersed dialogues. As Ólason (1993: 336) remarks, «one of the most important functions of the dialogue is to give an act a historical dimension by connecting it with the past events or pointing to the future through warning and prediction».

4. The Anthropology of the Icelandic Sagas: Textual Fieldwork in the Past

As I mentioned in the second section of this article when I introduced Literary Anthropology, this relatively new discipline deals with literary texts as cultural artifacts. Now I shall focus upon the application of Literary Anthropology to the study of the Icelandic family sagas offering a brief chronological overview of the main publications available in English within this area. The publications of which I will offer an overview can be considered anthropological approaches to Old Norse-Icelandic society by means of its medieval texts because at least one of these requirements are met (Durrenberger 1989:228):

a) they include ethnographic comparison and/or a holistic perspective (i.e., cultures as systems).

b) their authors are identified as anthropologists by self-ascription or departmental membership.

It should be noted that the grades of comparison can vary between an ethnographically-oriented saga scholarship which «tends to emphasize the sagas and only seeks to understand particular aspects of culture and society, across the spectrum of social formations or in a given selection of societies», and a saga-oriented ethnography, which «emphasizes the comparative record more than the sagas and seeks to identify and explore rather general questions – similarities and differences in both social formation and evolutionary change» (Pálsson 1992b: 5).

Early anthropological approaches to Old Icelandic-Norse literature can be found in Phillpotts (1913), Mauss (2011 [1923-4]) and Veblen (1925). Whereas the first chapter of Phillpotts’ book deals entirely with Iceland, Mauss devotes a few pages of The Gift to pledge and gift in Germanic

7 Let us remember here that lack of objectivity (or concealed subjectivity, for that matter) in ethnographic texts is one of the main issues in Clifford & Marcus (1986).
societies and even opens the book with a citation from the Old Icelandic poem *Hávamál* (MAUSS 2011 [1923-4]: xiv, 59-62). Veblen, for his part, states in his introduction to the English translation of the *Laxdæla* that this saga is «an ethnological document of a high order» (VEBLEN 1925: vi). Apart from Georges Dumézil’s structuralist contributions to Old Norse mythology, more recent and systematic anthropological studies on Old Icelandic society by means of its prose literature were those of THOMPSON (1969), WAX (1969), TURNER (1971; 1985) and LINDOW (1973).

Laura Thompson, who tells that she became interested in European indigenous cultures when she lived in a Lower Saxon rural community (THOMPSON 1969:101), devotes two chapters of the second part of her *The Secret of Culture* to give a general overview of the Viking culture and its later Icelandic counterpart relying basically on secondary sources from archaeological, legal, mythological and literary texts, but also from physical anthropology. From a holistic and comparative perspective Thompson concludes that

[I]f we would understand processes and principles of cultural “evolution” or change we must study comparatively the development of specific cultural traditions through space and time rather than visualize them simply as a series of sequential stages of organization” and that “social structure and ecological structure tend to operate as complementary systems within a total community. (THOMPSON 1969:218).

Much more comprehensive is the book by Rosalie H. WAX (1969), which is entirely devoted to «the changing ethos of the Vikings». The first words of her preface sound programmatic: «I felt that time had come for some anthropologist to introduce the rugged ancestors of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants into the company of our ‘underdeveloped’ or ‘developing’ peoples». In her book, Wax seeks to counteract Arnold J. Toynbee’s assertion that Viking “civilization” displayed a precocious rationalism and a remarkable freedom from superstition. After having dealt with Old Norse-Icelandic society, mythology, laws and verse and prose literature, Wax concludes:

[I]f one looks at the Icelandic writers’ “freedom from superstition” in the context of the transformation of their indigenous world view, it becomes not a manifestation of precocious, proto-scientific enlightenment, but rather a terminal expression of an extraordinary disenchantment. (WAX 1969:162).

