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Weather and Ideology in *Íslendinga saga*

A Case Study of the Volcanic Climate Forcing of the 1257 Samalas eruption.

MA Thesis in Viking and Medieval Norse Studies

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Abstract

The middle of the thirteenth century was a period of dramatic change in medieval Icelandic history. Politically, the Icelandic Commonwealth ended between 1262 and 1264 CE, as the leading men in Iceland swore allegiance to King Hákon IV of Norway and his surrogate, Gizurr Þorvaldsson. Ecologically, the Medieval Climate Anomaly gave way to the tumultuous weather of the fourteenth century and the so-called Little Ice Age. This border was punctuated by a massive volcanic eruption on the other side of the world. This eruption, which took place in 1257 at the Samalas caldera in Indonesia, caused a cooling effect across Europe until 1261, as the sulfur emissions from the volcano encircled the globe.

This thesis explores the interaction between these two moments of crisis within Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga*. The saga, by and large, does not describe any weather events in the years after the Samalas eruption, up to and including an eruption of Katla in 1262. I treat the saga as a literary text, and analyze weather events in the saga along the same lines as previous scholarship has analyzed weather events in the *Íslendingasögur*. By so doing, I establish a framework for how weather is used for narrative purposes throughout *Íslendinga saga*. Then, I analyze the other Icelandic documentary material that discusses the five years after the eruption, particularly the Icelandic annals, and reveal the exclusion from *Íslendinga saga* of many weather events found in the annals. Close examination of the end of the saga, focusing on these excluded weather events, reveals the narrative focus of *Íslendinga saga*, and some of its biases. The analysis of the weather supports interpreting the saga as warning against the civil strife that was a risk at the start of the fourteenth century.

Ágrip

Um miðja þrettánda öld áttu sér stað djúpstæðar breytingar á íslensku samfélagi. Á sviði stjórnarfars leið þjóðveldið undir lok á árunum 1262 til 1264 er áhrifamenn í íslensku samfélagi gengu Hákonni IV. Noregskonungi á hönd og jarli hans, Gissuri Þorvaldssyni. Í vistkerfinu vék hið sérstæða hlýskeyð miðalda (e. Medieval Climate Anomaly) fyrir vályndari veðrum fjórtánda aldarinnar og hinni svokölluðu litlu ísöld (e. Little Ice Age). Þessi tímamót fóru saman við gríðarleg eldsumbrot hinum megin á hnettinum. Eldgosið í Samalas-öskjunni í Indónesíu árið 1257 hafði í för með sér kólnandi loftslag í Evrópu allt til 1261 en brennisteinslosun úr þessu eldgesi hafði áhrif hringinn í kringum hnöttinn.

Í ritgerð þessari er rýnt í þessa tvo orlagamiklu atburði og samspil þeirra eins og þeim er lýst í Íslendingasögu Sturlu Þórðarsonar. Í sögunni er að heita má engum veðurtengdum atburðum lýst frá eldgosinu í Samalas og fram að Kötlugosinu 1262. Farið er með textann sem bókmenntatexta og veðurtengdir atburðir í honum greindir með sama hætti og veðurtengdir atburðir hafa verið greindir í Íslendingasögum. Þannig má greina kerfi í því hvernig veður er notað sem hluti af frásagnahætti í Íslendingasögu. Enn fremur er litið til annarra íslenskra heimilda um fimm ára tímabil eftir eldgosið í Samalas, einkum íslenska annála, og sýnt fram á að í Íslendinga sögu er látið hjá líða að geta margra veðurtengdra atburða sem lýst er í annálum. Nákvæm greining á lokum sögunnar með áherslu á þá veðuratburði sem þar liggja í þagnargildi varpar ljósi á áherslur og hlutdrægni í frásagnarhætti Íslendinga sögu. Greining á veðurfari styður þá túlkun að sögunni hafi verið ætlað að vara við þjóðfélagsdeilum sem yfir vofðu við upphaf fjórtánda aldar.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Research Aims

In this dissertation, I discuss various ways weather is recorded and adapted for both narrative and non-narrative reasons in Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga (ÍS)*. I will treat as a case study the years immediately following the very large eruption of the Indonesian volcano Samalas in 1257 CE and how *ÍS* treats weather events found elsewhere in the Icelandic historical record that can be plausibly linked to that eruption.¹ Many weather events that appear in other medieval sources are not recorded, but close reading of the source material reveals a mix of environmental and ideological reasons for the absence. This case study has two goals:

- 1) To determine what the impacts of the Samalas eruption were on medieval Iceland, and how weather events described in the documentary material other than *ÍS* are included or excluded in the saga.
- 2) To examine the ideological and narrative purposes underpinning the interpretation of the weather found in *ÍS*, and what these purposes reveal about the motivations of the saga as a whole.

