

Reviews

Book review editor: Lars-Erik Edlund, Dept. of Language Studies, Umeå University, SE-901 87 Umeå, Sweden
 Tel. +46-(0)90-786 7887
 E-mail: lars-erik.edlund@umu.se

Chris Callow, *Landscape, Tradition and Power in Medieval Iceland. Dalir and Eyjafjörður Region c. 870–1265* (The Northern World, 80), Leiden; Brill 2020, ISBN 9789004278875, 386 pp.

This book compares systems of geopolitical power including the formation of alliances through marriages in two regions of Iceland, Dalir and Eyjafjörður, as found in the Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*), The Book of Settlements (*Landnámabók*), Contemporary sagas (*Sturlunga saga*) and other publications.

The author, Chris Callow, has done admirable work in this carefully written and interesting book which spans 300 pages, and is complimented by a 34-page bibliography, 11 maps, and 18 photographs. The book is well written, and the text accessible to the general reader. The book should be welcomed by all who have an interest in the subject and will be especially beneficial to scholars in the field. The book covers a wide time range, from colonization to the end of the Icelandic Commonwealth in the middle of the thirteenth century, and the collection of sources is all documented. It is a fresh approach to focus the content of the book on geopolitics at the local level in Dalir and Eyjafjörður.

After reading *Íslendingasögur* as a testimony of the geopolitical power system at local level in the Middle Ages, the author claims it was characterized by stability and consistency, which in my view is the most important conclusion of the book. The *goðorð*, the legal authority owned by chieftains (*goði/höfðingi*) was geographically delimited, and although the form of the *goðorð* was not stable as the medieval Icelandic laws suggest—their number may not have been fixed and their names changed from time to time—the decision-making process the author describes, although he does not use that term, seems to have been stable and consistent. Every *goði* had around him a group of farmers, self-declared followers who lived near him. In each province, there could only be a limited number of *goðar* (the plural of *goði*). Their decisions on the use of force or making agreement, were driven by their own interests and the overarching goal of preventing society from descending into total warfare. I understand the results to mean that the power of a specific *goði* was as great as his last political or military victory. To win such victories, power was needed, and it was not obtained by legal order, but by use of force and making alliances with other powerful chieftains. The power was therefore not constitutional but came from control over land. The *goðar* were, says Callow, a constant threat to each other and to a peaceful society.

Callow says the time of the origin of the *Íslendingasögur* is older than has been suggested, before or in the second half of the twelfth century rather than in the sec-

ond half of the thirteenth century or later. His conclusion on this is persuasive, and it is important to an understanding of the stories, if not only for the obvious fact that they cannot be told from the political interests of the thirteenth century. More importantly, Callow doubts that the descriptions of the geopolitical power system were shaped by the interests of specific rulers, clans or interests as result of their role in the compilation of the sagas. Written texts that have both oral and written origins were created at different times, by different writers, either familiar with local matters or from other regions, but who describe the geopolitical power systems in regions in the same way. I believe this supports the perspective that we should consider whether these stories serve not only as records of the time in which they were written, but also as narratives of the events they depict. The only systematic bias the author finds is that the stories don't deal with the lives of the public but have focus on the *goðar*. It appears that *Íslendingasögur* can be thought of as a legitimate sample of sources about the Commonwealth. It is tempting to wonder if those who compiled the stories and wrote them down had something to rely on other than the stories of the events they describe, such as the story of an ancestor of Norwegian chieftains Helgi magri (the thin), who colonized Eyjafjörður, and who was born in Ireland as son of an Irish princess, Rafarta. Callow specifically states that he does not assume so and doubts this story of the settlement of Eyjafjörður (p. 311). Callow, however, accepts this description in the sagas of the geopolitical power system of leadership of one powerful *goði* in the region. Although the sagas leave a gap in who exactly controlled one specific part of the region, which Callow explains as being due to the influence exerted by the Norwegian monarchy in Eyjafjörður, but not in Dalir.

The authors' description of the origins of the geopolitical systems in Dalir and Eyjafjörður is clear and convincing and pushes back against efforts to paint a completely different picture of the nation's history than that found in medieval texts. Despite decades of searching for archaeological remains, nothing has been found that indicates settlement before the time indicated by the medieval texts, nor of the existence of a nation and culture whose stories have been drawn from the national memory. Callow enhances the credibility of these medieval texts. One source that Callow omitted are the existing names of farms which are likely named after the original settlers on farms for example Örlygur, Skeggi, Hróar, Harri on Skagaströnd.

Callow assumes that the Norwegian "takeover" of the Icelandic Commonwealth was not the result of economic or social development in the country but rather was due to the Norwegian military strength. This is contrary to one of the main assumptions of the independence struggle in the nineteenth century, which was the decision of the Icelanders to side with the King of Norway, rather than being forced to do so. He sees nothing but stagnation in society and the consolidation of the power of the chiefs who received a quarter of the property tax. However, if they controlled three quarters of it (the tithe of the church, priests and the poor), it would amount to the equivalent of the total value of all land in the country within a century. The question the book proposes is whether a marginal change in the balance of power could, over a long period of time, lead to a fundamental change in society.

The economic history of Iceland in the Middle Ages is under-researched and one question that arises is whether the impact of the increase in demand for fish in Europe started to impact politics in Iceland in the thirteenth century as the church sought

to exert its independence from chieftains and the Norwegian monarchy sought for control of the country. Could the idea of bureaucracy as described by Weber clarify the picture? If we can interpret political history with the level of accuracy that is described in this book, then we should also be capable of discerning economic history from these same texts. I think Callows writing challenges scholars to further explore the economic history of Middle Ages and the end of the Commonwealth from the perspective of the interests of the ruling class who were protecting their status through agreement with the Norwegian King.

The author firmly avoids letting the stories take hold of the analysis of sources and does so quite well. After passing up one opportunity after another to use one of the brilliant responses found in the sagas and writing long academic texts where Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir is on every page, he finally falls for Hallgerður langbrók and Hrútur Herjólfsson comments on her beauty and eyes (pp. 260–261). I leave it to feminist post-structuralist discourse analysts to judge whether and what to conclude from this. I recommend taking the time to read relevant Icelandic sagas, along with Callow's theoretical analysis of the geopolitical power system they describe. It's a fulfilling activity that provides the opportunity to interpret the stories in a new light.

Þorlákur Axel Jónsson

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Akureyri

Iceland

thorlaktur@unak.is