The Saga of Þórður kakali
D.M. White

Published by Punctum Books


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/84309

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2924236
The thirteenth-century Icelandic text *The Saga of Þórður kakali* survives today as part of the fourteenth-century compilation *The Saga of the Sturlungar*. In extant form, *The Saga of Þórður kakali* is a biography of Þórður kakali Sighvatsson (c. 1210–56) — chieftain, Norwegian royal retainer, and sheriff — and covers the periods 1242–50 and 1254–56.

Consequently, the saga is based on a “true story.” In 1242, Þórður returned to Iceland from service as a royal retainer in Norway. At this time, Þórður appears to have been relatively penniless and powerless after being deprived of his patrimony by his enemies (chiefly Kolbeinn ungi Arnórsson of the Ásbirningar and Gissur Þorvaldsson of the Haukdælir) and allegedly outspending his means in Norway. In short order, Þórður was hounded to the ends of the country by his enemies, who had slain and subjugated all of his powerful kinsmen during the preceding four years (1238–42) and thus taken control of over half of Iceland.

However, over the course of less than a decade (1242–48), the underdog Þórður managed to overcome all the odds, defeating his enemies and establishing hegemony over all Iceland (1248–50). Þórður was the only medieval Icelander to achieve this feat, almost seven centuries of colonial rule commencing shortly after his time (1262/4–1944). Yet, the spokes of fortune’s
wheel soon turned against Þórður, and he ended up dying in exile in Norway in 1256.

When it was first written, *The Saga of Þórður kakali* was longer and probably covered Þórður's entire adult life (c. 1233–56). This original — *The Great Saga of Þórður kakali* — is now lost. Though of unattributed authorship, *The Great Saga of Þórður kakali* was written in the 1270s, potentially by Svarthöfði Dufgusson (c. 1218–c. 1286) — Þórður's cousin and trusted follower — who witnessed the majority of the events described in the text.¹ *The Great Saga of Þórður kakali* has been theorised by several scholars (including myself) to have been intended as a work of propaganda. The most recent word on this (mine) is that the saga was most likely written to provide political support to Hrafn Oddsson — Svarthöfði's brother-in-law, a trusted follower of Þórður, a powerful chieftain, and later the sole governor of Iceland on behalf of the Norwegian king — who during the 1270s was contending with three knotty problems: a rival for the governorship of Iceland, a troublesome southern bishop determined to wrest ownership of church estates from secular leaders, and controversial legal reforms.

As mentioned, the extant portions of the saga cover the periods 1242–50 and 1254–56. It begins in *medias res*. Chapter 1 is a prologue of sorts, summarising events in Iceland following the seizure of two of Þórður's cousins, Órækja Snorrason and Sturla Þórðarson, at Hvítárbrú in the year 1242. The chapter reports that Órækja and Gissur Þorvaldsson travelled abroad and tells how Kolbeinn ungi subjugated the Western Quarter of Iceland to his leadership. Chapter 2 describes Þórður kakali's arrival back in Iceland in September 1242. Chapters 2–5 provide an account of Þórður's attempt to gather support for his case against Kolbeinn and Gissur for the deaths of his father and brothers at the Battle of Örlygsstaðir in 1238.

Chapters 6–7 explain the course of events when, after gathering an army, Þórður immediately invades the Southern Quarter. This campaign comes off as a success in chapter 7, and chapters 8–10 describe the escape of Þórður and his men from Kolbeinn, who has been made aware of the incursion by Hjalti biskupsson, the interim leader of Árnesþing.

Chapters 11–22 tell of a series of escalating skirmishes between Þórður’s and Kolbeinn’s sides, and the raising of navies by each. Following a devastating attack on Vatnsdalur by Þórður, Kolbeinn avenges himself by pillaging Dalir and the region around Reykhólar, before hunting down Þórður’s brother, Tumi yngri, and killing him, in chapters 23–26. This outrage, and the harsh measures imposed on the Eyfróðingar, set the stage for chapters 27–35, which describe the course of the naval engagement called the Battle of Húnaflói and the amphibious manoeuvres which followed.

