

Abstract

Auður Magnúsdóttir, *Frillor och fruar. Politik och samlevnad på Island 1120–1400*. Avhandlingar från Historiska institutionen i Göteborg 29 (Göteborg 2001). 240 pages. Written in Swedish with an English summary. (*Concubines, Companions and Consorts; Politics and cohabitation in Iceland 1120-1400*). ISBN 91-88614-38-7; ISSN 1100-6781.

This study analyzes the role of concubinage and other forms of extra-marital relationships in Iceland during the period 1120–1400. The efforts made by the Church in this period to impose monogamous marriage and clerical celibacy in Iceland challenged the prevailing norms of cohabitation, and provoked vigorous opposition that reflects the conflict between temporal and secular powers in contemporary Europe. Traditional forms of cohabitation were in fact important ways of furthering secular interests, both political and economic, in marked contrast to the Christian ideal of marriage. That contrast is the starting point of the present study.

Modern studies have tended to focus on the important role of marriage in medieval politics as well as in the political strategies of later times. This concentration on marriage and biological kinship has meant that the social functions of other forms of relationships have been neglected. The treatment of marriage as the keystone of the social structure has obscured the fact that monogamous marriage has not always been the norm, that other forms of cohabitation were socially and politically as important as marriage, and that kinship as a social construct is changeable over time. This narrow perspective has also characterized previous studies of concubinage.

Extra-marital relationships were common within the clergy as well, and even though these relationships were officially opposed by the Church, for several reasons, the degree of tolerance was high. During the fourteenth century these relationships grew in importance as an economically based relationship. Until the end of the Catholic period in Iceland it was regarded as a 'civil marriage'. Several other forms of cohabitation were in fact accepted by the laity, and more or less tolerated by the Church. As far as marriage, family structure, celibacy, and the political aspects of extra-marital as well as marital relationships are concerned, Iceland shows a development similar to that of the rest of medieval Europe.

Keywords: marriage, concubine, consort, kinship, friendship, family structure, political alliances, celibacy.