

HOW TO DO THINGS WITH GIFTS: *GJAFI-REFS ÞÁTTIR* AND *AUÐUNAR ÞÁTTIR VESTFIRZKA*

COMO FAZER COISAS COM PRESENTES: *GJAFI-REFS ÞÁTTIR* E *AUÐUNAR ÞÁTTIR VESTFIRZKA*

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Resumo: O objetivo deste artigo é comparar a ideologia em dois contos que tratam da troca de presentes feitos na Islândia medieval: *Gjafi-Refs þáttir* e *Auðunar þáttir vestfirzka*. Nossa hipótese é que estes textos, embora eles compartilham um motivo narrativo básico, representam diferentes posições ideológicas que podem ser associados com a transformação da sociedade islandesa no século XIII. Argumenta-se que, enquanto o anterior *Conto de Auðunn* exemplifica uma história de ascensão social baseada quase exclusivamente nas qualidades pessoais, o tardio *Conto de Refr* adiciona condições supra-individuais para explicar o sucesso do seu personagem principal, enfatizando sua boa linhagem e o patrocínio aristocrático.

Palavras-chave: Presentes, Islândia Medieval, Contos.

Abstract: The aim of this article is to assess the ideology of two short stories focused on gift-giving and composed in medieval Iceland: *Gjafi-Refs þáttir* and *Auðunar þáttir vestfirzka*. Our hypothesis is that the texts, while sharing a similar narrative motif, represent different ideological stances that can be associated with the transformations undertaken by Icelandic society during the thirteenth century. We argue that while the earlier *Tale of Auðunn* exemplifies a story of social promotion based almost purely on personal qualities, the later *Tale of Gift-Refr* adds supra-individual conditions to explain the success of its main character, emphasizing good lineage and aristocratic patronage.

Keywords: Gifts, Medieval Iceland, Short Stories.

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1. Introduction

Within the saga corpus, we can isolate a small number of *þættir* in which the plots are driven by unimportant but clever men who manipulate gifts to achieve a better status for themselves.¹ The group includes (and seems to be limited to²) a short tale found in *Gautreks Saga* inside the *fornaldarsögur* corpus, *Gjafa-Refs þáttur* (“The Tale of Gift-Refr”) and the well-known *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka*. *Gjafa-Refs þáttur* is preserved in three manuscripts, two paper copies from the seventeenth century and a vellum copy from the fifteenth century.³ It is generally considered to have been composed in the late thirteenth century; the oldest version is the shortest.⁴ Both versions include *Gjafa-Refs þáttur*. The other member of the group, *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka*⁵ (“The Tale of Auðunn from the Westfjords”) is preserved in three (close) versions; the best is from *Flateyjarbók*,⁶ while the oldest is from *Morkinskinna*, thus giving the text a date no later than 1217-1222.⁷

Ciklamini⁸ considers that *Auðunar þáttur* belongs in the *exempla* genre,⁹ and that it promotes the virtues of strength of character, determination, and equality of spirit.

¹ The two tales belong also in the much larger corpus of medieval Icelandic texts concerned with gift-giving, a central topic in some of its subgenres, notably the *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*, but also in some other texts, such as the Eddic poem *Hávamál* or several skaldic poems. This likely reflects a particularly heavy social concern about the role of gifts within society, closely entwined with the notion of (political) friendship as a fundamental social tie. See BAGGE, Sverre. *Den Vennlige Vikingen: Vennskapets Makt i Notge og på Island 900-1300*, Oslo: Pax, 2010, pp. 25-30. Many *þættir* focus on the same issue but from different angles. A good example is *Brandr þáttur orva* (“The Tale of Brandr the generous”) in *Morkinskinna*, which concerns a king demanding gifts from a lesser (but prominent) Icelander, which contrasts with the logic found in the texts dealt with here (where gifts are given willingly, not upon request). Other short stories discuss the dangers of not giving gifts and sticking to a profit-oriented mentality, such as *Ólkofra þáttur* (“The Tale of Ale-Hood”).

² In the entry to *Gautreks Saga*, a well-known encyclopaedia suggests that *Króka-Refs saga* might belong to this group. While the theme of clever gift-giving is present in that story, it is not as central in the narrative as in the two stories discussed here. See PULSIANO, Phillip et al. *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopaedia*, New York & London: Garland, 1990.

³ *Gjafa-Refs þáttur* is quoted from GUÐNI JÓNSSON and BJARNI VILHJÁLMSOÐN (eds.). *Gautreks Saga, Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda III*. Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan forni, 1944, here at p. VI.

⁴ In this article, we use the younger redaction, as it is more fruitful for analysis. All translations are ours. Primary sources are quoted by page number only, except poems, where stanza and page number are included.

⁵ *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka* and *Gísla saga Súrssonar* are quoted from BJÖRN ÞÓRÓLFSSON and GUÐNI JÓNSSON (eds.). *Vestfirðinga sögur*. Íslensk Fornrit VI, Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943.

⁶ At least according to a major scholar. MILLER, William. *Is a Gift Forever?*. *Representations* 100(1), 2007, p. 13-22 at footnote 1.

⁷ ANDERSSON, Theodore, and GADE, Kari Ellen (eds.) (2000), *Morkinskinna: The earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030-1157)*, *Islandica* 50, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 66-67.

⁸ CIKLAMINI, Marlene. *Exempla in an Old Norse Historiographic Mold*. *Neophilologus* 81(1), 1997, p. 71-87

⁹ Chesnutt adds that without the *Víkars þáttur* (only present in the long redaction) the whole *Gautreks saga* might be regarded as part of the *exempla* genre. CHESNUTT, Michael. *The content and meaning of Gjafa-Refs Saga*. In ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON et al. (eds.). *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed. Studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Forlag / Københavns Universitet, 2009, p. 93-106

While its exemplary value is hard to deny, given the didactic style of the narrative and its references to Christian ideal patterns of behavior, the principal values upheld within the text are not necessarily those highlighted by it. For example, it is disputable that the saga places Auðunn and the kings as equals in any sense, neither material nor spiritual. In the text, Auðunn's virtues are equated with his flaws, while the kings (especially Sveinn, King of Denmark) are portrayed as flawless. *The Tale of Gift-Refr* seems generally to lack clear moral overtones,¹⁰ as both the protagonist and his mentor, jarl Neri, are pragmatically wise and cunning but not especially virtuous. Consequently, the question of which values are promoted by these tales remains an open one. In this article, we propose a possible reading of the promoted ideological values and actions exemplified in both *þættir*. Our analysis will focus on the main theme of the narratives, which is a practice, gift-giving, that appears closely tied to a specific set of values.¹¹

There exists an important antecedent¹² to the approach we take in this text, an article written nearly three decades ago by the American anthropologist Paul Durrenberger.¹³ His article focuses on *Gautreks saga* as a whole rather than exclusively on *Gjafa-Refs þáttir*. The author uses extensively the theoretical tools created by structuralism in his effort to

¹⁰ Ashman Rowe finds it a "humoristic parallel to Auðunar þáttir vestfirzka" and considers it at probably derived from it, without giving further explanations (ASHMAN-ROWE, Elizabeth. *Folktale and Parable. The Unity of Gautreks Saga*. Gripla 10, 1998, p.155-166, at p. 161). For her we are dealing with a parable and therefore with Christian values, especially *caritas*, read through an Icelandic view associated with the idea of "good luck". She believes that "we can understand this in a spiritual sense" (Ibid, p.163).

