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Book review

Violence and Risk in Medieval Iceland. This Spattered Isle. By Oren Falk. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2021. xiii + 358 pp. £75. ISBN 978 0 19 886604 6.

This is a sophisticated and thought-provoking book. It uses the representation of physical violence in Icelandic sagas to reflect on why violence was used and how it is represented in those sagas that portray events set in medieval Iceland. Falk is juggling with a series of familiar issues for anyone interested in the vexed question of the historical value of the sagas, but he uses vocabulary rarely used by scholars of medieval Iceland. The book draws on and amplifies some of Falk's published articles but constitutes a wider meditation on both physical violence in Iceland and historical method. As Falk puts it at the end of his introductory chapter, his approach 'aims to offer a universal tool for making sense of violence *in* history; the particular patch of history on which I focus, the Icelandic uchronia, provides an opportunity to test the utility of this model in writing a history *of* violence' (p. 54, author's italics). While the majority of the book is concerned with thirteenth- and fourteenth-century society, its epilogue briefly suggests interpretations of Viking Age events and the significance of risk for modern Israel.

Falk's USP is his use of many and varied theoretical models to bear on the reasons for saga actors deploying violence. His particular view is set out in Chapter 1, 'What Does Violence Have to Do with History?' While some scholars have seen physical violence as exclusively strategic or symbolic, or even been inconsistent in the way they think about it, Falk argues that we need to consider the potential for it to be both and, in addition to this, that we need to recognize that in medieval Iceland people's (men's?) use of violence served to manage risk as part of the feud. Life was risky, but people's deployment of violence was automatic under certain circumstances (e.g. p. 93). Falk also couches his analyses with reference to prospect theory and the idea of edgework, i.e. the deliberate choice to take unnecessary risks.

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The object of Falk's analysis, as he characterizes it, is neither literature nor history but something in between, *uchronia*, the 'liminal historicity characteristic of such retrospective [i.e. saga] narratives' (p. 300). *Uchronia* spans literary genres so that Falk analyses Family Sagas and contemporary sagas together. He also draws on some of the ideas of well-known narratologist Gérard Genette, specifically the concept of *histoire* (the saga author's notion of supposed events) and *récit* (the way those events are 'arranged, embellished, amplified', p. 294). Falk's approach to the texts is set out in an appendix that should be essential reading for anyone interested in the debates about the sagas' historicity. His view is perhaps best summed up when he says that he sees us being able to 'gain a nuanced appreciation for their historicity and move towards – though never all the way to – the actual history they pretend to portray' (p. 301).

The meat of the book is four chapters. Chapter 2, 'Chronicling a Blood-spattered Isle', is largely an analysis of not much more than a few paragraphs' worth of one version of the Saga of Bishop Guðmundr Arason of Hólar (d. 1237). The story is one in which, in 1220, Guðmundr was trapped by his secular enemies at a farm in northern Iceland yet eventually rescued by a local intermediary. This is fairly standard stuff in the contemporary sagas and the mundanity of the episode on the one hand, mixed with the potential for hagiographic imagery, is what attracts Falk to it. The analysis is taken in varied directions, including assessing the logic of the risks taken by the protagonists in this small-scale conflict. One of Falk's major points, though, is that the consistency in attitudes of the bishop and secular leaders reflects 'uchronic realism' rather than 'hagiographic prejudice' (p. 92). Similarly, the bravado shown by men doomed to die violent deaths is not just a heroic trope because even men whom the saga author dislikes can be credited with choosing a heroic death (pp. 110–11).

Chapter 3, 'The Blood in the Feud', offers readings of two further episodes, both relatively well known, and prefaced by a discussion of the appropriateness for seeing in Iceland 'feud as key to the medieval mindset (rather than, say, more generalized honour or more genial gift-giving)', allowing for feud being 'conceptually murky' (p. 117). The first episode is from the contemporary sagas, and slightly unusual in that it involves a powerful southern Icelandic chieftain/leader (Sæmundr Jónsson) orchestrating deadly conflict with Norwegian merchants visiting Iceland in response to his son's accidental drowning at sea in Norway. The second – a short, whole text set in the tenth century, *The Tale of Thorstein Staff-struck* (*Þorsteins þátrr stangarhöggs*) – recalls a conflict that ends peacefully. If this latter example is familiar to non-specialists it might be because it was used by William I. Miller to

set out his method in *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking* (Chicago, 1990). The behaviour of the participants in each case is convincingly elucidated in an approach not dissimilar to that which Miller or other historical anthropologists might take, albeit with different emphases, not least a continued focus on characters' choices to take on risks associated with deploying violence.

In Chapter 4, 'Killing Ambition', Falk offers not just a theory of individuals' use of violence but of the cause of uchronia's obsession with feud rather than larger-scale conflict. Falk makes various congruent arguments here. He plays down the idea of significant socio-political change being represented by the differing depictions of scales of conflict in Family Sagas (resolutely small-scale) and the presence of occasional war-like conditions in the contemporary sagas. Rather, 'we should treat the two corpora as differentiated expressions of a unified uchronia. In response to clashing, incommensurable cultural paradigms within the Sturlung Age present – society on the one side, state on the other – both genres subscribed to the myth of a contrast between past equilibrium and its present disruption, and offered bifurcating, complementary commentaries on it' (pp. 215–16). Falk is also of the view that uchronia is anti-state and in favour of the kind of self-regulating effect of the feud on the elite. Perhaps all of this is not so far removed from this reviewer's (and others') notion that Family Sagas are partly nostalgic but it is effectively put.

The book's last main chapter, 'Violence, Naturally' picks up on an issue which Falk has published on before: the relatively rare appearance of natural hazards in saga literature, despite the Iceland's harsh climate, floods, and medieval annals which record numerous disasters. As he puts it, 'only two of the Four Horsemen feature prominently in the sagas' (p. 223); famine and pestilence are notable by their rarity except as plot devices. The argument of this chapter is that this absence serves to demonstrate the prominence of feud and violence in uchronia. Furthermore, when nature does appear it is often as a form of violence subject to human control in some way.

Even a review as long as this one cannot do justice to the nuances that Falk brings to bear on familiar material. There are times when I might emphasize different elements of the narratives that Falk deals with but the analyses are convincing and the emphasis on risk is enlightening. The sophistication of this book, and its many footnotes to the ideas and parallels that inform it, might put off undergraduate readers but it is an essential read for medievalists interested in narrative histories and, as the author surely hopes, students of violence.

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