In 1972, Victor Turner published an influential article titled “An Anthropological Approach to the Icelandic Saga” where he reveals that his knowledge of Old Norse-Icelandic culture and language as a student of English made him switch to anthropology and “work in a live society not too dissimilar to ancient Iceland” (TURNER 1971:351). Stating that «the sagas read like exceptionally well-filled ethnographic records and diaries, written by an incomparable literary artist» (ibid.: 371), Turner applies his concept of “social drama” to a brief analysis of the feuds in *Njáls saga*. In a later article written in a similar vein, Turner applies again the concept of social drama to the
conflicts in *Eyrbyggja saga* and points out that as an anthropologist he is mainly interested in “how modes of crisis control developed as the settlement of Iceland proceeded. The sagas give quite self-conscious ("reflexive") exemplification of this growth and consolidation of redressive machinery” (Turner 1985: 108). Another relevant publication in this early stage of contemporary literary anthropology of the Icelandic sagas is “The Sagas as Ethnographic Documents” by John Lindow (1973). Although not an anthropologist (he is professor of Germanic languages and literatures), Lindow’s claims that medieval Icelandic society is “as liable to ethnographic investigation as any so called primitive society of the twentieth century” (Lindow 1973: 1) and that «whatever else it may be, a given document is “ethnographic” if it may be used to illuminate a culture. In this way, the Icelandic sagas are as important as ethnographic documents as they are as works of art, literature, or monuments of national pride» (ibid.:5). Both Turner and Lindow are well aware in their articles that the Íslendingasögur – mostly written in the Sturlunga Era, i.e., some centuries after the events depicted in them – are largely projections of 13th century’s mentality and political dynamics onto a social and cultural landscape basically located in the 9th and 10th centuries. Therefore, as many other literary anthropologists or scholars of the Icelandic sagas would also assume later (see esp. Clover 1985: 255-6; Durrenberger 1989:236; Palsson 1992a), the question of the historicity of the Íslendingasögur is not paramount for the understanding of these texts as ethnographic documents of the period in which they were written and the past they relate to. Moreover, even the relative proximity of *samtíðarsögur* such as the *Sturlunga saga* to the events they describe is in itself no guarantee of veracity as «the political and social pressures of the Sturlung period were such that distortion was inevitable» (Clover 1968: 255).

The 80’s witnessed such an increased anthropological interest in Old Norse-Icelandic literature that Clover (1985) devotes almost 20 of the 59 pages of her bibliographical essay on the Íslendingasögur to deal with the contributions of Literary Anthropology to this genre. Outstanding monographies in this decade included *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland* by Kirsten Hastrup (1985), where this Danish anthropologist analyzes Old Icelandic society and culture centering around the semantic domains of time, space, kinship, political organization, cosmology and the changes which took place during the Commonwealth Period in the fields of ecology, demography, religion, property relations and the law. Her conclusion is that «Once a fascinating social “experiment” created in the wake of Viking expansion, it [the Icelandic Commonwealth] ended as an experience of conflict and submission» (Hastrup 1985: 238). *Medieval Iceland. Society, Sagas and Power* by Jesse L. Byock (1988) approaches Old Icelandic society emphasizing its legal aspects and stating that «the sagas served as a literature of social instruction» (Byock 1988: 36). Andersson & Miller (1989) also emphasize legality in *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland*, where in addition they offer a faithful translation of *Ljósvetninga saga* and *Valla-Ljóts saga* in English after an introduction of 128 pages. Clunies Ross (2010) comments referring to this book that both sagas give