The analysis of weather in the years immediately following the Samalas eruption will be contextualized by a discussion of how weather is used in other parts of *ÍS*, and therefore possible interpretations for the inclusion and exclusion of weather within the years of the case study. The analysis supports a reading of the saga as a warning against renewed violence, and highlights biases in the narrative that limit its potential as a historical source for thirteenth-century Iceland.

The Samalas eruption, which occurred in the summer of 1257, was by far the most sulfur-rich eruption of the Common Era (Lavigne et al 2013; Gao et al 2008).² The eruption delayed wine harvests and exacerbated famines across Continental Europe in subsequent years (Guillet et al 2017). It also coincided with the end of the *Sturlungaöld* and the Icelandic Commonwealth in 1264 (Karlsson 2000, 83). The eruption (along with a 1275 eruption from

¹ I discuss the limits and methods of the case study in more detail in the final section of this chapter.

² There is some debate over the dating of the eruption; Martin Bauch argues that continental Eurasian sources indicate possible climatic forcing in 1256 (Bauch 2019). However, I here accept the traditional dating of the eruption to 1257.

an unknown source) marked the end of the so-called Medieval Climate Anomaly and the beginning of the period of climatic volatility known as the Little Ice Age, which influenced Icelandic weather into the nineteenth century (Lavigne and Guillet 2015, 64).³ The Samalas eruption stands at a political and ecological boundary in Icelandic history, and is therefore particularly suited for in-depth investigation.

Because impacts of many different types can be linked to a volcanic eruption it is important to explore the link between the Samalas eruption and medieval Iceland. Changes to weather patterns because of an eruption, and the resulting crop failures, are inextricably tied to technological, economic, and social impacts, not always negative. However, in the short term, the cooling from an eruption causes starvation and the spread of disease, which in turn lead to riots, as Gillen D’Arcy Wood and Wolfgang Behringer have both demonstrated for the much better-documented 1815 eruption of Tambora (Wood 2014, Behringer 2016). For medieval Iceland, socially unstable since the second half of the twelfth century, as described in *Sturlu saga*, worsening environmental conditions caused by volcanic forcing may have been a deciding factor in the swearing of allegiance to King Hákon *gamli* of Norway and his appointed *jarl*, Gizurr Þorvaldsson, following the latter’s return to Iceland in 1258.

However, even crises are “constrained by social and cultural values,” and therefore different societies and individuals interpret a crisis differently (Adamson et al. 2018, 195). Studying *ÍS* offers a particular insight into how Sturla –and the compiler of *SS*– approach the fallout from Samalas. Their understanding of the post-eruption years, and the unusually poor weather that I will show occurred in those years, is shaped by a medieval Christian cultural milieu generally –which Christopher Girard and David Petley discuss as a mitigation tool for ecological catastrophe (Girard and Petley 2013)– and their memory of the *Sturlungaöld* specifically. Sverrir Jakobsson illustrates this with Encyclopedia of Sturla Þórðarson, writing “Sturla, like many other medieval historians, was attempting to fit his knowledge... into an overriding master narrative, that of Biblical history” (Jakobsson 2017, 218). Because of these two known milieus, *ÍS* offers insight into a particular human reaction to this combined ecological and social crisis more clearly than any other climatological or contemporary historical source.

³ I here use the term, coined by François Matthes, for convenience, though Astrid Ogilvie and Trausti Jónsson have argued that it was a series of regionally cold decades as opposed to a consistent, global phenomenon (Matthes 1939; Ogilvie and Jónsson 2001).

1.2. Prior Scholarship

This dissertation follows a fairly recent development of combining two related fields: historical climatology and environmental humanities. Historical climatology and past volcano studies are concerned primarily with the reconstruction of past climate, and determining the extent of the cooling effects manifested by historical large-scale volcanoes. The environmental humanities, on the other hand, are concerned with how environmental elements, such as animals, geography, and weather interact with the human element of a society (Heise 2017, 2-3). By combining the two fields, new understandings of how climate conditions and narrative interact and inform each other emerge. In this section, I will introduce current research trends in these two recent fields, focusing on their manifestation in Medieval Icelandic Studies.