¹¹ The literature on gift-giving is vast, and while it is mostly associated with anthropology and with the name of Marcel Mauss it has also been widely used by sociologists (for example, CAILLÉ, Alain. *Anthropologie du don*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2000), historians (IOGNA-PRAT, Dominique. *Ordonner et exclure. Cluny et la société chrétienne face à l'hérésie, au judaïsme et à l'islam. 1000-1150*. Paris: Flammarion, 1998 ; WICKHAM, Chris. *Framing the Early Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and even philosophers (DERRIDA, Jacques. *Donner Les temps*. Paris: Gallilée, 2001). In the field of Scandinavian studies it has been a fruitful approach, especially in the last three decades. While its origin in the field are ancient (Claude Cahen's *La Libation*, Grønbech's *Vor Folkætt I Oldtiden*, and Mauss' *Essai* itself), the bulk of works using this anthropological vocabulary belong to the last four decades (as for example the works of scholars such as K. Hastrup, J. Byock, W. I. Miller, E. Vestergaard, R. Samson, H. Þorláksson, G. Pálsson, E.P. Durrenberger, etc.).

¹² The other major work about one of these tales, William Miller's *Audun and the Polar Bear*, takes a radically different approach. While Durrenberger considers the *Tale of Refr* both in its social and historical context, his theoretical inspiration is clearly that of some branch of anthropological materialism. Miller draws instead from a Bourdieu-inspired branch of formalism and from game theory. His focus is placed on the inner world of the text, and particularly on each character's decision-making process. Moreover, its ideological function within *Morkinskinna* is not discussed, which is surprising given the length of his work. In Miller's reading, Auðunn appears almost like a Schumpeterian entrepreneur, but one driven by a wish to do saga-worthy deeds rather than by the aim (at least primarily) of becoming rich. However fascinating his reconstruction of Auðunn's possible motivations, the link of the story to the historical development of Medieval Iceland is not explicitly discussed. See MILLER, William. *Audun and the Polar Bear: Luck, Law, and Largesse in a Medieval Tale of Risky Business*. Leiden: Brill, 2008

¹³ DURRENBERGER, Edward Paul. *Reciprocity in Gautreks Saga: An anthropological analysis*. Northern Studies 19, 1982, p. 23-37.

understand the saga. He also compares it extensively with ethnography. Durrenberger reads the saga in negative terms and concludes: “the story indicates that asymmetric reciprocity is just as dangerous and foolish as non-reciprocity (...) there is no resolution, no suggestion of appropriate reciprocal relations”¹⁴. While it is evident that the structure of *Gautreks saga* is rather loose, especially in its younger redaction, to claim that it lacks resolution appears excessive. There is some kind of unity in it, given by the opposition between reciprocity and miserliness.¹⁵ Taking that element into account, it is hard not to see the *Tale of Refr* as an exemplary illustration about the paths to social prosperity through the manipulation of gift exchange,¹⁶ here told with a utilitarian, down-to-earth style that exists in other Norse sources.¹⁷ In this *þáttir*, the basic *exemplum* seems to be “dressed up” in a splendor assigned to the ancient past, which is frequent in *fornaldarsögur*.

Durrenberger also sees the story as an exploration about a principle that became available to Icelanders as a literary theme only after it ceased to be socially dominant, with the submission to the Norwegian Crown in 1262/4.¹⁸ This is difficult to accept for three reasons. First, because the presence of *Auðunar þáttir* (neglected by the author) in *Morkinskinna*, which pre-dates the end of the commonwealth by at least several decades.¹⁹ Second, because the idea that a given society can only write about something once it is no longer socially dominant is unacceptable. If this was the case, no *Speculum Regale* could have been the by-product of the rising (but still relatively weak) monarchies of the central Middle Ages nor could a work claiming that the bourgeoisie had any productive role in the economy (such as *Das Kapital*) have been written in Victorian Britain, to choose a few from a potentially endless list of examples. Finally, because the idea of a drastic change in social relationships happening after the *gamli sáttmáli*, which is a necessary condition for

¹⁴ DURRENBERGER, Edward Paul. *Reciprocity in Gautreks Saga: An anthropological analysis*. Northern Studies 19, 1982, p.31.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.82.

¹⁶ A similar reading can be found in CRONAN, Dennis. *The thematic unity of the younger Gautreks saga*. Journal of English and Germanic Philology 106(1), 2007, p. 81-123, at p. 88.

¹⁷ The first part of the Eddic poem *Hávamál* (the so-called *Gesta þáttir*, stanzas 1-80.) is the most obvious example of such utilitarian approach. See “Hávamál”, in NECKEL, Gustav (ed.). *Edda: Der Lieder der Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1953.

¹⁸ DURRENBERGER 1982, op. cit., p. 26

¹⁹ The old theory that saw the *þættir* in *Morkinskinna* as later additions has been recently superseded by the work of an Icelandic scholar. See ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON. *A Sense of Belonging: Morkinskinna and Icelandic Identity, c. 1220*. Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2014. See also the introduction to ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON and ÞÓRÐUR INGI GUÐJÓNSSON (eds.). *Morkinskinna I-II*. Íslensk Fornrit XXIII-XXIV, Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2013

Durrenberger's argument, has been challenged by recent scholarship.²⁰ Specialists now instead depict a long process of accumulation of power and establishment of territorial dominions where force at least coexisted with reciprocity as a dominant principle.²¹ Moreover, Durrenberger neglects the presence of an institution, the Church, which acted as a power on its own and controlled strong ideological, political and economic resources and that changed progressively rather than dramatically.²²

In short, the historical picture is more complex than the schematic approach Durrenberger establishes, and this makes his argument about the context of production too simplistic. However, his article poses a very interesting question about the effects that the social changes of the thirteenth century could have had on the narratives about gift-giving produced in medieval Iceland. Considering the small amount of texts that are directly devoted to this issue (our two *þættir*), to draw a general conclusion from them would be excessive: our aim will be, at best, to propose a possible trend in the changes that would require further analysis. We will return later to that problem. However, we first need to summarize both texts, considering their depiction of the circulation of gifts as a first analytical step.²³

2. Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka

In this tale, the structure of gift-giving begins with Auðunn²⁴ spending all his resources on a trip to Greenland, where he buys a (polar) bear that he plans to give to the King of Denmark as a gift. First, he arrives in Norway. The Norwegian king hears about the bear, asks him to buy it for what it costs, and later for twice that amount. Auðunn answers

²⁰ On this issue, see PIRES BOULHOSA, Patricia. *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway*. Leiden: Brill, 2005, who takes a radical stance on the validity of the covenant.