[T]he sort of ethnographic detail that allows someone with a basic understanding of how the kinship and feuding system worked within the context of medieval Icelandic law, for example, to follow the main themes of these sagas in a manner that approximates to the position of a historically informed participant observer. (Clunies Ross 2010: 162)
The 90’s seems to be the heyday of the (literary) anthropology of the sagas as Prof. Gísli Pálsson started teaching a course on this subject at the University of Iceland and some pioneering collections of essays and relevant monographies are published during this decade. Thus, in 1990, Kirsten Hastrup edits her collection of essays *Island of Anthropology*, although some of them deal with modern Iceland. That same year, *Miller* (1990) published a comprehensive monography on what can be called an “ethno-legal” approach to Old Icelandic society despite its lack of comparative perspective. *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*, edited by Ross Samson in 1991, deals with Old Norse-Icelandic society from different frames of reference: literacy, gender studies, economy, politics and ethnicity. In one of the essays, the influential E. Paul *Durrenberger* (1991: 17) interestingly states that «the sagas are not stories but descriptions of totemic structure». By this he means that «the sagas were totemic documents written in an effort to stitch the present to the past, to assert changelessness in the face of change» (*ibid.* : 15). Another collection of essays, *From Sagas to Society. Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, edited by Gisli Pálsson in 1992, analyzes a similar range of themes through 17 contributions by outstanding scholars in Old Norse-Icelandic studies. Also in 1992 appears Durrenberger’s essential monography *The Dynamics of Medieval Iceland*, where he analyzes the political economy of Old Icelandic society from the evidence in the sagas. Equally relevant, although from a historical anthropological perspective, is an anthology of articles by Aaron *Gurevich* (1992), where the section devoted to case studies contains exclusively articles on Old Norse-Icelandic society and culture. As I mentioned in the first section of this article quoting *Poyatos* (1988b), historical anthropology is an “indispensable companion tool” concerning the diachronical dimension of literary anthropology and, as *Jong* (1996:329) remarks, «a renewed awareness of the “otherness” of the past has been a crucial factor in the rapprochement between historians and anthropologists».

The interest in an anthropological approach to the sagas seems to have decreased in this new century if we take into consideration the number of relatively recent academic publications on the subject (see, e.g., *Nedkvitne* 2000; *Mitchell* 2003; *Zori et al.* 2013; *Lincoln* 2014), but its ongoing influence is made clear when we notice that both recent studies and translations of Old Norse-Icelandic literature in English and other languages usually include pervasive data referring not only to philological and literary aspects, but also to social and cultural (i.e., anthropological) features. On the other hand, a critical look to what was published in the 90’s and a more dynamical approach to Old Norse society are the trademarks of both literary and historical anthropology in the 21st century. *Nedkvitne* (2000:28) critically comments that the former anthropological tradition tended to focus upon the statistic features of Old Norse-Icelandic mentality and society thus overlooking social, chronological and individual differences within that society. As he conveniently points out: «Ten years ago [the 90’s] anthropology meant a renewal for saga studies. But has it now become a straightjacket for the future studies on saga mentalities?” (*ibid.*). To take that jacket off is the task of new anthropological studies on Old Norse society.

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8 Although devoid of an English translation so far, I must allude here to a quite influential work published in the 90’s: *Fortælling og ære: studier i islændingesagaerne* by the late Danish scholar Preben Meulengraacht Sørensen (1993).
5. Icelandic Sagas and Translation: The Anthropologist as Pontifex

I consider it appropriate to finish this article dealing briefly with the translation of the Old Icelandic sagas into modern languages from an anthropological perspective. Thus, just as a (Western) anthropologist usually does not publish his/her monography on, say, the Nuer in this people’s language, a (literary) anthropologist does not need to study the culture and society reflected in Old Norse-Icelandic literature directly from the original language of the sagas. In this sense, translation has a very important role in the literary anthropological approach to the texts of a society which is quite remote from us both in place and time.

Anticipating the “cultural turn” in translation studies, in which discourse and social contexts are the translations units instead of word and text (LeFevere & Bassnett 1990), Nida (1964: 80) stresses the fact that translators should be aware of the cultural dimension of the translated languages since

Languages are basically a part of culture, and words cannot be understood correctly apart from the local cultural phenomena for which they are symbols. This being the case, the most fruitful approach to the semantic problems of any language is the ethnological one. (NIDA 1964: 97)