Study on the influence volcanic eruptions have on climate began with the work of Hubert Lamb. Lamb, who also first identified the “medieval warm epoch,” or the Medieval Climate Anomaly as it is now known, built a Dust Veil Index in order to measure the size of volcanic eruptions, and correlate them to climate records (Lamb 1965; Francis and Oppenheimer 2004, 420). Since Lamb’s time, means of detecting and measuring volcanic eruptions have improved, with rapidly developing technologies allowing better detection of volcanic material. The most recent standard for volcanic sulfur injections was released by Matthew Toohey and Michael Sigl in 2017, and even since then there has been new developments in helping locate and measure eruptions based on sulfur and oxygen isotopes (Toohey and Sigl 2017; Gautier et al. 2019). Alongside the improved technology has come a desire to understand what the improved data can actually say about the past climate. Climate modelers and historians work together to determine how the effects of an eruption spread, and the resultant cooling. As an example of recent scholarship in this direction, mixing humanities and climatological studies, Felix Riede edited a major volume bringing together many studies on human vulnerability to volcanoes, representing well current research trends between the chemical, the archaeological, and the manuscript data on historical eruptions (Riede 2015).

Within the context of the Samalas eruption, the first major study of climate and societal impacts was performed by Richard Stothers, who linked repeated pestilence outbreaks and cold winters in Europe and the Middle East to the eruption (Stothers 2000). Samalas was identified as the source of the eruption in 2013, and a team led by Sébastien

Guillet performed the most comprehensive study on the tree ring, ice core, and medieval written material to date, concluding in very large impacts in 1258 and 1259, but then declining in 1260 and 1261 (Guillet et al. 2017).⁴ More research is still being done, fueled by re-analysis of the textual evidence and technological improvements, making the volcano, alongside the 536/540 eruptions, the 1783 Laki eruption, and 1815 Tambora, one of the most well-studied premodern eruptions (Bauch 2019; Toohey et al. 2016; Price and Gräslund 2015; Behringer 2016).

Most of the environmental literary studies in medieval Icelandic literature have been performed on the physical landscape, following the so-called “spatial turn” in the humanities, used to describe increased interest in cultural geography, or the interactions between humans and their physical contexts in many different fields (Bonnemaison 2005; Warf and Arias 2009). One result of this “spatial turn” is the emergence of ecocriticism within the realm of literary studies. All the environmental humanities, including ecocriticism, “do not so much propose a new object of study, a new humanistic perspective on a nonhumanistic field, or a particular set of new methods, as they combine humanistic perspectives and methods that have already developed in half a dozen or so disciplines over the last four decades” (Heise 2017, 1). Ecocritical theory is a less structured theory than many others, instead re-examining human-environment interactions in media from many different approaches (Bennett and Royle 2009, 141; Phelpstead 2014, 2; Abram 2019, 39).

Ecocriticism, however, has been inspired by Romantic nature writing, and is based, somewhat problematically, on a desire to “return” to pristine nature (Cronon 1996; Abram 2019, 177). In recent years, ecocritical scholars have kept trying to move beyond nature writing into other ways of conceiving the past (Armbruster and Wallace 2001). Ecocriticism has been used to great effect in studies of other medieval literature, and indeed in the field of Icelandic studies, the anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup used very similar terms as ecocriticism in her conceptions of Old Norse cosmography (Rudd 2007; Hastrup 1985). However, the first scholar to explicitly use the term “ecocriticism” in the study of the sagas was Carl Phelpstead, in his analysis of *Eyrbyggja saga* (Phelpstead 2014). He argues that the supernatural elements of the saga provide insight into new ways of conceiving of nature as something beyond a modernist, scientifically-minded view. Christopher Abram most directly follows in his footsteps in *Evergreen Ash* (Abram 2019). He analyzes the Norse mythological corpus for

⁴ Guillet et al’s analysis references *Porgils saga skarða*, but treats the text as a historical fragment, not a literary creation.

insight into how the distinction between Nature and Culture was constructed in hopes of finding an alternative paradigm to modernity. He concludes that pre-modern Norse society had no conception of nature as unified creation, like a Mother Earth (Abram 2019, 33). Despite this, though, the mythological use and abuse of nature is ultimately similar to modern, Western conceptions. “The Nature/Society dualism that Latour sees as being at the heart of the ‘modern constitution’ is present in ancient Judaism and Western Christianity; it is all-pervasive in in pagan Norse mythology; it is the bedrock of capitalism” (Abram 2019, 177). As a result, Ragnarök was an inevitable ecological crisis caused by the Æsir’s inflexibility, a warning for contemporary climate change (Abram 2019, 157).