²¹ For a reinterpretation of Iceland as a hierarchical society since the settlement era, see ORRI VÉSTEINSSON. *A divided society: Peasants and the aristocracy in Medieval Iceland*. Viking and Medieval Scandinavia 3, 2007, p. 117-139

²² ORRI VÉSTEINSSON. *The Christianization of Iceland: Priests, Power and Social Change: 1000-1300*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 and HELGI ÞORLÁKSSON (ed.). *Church Centres: Church Centres in Iceland from the 11th to the 13th Century and Their Parallels in Other Countries*. Reykholt: Snorrastofa, 2005.

²³ The procedure of synthesizing the gift-schemes as a first analytical step was already used by Fichtner (FITCHNER, Edward. Gift Exchange and Initiation in *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka*. *Scandinavian Studies* 51(3), 1979, p.249-272). His article later considers the *þáttur* as depicting an initiation ritual, an idea that is intriguing but maybe far-fetched.

²⁴ In the *Flateyjarbók* version he is said to be a poor farmhand, but with a talent for commercial activities. These early scenes of him as a farmhand and trader are not present in the oldest version. GUÐBRANDUR VIGFÚSSON and UNGER, C. R. (eds.). *Flateyjarbók: En samling af Norske Konge-sagaer*, I-III. Christiania [Oslo]: P. T. Mallings forlagsboghandel, 1860–1868, at v. III, pp. 410-415

that it is meant as a gift for the king of Denmark and thus he cannot sell it. The Norwegian king threateningly reminds him of the enmity between him and the Danish monarch, adding that travel to Denmark would be unsafe. However, Auðunn continues his trip, but promises the king to return and tell how he was rewarded. A complication occurs when he runs out of money, which forces him to sell half the bear to a retainer of the Danish king in order to feed both the beast and himself. He finally manages to reach Sveinn, King of the Danes.

Sveinn becomes angry with his retainer, as his greed made the king risk the chance to get the gift from Auðunn. However, the king is glad with Auðunn for the gift itself and because he spent all his money on it, and so he invites the Icelander to live at the court. Auðunn accepts and stays for some time, then leaves for a pilgrimage to Rome after obtaining a parting gift of silver from King Sveinn. Again, Auðunn runs into a stroke of bad luck and comes back to Denmark in tatters. He thinks he cannot present himself dressed so poorly in front of the king (who, by contrast, appears dressed in full splendor) because Sveinn's retainers are drunk and could be aggressive towards Auðunn. However, the king spots the Icelander and, while his warriors laugh at the pathetic appearance of Auðunn, he instead praises his pilgrimage and offers hospitality. Moreover, the king offers him the position of cup-bearer. Auðunn rejects it, saying he needs to take care of his mother in Iceland, whom he describes as poor. The king accepts this and repays the bear with an outfitted ship. He also gives the Icelander a bag of silver and an arm-ring for him to demonstrate that he has visited King Sveinn. He suggests Auðunn not to give away the arm-ring except to repay a very noble man.

The traveller then returns to Norway, where the king asks him about how the Danish king repaid him. Auðunn answers laconically that Sveinn did "by accepting my gift". The Norwegian insists, and Auðunn tells in detail about the money for the pilgrimage, the offer to be a cup-bearer, the ship with cargo and the silver. The king says he would have considered himself free of obligations at that point and asks if something else was given. Auðunn tells of the arm-ring and the condition put on it. Then he gives the king the arm-ring to repay him for pardoning his life and that of the bear earlier, while

travelling to Denmark. The king accepts and in turn gives counter-gifts²⁵ to Auðunn when he leaves for Iceland, where it is said that he was considered very lucky.²⁶

3. Gjafa-Refs þáttur

The tale starts telling of jarl Neri, a Norwegian magnate who is both wise and unwilling to accept any gift, as he did not want to be obliged to bestow counter-gifts. We are also told about a farmer called Rennir, who was previously presented in the saga as a settled farmer in good relationships with King Víkarr.²⁷ We are also told that Rennir had a son, a stereotypical coal-biter called Refr, and a very valuable and ornamented ox, which was the best in the district. Upset by Refr's sloth, Rennir expels his son from the house. Refr leaves but demands his father to give him his most valuable possession. Rennir grants it, for the sake of his departure. The son takes the ox, and goes to visit jarl Neri. His retainers mock Refr, but the jarl chastises them from doing it. His doorkeeper insists Refr is just a peasant, but the jarl receives him anyway.

Refr offers him the ox, and as Neri says that he never accepts gifts to avoid giving counter-gifts, Refr replies that he does not need anything but advice.²⁸ Neri concedes, invites Refr to sleep in his residence, washes him and dresses him properly. Then he gives him an impressive shield from his vast collection. However, the jarl later complains that if he receives more gifts, he will lose all his shields because he would be forced to bestow them as counter-gifts. Refr hears this and offers to return the shield, saying that he does not need it because he has no other weapons. Neri accepts the shield back and gives him instead a whetstone. Moreover, he instructs Refr to visit King Gautrekr, specifies the conditions in which Gautrekr will need the stone when hunting, and predicts that the king will offer a counter-gift. Neri then instructs Refr to return after he receives the counter-gift.

²⁵ A splendid pair of sword and cloak, in the *Flateyjarbók* version (*Flateyjarbók*, v.III, p.415), but unspecified in *Morkinskinna*.

²⁶ The tale ends with the name of a descendent, Þorsteinn Gyðuson, a prominent farmer in Flatey according to Sturlunga, who died in 1190. This could explain its inclusion in *Flateyjarbók*.

²⁷ King of Agder and Jaederen, Hordaland, Hardanger and some other Norwegian districts, because he was one of his warriors during his career to ascend as a king. He later dies, and his inheritors are his two sons. Neri is one of them.