Though the Battle of Húnaflói proves undecisive, a partial resolution between the two sides is reached in chapters 36–38 by Kolbeinn returning Þórður’s patrimony to him and dying shortly after. Þórður establishes himself as the leader of Eyjafjörður while Brandur Kolbeinsson takes the helm in Skaga fjörður. Chapters 39–41 describe escalating tensions between Þórður and Brandur, culminating in a second confrontation at the Battle of Haugsnes in chapters 42–44.

Having summarily executed Brandur following a total victory over the Skagfirðingar, Þórður and Gissur agree to resolve their own dispute through the mediation of the Norwegian king in chapter 45. The two travel to Norway and submit their case to the Norwegian king’s judgment in chapter 46. Chapter 47 tells what happened next in Iceland and dates the death of Brandur. Returning to Norway in chapter 48, it is stated that Cardinal William of Sabina decided the dispute in Þórður’s favour, and that he was to be sent by the Norwegian king to promote the royal cause with the assistance of the new bishop elect of Hólar, Henrik.

Chapter 49 summarises Þórður’s time in Iceland during the period 1247–50. Most of the narrative is taken up with the mat-
ter of how he established leadership over the whole country and notes some key events during his ascendancy. Þórdur and Bishop Henrik, however, fall out, for the latter believes the former to have laboured more on his own behalf than the king’s. The consequence is that Bishop Henrik goes to Norway and makes the case against Þórdur before King Håkon in 1249. Chapter 49 ends abruptly in the winter of 1249–50 by telling how few support Þórdur’s case in Norway.

Chapter 50 — the last — picks up the story four years after the end of chapter 49, with Gissur’s arrival in Norway in 1254 after the Flugumýri Arson on 22 October 1253. After a confrontation with Þórdur at the court, we hear about Þórdur’s activity in Norway as a sheriff, his popularity, and then an account of his death.

_The Saga of Þórdur kakali_, treated as a primary source, provides the reader with an interesting view of power politics and political culture from the periphery of medieval Europe, challenging dominant historiographical narratives derived from the sources produced at the center. For example, let us consider the influence that Hálfdan Sæmundarson — Þórdur’s brother-in-law — is reported to wield, despite the fact that he was, by his own admission (in chapter 2 of the saga), a peaceful, placid individual, so uninterested in politics and conflict that he surrendered the opportunity to lead Rangárþing to his brothers. In chapter 7, Þórdur asks his sister Steinvör to summon the householders of Rangárþing for an attack on the episcopal See of Skálholt. Here we are told of a levy of troops being quickly raised in the name of Hálfdan — who did not even hold a political office in the region — and then immediately disbanded with virtually no effort:

Steinvör summoned together all of the householders in one location, ordering them to be ready to follow Þórdur and Hálfdan. Björn and Kolbeinn met Hálfdan and gave him the message from Þórdur and Steinvör. Hálfdan said it was unwise to assault a holy place on account of the householders [of Árnesþing], who would not be of any account. ‘I will not go anywhere, nor shall any of my men, but Þórdur may get
vengeance against the householders some other way in time.’ Then Hálfdan sent men to the householders and told them to go home.

This evidently does not square with the typical view of the powerful medieval magnate as a warrior and skilled political player.

Additionally, a close reading of the contents of The Saga of Þórdur kakali yields much historical evidence to confront outdated views of the roles and limitations of women, the disabled, and the poor in medieval European society. To illustrate this, consider the following scene from chapter 2 of the saga which describes the indomitable Steinvör, Þórdur’s sister (and the wife of Hálfdan):

Steinvör [...] said that Hálfdan would obviously assist Þórdur in such ways as he could. She also noted that, hitherto, Hálfdan had never been a warrior, and ‘I have not urged him to involve himself in high-profile cases. However, our relationship will suffer if you do not assist my brother Þórdur and the natural order of things shall be violated: I will take up weapons and seek a following of men, leaving you with the kitchen keys.’ Steinvör continued speaking for a while and Hálfdan listened in silence.