The first studies on the uses of weather in the Icelandic sagas were performed by Peter Hallberg and Paul Schach, both taking a very function-oriented approach to the material (Hallberg 1962; Schach 1955). Treating the *Íslendingasögur* as structured literary creations (and therefore falling under the umbrella of *Buchprosa* theory, to use the term coined by Andreas Heusler), both scholars argue that the weather appears in the sagas primarily when it is connected to the action of the scene it appears in. The theme of weather was not revisited then by saga scholars until Astrid Ogilvie and Gísli Pálsson (Ogilvie and Pálsson 2003). They use marine sediment data and historical documents to provide a climatological backdrop to saga weather. They both analyze the sagas for historical source data for the Saga Age and discuss how weather is treated in the saga-writing age, using historical anthropology as a guide (Ogilvie and Pálsson 2003, 256-257). They discuss weather at sea, at hay-making, and from magical causes, concluding that some weather is to increase the entertainment value of the story, but also that some descriptions, even though they portray the Saga Age as unusually fruitful, can be backed by scientific data to show awareness of past climate and of climate change (Ogilvie and Pálsson 2003, 269-270).

The most recent study of weather in the Old Norse literary corpus was performed by Bernadine McCreesh in her book *The Weather in the Icelandic Sagas: The Enemy Without* (McCreesh 2018). McCreesh builds on Ogilvie and Hartman’s work, discussing the weather as it relates to all genres. She splits her analysis into two parts: a historical and anthropological section, and a literary section. In the first, she discusses the *samtíðarsögur* and *biskupasögur*, along with various types of supernatural weather, both divine, such as a rain of blood that foreshadows Þórgunna’s death in *Eyrbyggja saga* (pp. 44-48) and pagan (pp. 57-67). The second part of the analysis discusses literary uses of weather, primarily (though not exclusively) in the *Íslendingasögur*, such as how the bad weather surrounding the

revenant Glámr in *Grettis saga* “is a reflection of the horrors and evil of the supernatural world” (McCreesh 2018, 83). In a particularly relevant example for the present analysis, she argues that the *samtíðarsögur* describe a much less heroic ethos than is present in the *Íslendingasögur*; the weather heightens the status of distant, folkloric heroes. A *jökulhlaup* will founder horses and kill men; Sturla Þórðarson cannot wade through a flooded, icy river like Grettir Ásmundarson supposedly did. Nor is it shameful for this to happen; it’s a neutral, historical event, included in two sagas because it ended an attempt on Gizurr Þorvaldsson’s life. (McCreesh 2018, 117-119). However, her analysis falls short in many respects. Most notably, she assumes that the *samtíðarsögur* provide a fully reliable account of weather in the thirteenth century as grim and rainy (pg. 23). In doing so, McCreesh treats *Sturlunga saga* as primarily a historical fragment, instead of a literary creation in the same vein as the *Íslendingasögur*, even as she acknowledges places that the sagas within the compilation have different focuses, such as how “The emphasis in *Þorgils saga skarða* ... is on how weather-conditions affect travel (McCreesh 2018, 18). I will demonstrate below that weather is adapted in a very similar way in the former as has been described by the latter.

Research into the literary uses of volcanoes in medieval Icelandic literature has been mostly focused on Eddic material. Neil Price and Bo Gräslund link Ragnarök, particularly the *fimbulvetr*, to two eruptions in 536 and 540 that caused long-term cooling over much of Europe (Price and Gräslund 2015). Additionally, *Völuspá*, which seems to describe a volcanic eruption, has been linked to the 935 Eldgjá eruption (Oppenheimer et al. 2018). Christopher Abram also briefly touches on volcanic elements in the poem, reading it as a way of deferring an existential threat: “The immense destructive potential of Iceland’s volcanoes is deferred... from the everyday world of Icelanders’ experience, into the nowhere-and-everywhere cosmos where the pagan gods are to be found” (Abram 2019, 17). Mathias Valentin Nordvig and Declan Taggart also examine other Eddic material for signs of eruptions; Nordvig focusing on encounters with giants, and Taggart exploring seismic and volcanic associations with the god Þórr (Nordvig 2015; Taggart 2017). Along with Árni Hjartarson, both Nordvig and Taggart examine the poem *Hallmundarkviða*, which very clearly describes an eruption (Hjartarson 2014; Hjartarson 2015). Within the saga corpus, Oren Falk has explored the absence of volcanic eruptions, examining part of *Grettis saga* for a potential folkloric warning to prevent people from trying to seek treasure at a lava flow (Falk 2007). To date, however, there has not been an analysis of global volcanism in the saga

corpus using the same techniques of analysis demonstrated in the eddic material. That is, at least in part, what my present study does.