²⁸ This is a (subsidiary) counter-gift and ends up being quite an important one. Failing to recognize this, Durrenberger (DURRENBERGER 1982, op. cit., p.35) sees the whetstone gift (which only matters if seen together with the good advice) as "absurd". In fact, the wise advice later shows up as setting the grounds for the other kings to behave as no less than Gautrekr, who exchanged gold for stone. However, the counter-gift stone given by Neri is not the same as the gift given from Refr to Gautrekr, as the advice cannot be transferred, but stays permanently with Refr.

Refr goes to see Gautrekr, and he gets a gold ring for the whetstone, which was required by the king exactly as Neri predicted. He brings it back to Neri, spends the winter with him, and thinks about selling the ring. Neri intervenes, and sends him to Ella, an English king, ordering to offer the ring and to come back. He does and gives the ring while wearing fine clothes and weapons (we are not said where they came from). The English king offers hospitality, but Refr only accepts a short stay, saying he has to go back to “his foster father, jarl Neri”. He then receives a fully equipped and loaded ship as a counter-gift, as the English king compares his generosity to that of Gautrekr, who gave gold for stone. The king also grants him two impressive hounds.

Refr returns to Neri and is invited to stay and eat there. He says he has money to pay, but the jarl invites him arguing that his lodging will not be enough to repay the ox. Refr stays again for some time with Neri, who then sends him to see Hrólfr Kraki in Denmark. Refr travels to the Danish court to offer the hounds to the king, and describes his previous exchanges to him. King Hrólfr praises Gautrekr, and gives the son of Rennir another ship, a helmet and a byrnie. After a short stay, Refr returns to Neri, who offers again hospitality as a part of his repayment. The jarl then sends Refr to visit a plundering king called Ólafr, and tells Refr to give the king the chainmail and the helmet, while warning Refr to be wary of Ólafr’s advisor, Nose-Refr. As a reward, Refr would be allowed to command for a night the jarl’s forces, which should be taken into Neri’s dominions.

Refr offers the gifts to the king and once again tells their story. Ólafr asks his advisor if he should accept them, and receives a negative answer. Then Nose-Refr gets the gifts and jumps to the sea. Gift-Refr recovers the byrnie, but Nose-Refr disappears with the helmet. Then, the son of Rennir offers the piece of armor to the king, who now accepts it and lets him choose a reward. Refr asks, per Neri’s suggestion, to command his troops for a night. Jarl and peasant meet, and Neri tells Refr of a plan he has to get him married to the daughter of King Gautrekr. By a clever trick, the jarl makes Refr threaten him and Gautrekr with an invasion (with Ólafr’s army), and offers him a settlement, praising his lineage. He offers him land and Gautrek’s daughter. Refr is then given lands, the girl, and the status of a jarl. Later, Gautrekr discovers the trick, but he keeps his oath. Neri then says he has repaid him but not enough because Refr had given all he had, while Neri remains very wealthy. The tale ends with the wedding feast, a final praising of Gautrekr’s generosity and of Refr’s cleverness and lineage.

4. Analysis: Using Gifts

A comparison between both stories reveals major similarities and significant differences. In both cases, the protagonists give a luxury good:²⁹ in one case made exotic by ornamentation and the quality of the specimen, and in the other by its exotic nature. Moreover, this gift represents in both cases a major portion of the total wealth of the givers. The combination of a magnificent, royal-like initial gift with its overgenerous outlook explains both the subsequent royal-like and overgenerous outlook of the counter-gifts offered by the receivers, and their inability to reject them. This is particularly stressed for Neri, who is explicitly said to reject gifts because he does not want to repay.³⁰

The obligation to repay, which is the most prominent element in the Maussian theory of the gift and is directly mentioned in Old Norse texts,³¹ is here depicted as having agonistic features. This form of gift-giving is competitive and ranks the parts involved in a scale of liberality. Thus, it establishes (but it also confirms) a hierarchy of ascending status associated with it. Both Auðunn and Refr understand the underlying logics of competitive gift-giving and manipulate them on their behalf. The powerful men who receive the gifts also have reasons to accept them and to give back, as it will increase their reputations. However, they have fewer margins for choice, as a decision not to reciprocate would be negative towards their status. A status which, in turn, is what builds (part) of their ability to command people, and thus, to remain being powerful men.³² In other words, while lowly men can choose strategically to give or not to give, powerful men are structurally bound to do it for the sake of their position.

Another relevant and recurrent element in both narratives is the passage of time between the first gift and the counter-gift. This time is embodied in the shape of minor,

²⁹ The fact that it in both cases the gift is an animal (one domestic, the other wild) seems not to be particularly relevant, with the exception of the difficulties faced by Auðunn to feed the animal and the short subplot created from it, the function of which is to assert the superiority of royal rights over those of their subjects.

³⁰ *Aldri vildi hann gjafir þiggja, því at hann var svá sínkr, at hann tímdi engu at launa* ("He never wanted to receive gifts, because he was so stingy, that he grudged counter-giving". *Gjafa-Refs þátr*, p.30)

³¹ *Hávamál* (*Vin sínom skal maðr vinr vera / oc gialta gjöf með gjöf*. "To his friend a man a friend should be and pay gift with gift". *Hávamál* stanza 42, p.23), *Gísla Saga* (*sér æ gjöf til gjalda*. "A gift looks for itself to be paid", *Gísla saga*, 52). *Hugsvinnsmál*, the Icelandic version of *Disticha Catonis*, echoes the same idea: *gjaltu gjöf við gjöf*. "Pay gift with gift". GERING, Hugo (ed.). *Hugsvinnsmál: Eine altisländische Übersetzung der Disticha Catonis*. Kiel: Verlag für die Universität Kiel, 1907, stanza 8, p.3). Interestingly, it represents reciprocity in accordance with *Hávamál* rather than with the Latin original, which refers to loans instead of gifts (McKINNELL, John. *The making of Hávamál. Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 3, 2007, p. 75-115, at p. 83).