Thus, instead of considering translations as “facts of a target culture” (Toury 1995:29), they should rather be treated as facts of the source culture the original texts come from. This approach intends to avoid annihilating/domesticating the foreignness (i.e., “Otherness”) of the translated texts. As Venuti (2008:265) points out: «A translated text should be the site where linguistic and cultural differences are somehow signalled, where a reader gets some sense of a cultural other». This philosophy is applied by E. Paul and Dorothy Durrenberger (1986) to the anthropological translation of the Icelandic sagas since «in anthropology, translation is used in the service of cultural description» (Durrenberger & Durrenberger 1986:11). Therefore, a literal translation should be carried out in order to respect as much as possible typical stylistic features in the Icelandic sagas such as time shifting, formulaic expressions, word choice or parataxis. By doing so, the translation could retain important cultural information that otherwise would be lost in a free translation adapted to the presumed tastes of the modern reader (ibid.:19). Although in a literal translation the readers might be confused by the unfamiliar, «from the confrontation with confusion come the questions about cultural differences, and one hopes, the motivation to comprehend them» (ibid.: 19). To accomplish this, an anthropological translation should therefore be a “thick translation”10 in which the translator has to provide as well a comprehensive introduction, annotations and glosses in order help to locate the translated text in its rich cultural

9 However, some scholars have criticized the approach of the Durrenbergers to the translation of the Icelandic sagas saying that it can go too far using absurd expressions such as “chopped him a death chop” to render the original Old Icelandic hjó [...] banahögg. See Kennedy (2007:174).
10ss No need to say, Geertz’s “thick description” rings a bell here.
and linguistic context (Appiah 2004:399). In this way, the anthropologically-trained translator becomes a pontifex, i.e., a bridge-builder «charged with the task of facilitating a “crossing” into the sensibilities and sensitivities of others» (Saler 2003:209).

Based on my own translatorial praxis, I will give a couple of brief examples about the importance of an anthropological approach to the translation of Icelandic sagas in order to illustrate the point and finish off this section of my article:

a. The Old Icelandic verb at râða ("to rule") is usually followed either by the preposition fyrir or by the preposition yfir. Then, if one translates both at râða fyrir and at râða yfir simply as “to rule” (e.g., “Harald ruled Norway”), important political information is missed, since the first version of the verb (literally, “to rule before”) might allude to a local chieftain considered to be a horizontal primus inter pares, whereas the second version (literally, “to rule over”) might rather refer to other kind of leaders such as kings or emperors, who occupy a vertical (more hierarchical) position in society.

b. The Old Icelandic word hólmganga is often translated in English simply as “duel”, thus missing all its etymological and cultural background. Hólmganga actually means in English “isle-going” or, better still, “holm-going”. It originally described a specific type of duel carried out on an islet located in a river or near a mainland and accompanied by a series of rites and rules. It is different to another type of “duel”, the einvigi (“single combat”), which did not have any rites nor rules (Cleasby et al. 1957, s.v. hólmganga).

6. Conclusions

Literary Anthropology is a relatively recent interdisciplinary field which, in its diachronical dimension, aims at studying the culture of past literate societies. Since at the moment we cannot travel physically back in time to make traditional fieldwork in those societies, Literary Anthropology proposes textual fieldwork as a useful alternative strategy to approach past cultures and societies from their written (especially literary) sources. If, according to interpretive anthropology à la Geertz, “culture is text”, text can also be considered culture. In this way, anthropologists can start an enriching journey towards a better understanding of human nature through the detailed study of its literary products. These literary products adopt thus the role of “native informants” of societies gone by.

The contribution of Literary Anthropology to the study and interpretation of Old Norse society in the peripheral Iceland has proven to be rather fruitful to this day considering the amount of publications, the diversity of themes and perspectives that so far can be found and the increasing quality of the socio-cultural approach to Old Norse-Icelandic studies, including the field of translation.
As Pálsson (1995:33) points out, the feeling of living in a world where apparently nothing remains to be discovered makes many people resort to the strategy of “importing” strangers either from outer space or former times. This could account, in my view, for the increasing interest in new disciplines such as Anthropology of Outer Space (e.g., Finney & Jones 1985) and Literary Anthropology of past societies.

Although, as Nic Craith & Fournier (2016:2) remark, «the notion of “literary anthropology” is not yet given full recognition as a sub-field of anthropology», we should keep in mind that «social scientists can profit profoundly by reading, thinking, writing about, and teaching literary works» (Stoller 2015:144). Moreover, using literary texts as a part of the syllabus for studies in anthropology can be a stimulating way of engaging students with lively ethnographies of the cultures and time periods to be explored.

REFERENCES


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