Later on, in chapter 7, The Saga of Þórdur kakali reports that this same Steinvör was so well-regarded that she was chosen to arbitrate a high-profile dispute alongside a bishop. Clearly, Steinvör does not fit the “damsel in distress” stereotype commonly misapplied to the wives of medieval élites.

Beyond its historiographic value, the saga also reflects considerable art. The artistic skill of the saga’s author has previously been compared unfavourably to The Saga of the Icelanders (the magnum opus of Þórdur’s cousin Sturla Þórðarson — the famous poet, writer, chieftain, royal retainer, and lawman). However,
my contention is that Sturla and the author of *The Great Saga of Þórdur kakali* were both skilled practitioners, and that pitting the two against each other does not add anything to scholarly discourse on either text.

I admire two things in particular about the literary art of *The Saga of Þórdur kakali*. Firstly, the author of *The Great Saga of Þórdur kakali* was highly skilled with the technique of interlacement. The interlaced structure of the saga is fractal, with the author using it to depict simultaneous action within scenes at the smallest scale and to interweave the saga’s main plot with several subplots on a grand scale. The effect of this is that the narrative appears to orbit around the titular character, Þórdur kakali, and invites the reader to draw comparisons with other characters. Secondly, the saga is also replete with intertextual references to then-contemporary literature (chiefly *The Saga of King Sverre of Norway*) which enables the author to “show” the audience a lot about the character of Þórdur in particular without actually having to “tell” them much.

*The Saga of Þórdur kakali* is readily available in Icelandic editions of The Saga of the Sturlungar, but, hitherto, only one English translation of *The Saga of the Sturlungar* (and thus *The Saga of Þórdur kakali*) has ever been produced. This translation was carried out by Julia McGrew and R. George Thomas (published in two volumes, 1970–74). Nevertheless, even with the invaluable assistance of the eminent Icelandic scholar Sigurður Nordal — who provided English translations of the trickier passages of text — McGrew and Thomas’s translation turned out “defective and unreliable” (in the words of Oren Falk).  

Published translations are cultural levelers insofar as they open up texts to broader audiences — members of the interested wider public — who may not have the means or time to learn the original language merely to study a single primary source or

---


read a lone literary classic. While McGrew and Thomas’s translation of *The Saga of Þórður kakali* is more-or-less serviceable if used with extreme caution (i.e., by native English speakers with fluency in Icelandic), the importance of competent translations should not be forgotten, especially for the reader without Icelandic language skills: poor translations can offend, confuse, and mislead users of the target language.

What follows is an Icelandic–English parallel text of *The Saga of Þórður kakali*. It may appear controversial to some that I have chosen to present the source text of the saga in modern Icelandic orthography. However, I would counter that the language of the medieval Icelanders is not a dead one. I feel strongly that imposing “standardized Old Norse” orthography on the medieval Icelandic corpus— which is done in spite of the fact that spelling was neither homogenous nor static in reality during this period—serves to marginalize this language even more than it already has been by the ascendancy of English during the digital age. Moreover, when one does not employ modern Icelandic orthography, one prematurely accepts the relegation of the language which birthed the sagas to history, even though it still breathes.

As for the English translation, I have striven to maximize both fidelity to the text and reader comprehension. Nevertheless, I admit that a marked preference for the latter is evident.

D.M. White
August 2019
Further Reading

On Þórður kakali and His Historical Context


Sveinsson, Einar Ól. “Sturlungaöld. Drög um íslenzka menningu á þrettándu öld” (Reykjavík, 1940), trans. Jóhann S. Hannes-

On The Saga of Þórdur kakali

__Ólafur Ármann Jakobsson__


_Editions and translations of and from The Saga of the Sturlungar_ 


PREFACE


Fig. 1. fol. 36v of AM 122 a, one of the two vellum manuscripts of Sturlunga saga. Source: Dictionary of Old Norse Prose, https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?i118597.