³² As classically argued by SAHLINS, Marshall. *Stone Age Economics*. London: Routledge, 2004.

subsidiary gifts³³ that function as tokens of an expected future counter-gift. These can take the form of silver, advice or clothes. However, they mostly appear as hospitality. This implies receiving shelter, food, drink, and taking part in the retinue of the king (and, through it, obtaining expanded sociability). In turn, expanded social ties contribute significantly to increasing the prestige of the guest, and seem to have provided him with a name in this higher social milieu, even beyond the local court. This can be seen when Refr reaches the kingdom of Denmark. He presents himself as Refr, and king Hrólfr ask if he is the one called Gift-Refr. Refr says that he has both given and received gifts from men.³⁴ There is a change in his nickname, which evidences a rising social status. He was previously called, by Neri's retainers, Refr *Rennisfífl*.³⁵

Both *þættir* illustrate how communications of status associated with generosity happen, as there are recurrent questions on how the gifts were counter-given paired with assessments of the generosity of the counter-gift. In fact, the reasons for the inclusion of the story of Gift-Refr in *Gautreks saga* might be an attempt to praise the generosity of the king,³⁶ while it may also aim to cast some shade of doubt on his intelligence. Immediately before the end of the *þáttr*, the author describes Gautrekr: *Var hann meir ágætr at örleik sínum ok framgöngu, en eigi er þat sagt, at hann væri djúpvitr, en þó var hann vinsæll ok stórgjöfull ok inn hæverskligasti at sjá* ³⁷.

A scene where a nobleman becomes impressed by the gift of gold for stone points in the same direction and is repeated in his encounters with Kings Ella of England³⁸ and Hrólfr kraki, using the formula *Mikit er um örleik slíkra konunga, er hann gefr gull við grjóti*.³⁹ The formula varies in its second half to emphasize Gautreks generosity during Refr's meeting with King Ólafr: *Mikit er um örleik slíkra konunga, ok berr Gautrekr*

³³ The idea of subsidiary gifts goes back to Malinowski (MALINOWSKI, Bronislaw. *Argonauts of the western Pacific*. London: Routledge, 1978). Especially relevant to the problem is the discussion of the Polynesian *mapula* (small gifts) in WEINER, Annette. *Inalienable possessions: the paradox of keeping-while-giving*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, at p.25-28.

³⁴ *Gjafa-Refs þáttr*, p. 36. The sociability in *Gjafa-Refs þáttr* is exclusively between males. *Auðunar þáttr* barely mentions the tie between the protagonist and his mother, but on all other aspects is also part of a male-controlled environment.

³⁵ "Refr the idiotic son of Rennir". *Gjafa-Refs þáttr*, p.31

³⁶ CRONAN 2007, op.cit., p.84

³⁷ "He was more famous at his liberality and exploits, but it is not said, that he was deeply wise, but nevertheless he was blessed with friends and greatly munificent, and the most courteous to see". *Gjafa-Refs þáttr*, p.41

³⁸ Ibid, p.34

³⁹ "Great is in liberality such a king, that he gives gold for stone". Ibid, p.36

*konungr þó yfir þeira örleik allra.*⁴⁰ The same communication of reputation occurs when the Norwegian king evaluates the generosity of King Sveinn after talking with Auðunn. Even if both kings are enemies, the generosity of Sveinn is praised by king Haraldr, which qualifies Sveinn's counter-gift-giving as *stórmannligt*.⁴¹

Both stories also end with the main characters rising in prestige and wealth in a permanent way. This is one of the main exemplary elements: the stories suggest how generosity of giving is a key to upwards social mobility. The same message, in an inverted way, is given by stories that represent greedy hoarders as social failures. Those range from the realistically rendered protagonist of *Hænsa-Þóris saga*⁴² to the mythic monstrosity of Fáfnir⁴³ (and of dragons in general⁴⁴). The link made between prestige and gift-giving is recurrent in the corpus, but these tales illustrate it in a systematic way, although in rather different style. The differences in genre between *Auðunar þáttr* (which is close in style to the verisimilar and mundane *konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur*) and *Gjafa-Refs þáttr* (which clearly belongs in the *fornaldarsögur*⁴⁵) explain some of the differences in tone between the texts. As Chesnutt⁴⁶ has noted, the repetitions of the episodes in the gift cycle (give, receive and counter-give) in the *Tale of Gift-Refr* are related to the narrative style.⁴⁷ From an anthropological point of view, most episodes in *Gjafa-Refs þáttr* bear the same message, and the story would not be essentially different if the kings of England, Norway and Denmark would have been placed in another order, or even if two of them were suppressed. However, that threefold repetition (which is

⁴⁰ "Great is in liberality such a king, but King Gautrekr bears nevertheless over all the others in liberality", Ibid, p.38

⁴¹ "magnificent", *Auðunar þáttr*, p.368

⁴² "Hænsa-Þóris saga" is quoted from SIGURÐUR NORDAL (ed.). *Borgfirðinga sögur*, Íslensk Fornrit III. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938. On Hænsa-Þórir and his depiction both in anthropological and literary terms, see DURRENBERGER, Edward, DURRENBERGER, Dorothy & ÁSTRÁÐUR EYSTEINSSON. *Economic Representation and Narrative Structure in Hænsa-Þóris Saga*. Saga Book of the Viking Society 22, 1989, p. 143-164.

⁴³ As depicted both in Eddic poetry and *Völsunga saga*. On Fáfnir's hoarding, Vestergaard appropriately comments "denne vågen over skatten er en afvisning af alle sociale relationer og alliancer", and ties it with the same kind of logics in the origin of Ragnarøk; end of exchange, implies end of social ties, and that leads to social destruction (although in a much bigger, "cosmic", scale). See VESTERGAARD, Elisabeth. *Dværgenes Skat*. In STEINSLAND, Gro et al. (eds). *Nordisk Hedendom: Et symposium*. Odense: Odense Universitets Forlag, 1991, at p. 53

⁴⁴ See VON SEE, Klaus. *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*. Vol. 5, pp. 239 ss.

⁴⁵ Even if it never reaches the levels of fantasy appearing in some examples of the genre: the tale still speaks about realistic characters, and is doubtful it could have been understood as pure entertainment.

⁴⁶ CHESNUTT 2000, op. cit.

⁴⁷ Following this line, we avoid making arguments on the repetition of the gift-cycle as determinant in the outcome of the tales of Refr and Auðunn. We consider it an example of the folk-like use of threefold repetition as a literary device in the *fornaldarsögur*.

lacking in *Auðunar þáttir*) reinforces the main messages (which are shared between both tales). In short, both *þættir* share three main messages: (1) Generosity is the key value to becoming a great man; (2) To receive and to repay gifts is mandatory; (3) Great men are always givers, but smaller man can also be, and prosper.

5. Differences: Ideology and Social Mobility

There are, however, some important differences in the ideology⁴⁸ expressed by the tales, even if they share similar basic meaning and episodes. Those differences appear in subtler ways, which seem not to have been necessarily put on the forefront by the authors. Consequently, their exemplary value could be doubted. They appear mostly through comparison and we have no sure way to know if the author of the later tale (with all probability it is *Gjafa-Refs þáttir*) had the other tale in mind while composing his own story, or even if he knew any version of it.

In recent years,⁴⁹ anthropologists working at a theoretical level on gift-exchange went back to an overlooked element in the Maussian *Essai*, which commented (and did not elaborate on) the idea that some special goods were never given, as they were considered inalienable. The work of Weiner and Godelier⁵⁰ suggests that such separated goods were present in many societies and that they set the background that enabled the gift-giving logics to operate.

Part of this idea already appeared in one of the earliest essays on gift-giving for medieval Scandinavia, written by the Soviet historian Aron Gurevich, which related the concepts of nobility, (landed) property and freedom through the concept of *óðal*.⁵¹ While he failed to acknowledge that this concept never existed in Iceland, there is legal evidence

⁴⁸ We understand ideology in the classic Althusserian sense, as a representation, as “le rapport imaginaire des individus à leurs conditions réelles d'existence”. In other words, the different intellectual constructions on how and why a certain aspect of social structure functions. However, we should differentiate it from mentality, which is a collective, general mental background constitutive of those “real” (material) conditions (as part of the relations of production in Marxist parlance). For example, the tripartite gift model, which implies the mental requirement for the obligation to give, accept and return gifts cannot be considered ideological from this point of view, as it constitutes one of the core mechanisms which integrates certain societies. However, the different stances about how far this model extends within different layers of a given society and its relative importance is subject to ideological representation. On this issue, see ALTHUSSER, Louis. *Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État*. La Pensée 151, 1970, pp. 3-39 and GODELIER, Maurice. *The mental and the material*. New York: Verso, 1996.

⁴⁹ This short excursus aims to set the background for the analysis of difference between the texts as explained below.

⁵⁰ WEINER 1992, op. cit.; GODELIER, Maurice. *L'enigme du Don*. Paris: Flammarion, 1994.

⁵¹ GUREVICH, Aron. *Wealth and Gift Bestowal Among Ancient Scandinavians*. In: *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 177-189 at p. 177-178.

that the inheritance of land property was conceived as linked to families even after actual transfers.⁵² The contrast between both *þættir* seems to show that the distinction between alienable and inalienable possessions may also emerge in narrative sources.

While it is true that both Refr and Auðunn benefit both materially and socially from their gift strategies, the position they achieve in the end is very different. Refr becomes part of the nobility and earns the title of jarl, while Auðunn just becomes a rich farmer. If we followed a purely economicist reading of the episodes, we could say that this could have been attributed to a difference in the value⁵³ between both initial gifts, which would demand (following *potlatch*-like logics) a higher value of counter-gifts. Auðunn's bear was a luxurious, extremely expensive beast, while Refr just had a high-quality, finely ornamented common animal. However, the counter-gifts obtained by Refr are significantly more valuable than those obtained by Auðunn, the opposite of what could be theoretically expected if they worked through competitive gift mechanisms in an ideal form. Moreover, Auðunn receives less while he has given the same (or more), and the only position he is offered (but refuses) is a position in the retinue (as a *skutilfsveinn*, a kind of page or table assistant⁵⁴). Nevertheless, it is the social, more than the economic, quality of the opening gift that differs in each case. This meaningful difference is seen in the way Auðunn and Refr acquire their animals: *Þess er við getit, at Auðunn kaupir þar bjarndýri eitt, gersimi mikla, ok gaf þar fyrir alla eigu sína*⁵⁵.

On the other hand, when Rennir, Refr's father, expels him, Refr answers:

*“Með því attu rekr mik frá þér, þá mun þat makligra, at fári sá gripr med mér, er þú átt beztan ok þér þykkir mest at láta.” Rennir mælti: “Engi gripr er sá í minni eign, at ek vilda eigi til þess gefa, at ek sæja þik aldri, því at þú ert athlægi ættar þinnar”*⁵⁶

⁵² BYOCK, Jesse. *Viking Age Iceland*. London & New York: Penguin, 2001, pp. 270-271.

⁵³ Here by “value” we mean the *perceived* value, and not the value in terms of its cost of production.

⁵⁴ *Auðunar þáttur*, p.366. Cleasby-Vigfússon's dictionary notices that the figure was introduced in the Norwegian courts during the rule of Ólafr the silent (in the second half of the eleventh century), and it is common in the twelfth and thirteenth century. This is consistent with the tale, which mentions the figure in the court of Sveinn Úlfsson, which is only slightly earlier and a contemporary of Ólafr's predecessor, Harald Harðráði (the king of Norway in the tale). This places the story c.1050.

⁵⁵ “It was said, that Auðunn bought there a wild bear, a big treasure, and gave for it all that he owned”. *Auðunar þáttur*, p. 361

⁵⁶ “Since you drive me away from you, then it is fitting, to take away this thing with me, that you have as the best and think the most valuable” Rennir said “Nothing is in my property that I will not give to not see you again, because you are the laughing-stock of your family”. *Gjafa-Refs þáttur*, p.31

If we look at the vocabulary used, the ox is *given* from father to son in the second case. In addition, there is no expectation of any counter-gift: Rennir explicitly wants never to see Refr again (as in fact happens). It is described as a gift, but in fact it appears to work almost as a bribe. In any case, Refr finds it “fitting” or “deserved” and the explanation given for this is that he is claiming it as inheritance. The emphasis put on kinship in this dialogue is totally absent from the commercial tone of the other account. We are told that Auðunn buys a bear using all his wealth. What is praised about the bear is its value as a commodity, which is assessed impersonally, as an objective quality of the bear. This is rather different in the first description of the ox, which is explicitly said to be highly valued by *Rennir*, who devotes attention and efforts to keeping it as precious. It was an impressive animal by both its quality *and* by the effort that Rennir put on it.⁵⁷ Both will become gifts, but, in one case, we are dealing with a commodity, while in the other with a non-generic item, tied to lineage and inheritance.

Gjafa-Refs þáttur seems to confirm the ideological emphasis on lineage while it mentions (for the first time in the tale) a grandfather of Refr as part of the stratagem jarl Neri uses to present the son of Rennir as a viable match for King Gautrek's daughter. Neri judges the demand fitting *því at ríkr jarl var móðurfaðir þinn, en faðir þinn öruggr kappi*.⁵⁸ The adjective *ríkr* means both “mighty, powerful” and “rich”, the second meaning appearing in the late thirteenth century by analogy with continental and British use, according to the Cleasby-Vígfússon dictionary.⁵⁹ This is around the time when *Gautreks saga* seems to have been composed, leaving the precise meaning obscure or maybe even suggesting a connection between both meanings. Gautrek accepts the argument, which could be at first considered just a ruse designed by the crafty Neri. However, the narrator later seems to confirm the sayings of the jarl: *Þar*

⁵⁷ *Gjafa-Refs þáttur*, p. 24. This connects with the idea, central to the theories on the gift, that something from the possessor is present in the possessions. These kind of personalized objects are usually named with the term *nautr*. See HEIDEMANN TORFING, Lisbeth. *Om navne og nautr: En undersøgelse af betydning og ordklasse for en gruppe genstandsbetegnelser i norrøn litteratur*, forthcoming 2016. Her analysis focuses on the legendary saga corpus, but similarly named objects are also found in the family sagas.

⁵⁸ “Because your maternal grandfather was a *ríkr jarl*, and your father a bold warrior”. *Gjafa-Refs þáttur*, p. 40.

⁵⁹ CLEASBY, Richard and GUÐBRANDUR VÍGFÚSSON. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874.

*með gaf Gautrekr konungr honum jarls nafn, ok þótti inn frægasti at öllum vaskleik, var ok ætt hans af tígnum mönnum, en faðir hans inn mesti víkingr og kappi*⁶⁰.

This maternal grandfather of Refr appears literally out of nowhere. When Rennir was presented, the only thing said about his wife is the laconic assertion that he was married to her.⁶¹ In the same paragraph he is described as a *ríkr bóndi*, and it is said that he has a good relationship with King Víkarr, who is Neri's father.⁶² This explains why Refr chose to visit the jarl after being expelled, and points to a connection between both families. The same is true for the adjective used to describe him; if he was only meant to be wealthy, but of no lineage at all, *auðmaðr* could have been used instead of *ríkr*. The first term is used, for example, to describe the *parvenu* Hen-Þórir,⁶³ a detestable man who lacks any prominent family ties. In addition, *ríkr* is, as we have seen, the same adjective used to describe this supposed grandfather. So it seems logical to suspect that, even if Neri might have been enlarging Refr's lineage, he was (at worst) exaggerating what was already present. The insistence of Neri to welcome him against the mockery of his retinue towards Refr also points in the same direction.

On the other hand, Auðunn is a nobody. His initial depiction links him only with traders and with his poor mother. We know nothing about his father nor of any other ancestor, and there is an element of pity and humility about him (which is highlighted in his return scene from the pilgrimage⁶⁴) that is absent in Refr; this element influences Sveinn's decision to welcome him after the pilgrimage. He is, nevertheless, far from average, as he was thought to be the luckiest man.⁶⁵ Luck seems to have been considered

⁶⁰ "There also king Gautrekr gave him the title of Jarl, and he was thought the most famous in quickness. His family was also of men of rank, but his father was the best viking and champion", *Gjafa-Refs þátr*, p. 41. The translation of Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards translates the passage in a very different way "Everybody thought Refr a very enterprising fellow" (EDWARDS, Paul and HERMANN PÁLSSON (trans.). *Seven Viking Romances*. London: Penguin, 1985, p. 170). The key word here is *vaskleikr*, which Fritzner renders as *raskhed* (celerity, quickness). Zöega follows Cleasby-Vigfússon, with "bravery, valour". The substantive seems to derive from the adjective *vaskr*, which is translated consistently as "rask" (quick) by Fritzner, and as "manly, valiant" by Zöega and Cleasby (who adds it has uncertain etymology). My translation follows Fritzner, as there seems to be no reason to qualify Refr as particularly manly or valiant, except through stock motifs of praise (or ironically). In any case, a connection between "quick" (or "manly") and "enterprising" seems to be far-fetched. See CLEASBY-VIGFÚSSON 1874, op.cit.; GEIR ZÖEGA. *A concise dictionary of Old Icelandic*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910; FRITZNER, Johan. *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog* I-III. Oslo: Norske forlagsforening, 1883-1896.

⁶¹ *Konu átti hann sér. Gjafa-Refs þátr*, p. 23

⁶² *Gjafa-Refs þátr*, p. 20

⁶³ *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, p. 6

⁶⁴ *Auðunar þátr*, p. 365

⁶⁵ *þótti vera inn mesti gæfumaðr. Auðunar þátr*, p.368

as an inborn quality,⁶⁶ but could revert into bad luck by specific negative choices.⁶⁷ Auðunn had luck from the beginning, yet we also see him avoid making mistakes. In other words, there is an element of personal choice, which makes his innate luck fruitful.

However, the lucky Auðunn is never given the status that the also lucky⁶⁸ Refr gets. Lineage plays here a determinant role, as it is the only thing that distinguishes the generally similar behavior of both characters. Neri's relationship with Refr, which is described as *fóstri* (fosterage, a form of kinship by alliance⁶⁹), is deeper than the protection that Kings Sveinn and Haraldr give to Auðunn. It stems from a shared asset, family ties, which cannot be obtained by personal skill. It is a resource at best obtained after generations (through marriage), and that leads to lasting changes in status. In short, both tales share the common message "great men are always givers, but smaller man can also be, and prosper", but *Gjafa-Refs þáttur* adds "yet, small men can only become big through giving if there is already some greatness in their ancestry", an element which is neither present nor contradicted by *Auðunar þáttur*.

This contradicts the conclusion reached by Cronan, who argues that "the saga concludes by presenting a new model of giving, one that can absorb and include the competitive reciprocity of aristocrats but which is open to all and which enables everyone to flourish through its affirmation of community, social mobility, and the selfless guidance of the young."⁷⁰ This "new model", with Christian echoes, is contrasted to an old model (presented in the curious early part of Gautreks saga, *Dalafla þáttur*) of a pagan world, which is presented as ruled by malevolent gods who exact all they can from their worshippers.⁷¹ On the one hand, this view does not to recognize that Refr is more than a simple ashlad, as the reasons for his social mobility are in part grounded on his background. On the other hand, the guidance of Neri is hardly selfless, as it also provides him with praise and prestige. Moreover, Neri's goodwill seems not to have been a matter of choice, but forced on Neri by the logics of competitive gift-giving and the risk of being

⁶⁶ HALLBERG, Peter. *The Concept of Gipta-gaefa-hamingja in Old Norse Literature*. In Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973, p. 141-74. Also MILLER 2008, op.cit., p. 71-77, who notices that Auðunn's luck derives in good measure from his skill to manage situations.

⁶⁷ SEJBERG SOMMER, Bettina. *The Norse concept of luck*. Scandinavian Studies 79(3), 2007, p.275-294 at p. 291-293.

⁶⁸ *Gjafa-Refs þáttur*, p. 37.

⁶⁹ *Gjafa-Refs þáttur*, p. 36, 39, 40.

⁷⁰ CRONAN 2007, op. cit., p. 123.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 121.

qualified as a miser, and maybe also by the tie between his father and Refr's father. Finally, these ideas can hardly be qualified "new", as the considerably older *Auðunar þáttir* already presents them.⁷² Therefore, the aforementioned intuition of Gurevich about a long-term link between some inherited, inalienable quality and the strategies of gift-giving seems to be confirmed for these tales. This way we return to the question of the effects the social changes of the Icelandic thirteenth century might have had on the narratives about gift-giving.

6. Conclusions

The contradictions, or at least differences in emphases, in the ideas concerning gift-giving in both tales are harmonic with the changes Icelandic society underwent between the composition of both. In the roughly half-century separating them,⁷³ the process of accumulation of power in the hands of a small number of families came to an end. Civil conflict became endemic, and territorial dominions finally replaced personal ties around chieftains as the dominant form of organization.⁷⁴ This process involved also a foreign actor, represented by the Norwegian crown, which arguably became the biggest victor with the agreements of 1262-1264. This political change eventually led to the formation of an aristocracy of service in the fourteenth century.⁷⁵ However, power did not change hands in local matters, as the families of big chieftains kept most power and offices after the transition: there was no quick replacement of an old aristocracy with newcomers. Moreover, the involvement of the Norwegian monarchs in its daily matters was probably far from pervasive given the rather peripheral nature of Iceland, and royal representatives struggled with other leaders, such as bishops.⁷⁶

⁷² The reasons for the king of Norway to protect Auðunn might have some degree of selflessness; Christian values are in general far more evident there than in *The Tale of Gift-Refr*.

⁷³ These arguments rest on the conventional composition dates of c.1220 for *Morkinskinna*, and c.1280 for *Gautreks Saga*. They will not change if *Auðunar þáttir* is somewhat older or slightly younger, or if *Gjafa-Refs þáttir* is slightly younger or somewhat later. A late *Auðunar þáttir* (for example, near the date of the *Morkinskinna* manuscript) or an early *Gjafa-Refs* would obviously make them invalid.

⁷⁴ See SVERRIR JAKOBSSON. *The territorialization of Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*. In BAGGE, Sverre et al. (eds.). *Statsutvikling i Skandinavia i Middelalderen*. Oslo: Dreyers Forlag, 2007; JÓN VÍDAR SIGURÐSSON. *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic commonwealth*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1999.

⁷⁵ JÓN VÍDAR SIGURÐSSON. *The Icelandic Aristocracy after the fall of the Free state*. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 20(3), 1995, p. 153-166.

⁷⁶ Cf. WÆRDAHL, Randi. *The Incorporation and Integration of the King's Tributary Lands into the Norwegian Realm c.1195-1397*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

Accordingly, the difference in ideology between both *þættir* is not radical, as both probably stem from the same literate groups at the top of Icelandic society, an elite with particular interest in showing its links with the Scandinavian monarchs, both before and after the agreements of 1262/4. The old, romantic notion of medieval Icelanders being anti-monarchic, proto-democratic freedom lovers should be discarded. This is especially true for the upper layers of society, which was constantly worried with the prestige granted by contacts with both royal and ecclesiastical power.

Yet, we are dealing in both cases with narratives of aristocracies that are still open, where social mobility exists and is positively assessed. The unimpressive lineage of Auðunn (or, better his total lack of any lineage) poses no barrier for him to become a noteworthy ancestor for some of the families in the Westfjords area, as the last paragraph of the tale asserts. Moreover, no narrative device is used to provide Auðunn with illustrious ancestors. We are dealing with a society that still accepted social mobility (at least in a narrative past) through luck, perseverance and intelligence. At the same time, it was a society that emphasized the difference in power and magnitude between common people and kings. Moreover, it emphasized the benefits provided by seeking links with monarchs, much in the same fashion that historical ascending Icelanders of the early thirteenth century behaved.

Roughly six decades after that, *Gjafa-Refs þáttr* appears harmonic with a society in which social mobility is (or should be presented as) becoming more stagnant. The chaotic, but opportunistic, times of the early thirteenth century were replaced with a context where the root of ultimate worldly authority is clear and undisputed. To use a historical example, even while they struggled against the unpopularity of the law code *Jarnsída*, the Icelanders were not aiming to avoid royal overlordship anymore in the decade of 1270. Moreover, its replacement by *Jónsbók* in 1281 was also enacted by the king, and this settled the issue: the authority of the king was beyond discussion. It is in that context where the perspective of *Gjafa-Refs þáttr* on lineage must probably be placed. Compared with *Auðunar þáttr*, it presents a more restricted pattern of upwards social mobility. Both texts could be read as complementary and generally harmonic, even if one describes how far a commoner could climb in the social scale and the other shows how far an important farmer could. The difference is maybe to be found in which story each era preferred to tell.

Alternatively, and without assuming difference stemming from diachronical changes, it could be argued that both *þættir* simply represent different (but not, strictly speaking, opposed) answers to the question of who could improve his social standing through gifts, and to what extent. This is indeed possible, and a definitive argument could only be reached, at best, by examining a much larger corpus of texts. The issue of texts primarily reflecting changes in social order or if, instead, they reveal authorial imagination is a classic discussion in Old Norse scholarship. The debate around *Hrafnkels saga*, since Sigurður Nordal's 1940 *Hrafnkatla* text, which aimed to prove that the text's verisimilitude must be fictional, is paradigmatic in this sense. The scholarly reactions to this debate, which reflect the way in which the "bookprolist" and "freeprolist" schools of thought assessed the value of saga literature as historical sources led to a new approach during the "anthropological turn" of the 1980s onward.⁷⁷ The scholars within this tradition accept that most sagas, which are undoubtedly literary artifacts, can be used as historical sources. Their historical use of sagas is concerned with social structures and dynamics rather than with events. Therefore, whatever the time of action in the story, sagas must reflect, in broad terms, the worldview of the era that composed the narrative. The present article accepts the ideas of the anthropological school. However, we tried to avoid the risk of imagining a homogeneous and timeless "saga world"⁷⁸ by highlighting the more or less substantial divergences in the way medieval Icelandic literature expresses social concerns through texts such as the *þættir* about Auðunn and Refr.

⁷⁷ For a summary of the debate between bookprolists and freeprolists in its sociopolitical context, see BYOCK, Jesse. *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas and Power*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, pp. 38-45.

⁷⁸ As brilliantly argued by NEDKVITNE, Arnved. *Beyond Historical Anthropology in the Study of Medieval Mentalities*. *Scandinavian Journal of History* 25(1-2), 2000, pp. 27-51.