1.3. Theoretical Framework: Ecohistoricism

The primary theoretical framework I am using for this analysis is ecohistoricism. This theory is concerned with past responses to ecological crisis. Ecocriticism and ecohistoricism, a development of generalized environmental theories that have slowly gained traction since the 1960s, seeks to re-interpret past texts in light of their understandings and constructions of “natureculture,” to adopt the term coined by Bruce Latour, often in conjunction with other frameworks (Heise 2017, 2). This analysis is specifically attempting to break down the binaries of Self and Other, using Society and Nature as their stand-ins (Abram 2019, 22). Though ecocriticism and ecohistoricism are applied to media from the past, these theories are turned towards the present. Ecocriticism, in particular, uses texts as clues to modernity, without regard to historical context. As Gillen D’arcy Wood writes:

Ecocriticism’s concern for how the human-environment relation has been discursively constructed and politicized, however, has not been adapted to the urgent task of historical revisionism: to illuminate how, in the colonial era for example, specific instances of human ecological agency—land use, agricultural technology and food production, the opening of trade routes, urban planning, and public health policy—were acculturated and rationalized. Likewise absent from ecocritical scholarship have been critical histories of cultural response and adaptation to natural phenomena beyond human control: to seasonal temperature anomalies, extreme weather events, climate change (e.g. the vicissitudes of the Little Ice Age), and natural disaster. (Wood 2008, 3).

As Wood describes, ecohistoricism bridges a gap between literary ecocriticism and historically-minded ecological studies, such as Hubert Lamb’s research and historical climatology. This perspective is concerned with seeing how a particular natureculture functioned within larger climatic patterns and those consequences. Seeing that then, offers insight into past societies’ understanding of their environment, and thereby an alternative understanding to the one understood in the present. In the mediation of the text with past context, ecohistoricism distinguishes itself from ecocriticism, which Christopher Abram acknowledges is fundamentally anachronistic (Abram 2019, 38-40). However, the end goal is the same: to reframe the present and imagine a relationship with the out-of-doors different from the entrenched binaries of modern society.

Within this particular analysis, an ecohistorical perspective requires acceptance of the weather described in the medieval texts as events that happened. In other words, I assume

that, absent of good reason to suspect a described weather event, that Sturla and the compiler did not make up any weather events wholesale.⁵ However, with this assumption, the most pressing questions are *how* weather is described and *why*. It is in the answers to these questions that the weather's role in the narrative and worldview of thirteenth-century elite Icelanders becomes visible. Weather is both an actor and a tool of characterization, a structural device and an attacker unto itself. How these varying roles are represented in a time of natural and political volatility offers a clue for how to adapt to these multifaceted crises that were a fundamentally similar concern in the thirteenth century as they are today.

1.4. Sources

This dissertation relies on three main types of Icelandic historical evidence, two medieval and one modern. The medieval sources can be grouped into sagas and annals, with this analysis discussing two sagas and eight annals, while the modern source are weather compilations. In this section, I will introduce these sources in more detail, then offer some context for the central analysis of the piece. I here do not use other saga types, such as the *byskupasögur* or *konungasögur*, because no sagas in those genres contain weather information about Iceland for the years following the Samalas eruption. Though *Árna saga byskups*, which Haki Antonsson argues was intended as a conclusion to *Reykjarfjarðarbók*, begins in the years of the case study, it glosses over them very briefly, and includes no weather events, and so it is excluded from this analysis (Antonsson 2017, 262).

The first medieval source I will introduce, and the central focus of my analysis, is *Sturlunga saga* (*SS*). Produced around 1300 from previously extant sagas, *SS* is by far the most detailed documentary source for thirteenth-century Icelandic history. This compilation of sagas is preserved in paper copies related to two medieval parchment manuscripts: *Króksfjarðarbók* (AM 122a fol.), which Kristian Kaalund labels I, and *Reykjarfjarðarbók* (AM 122b fol.), or II (Kaalund 1906). Neither medieval manuscript is complete, but the paper copies were made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, before the manuscripts deteriorated to their present poor condition (Bragason 2005, 428). The *Reykjarfjarðarbók* redaction was written later and has more sagas, adding more sagas after *Íslendinga saga*, including *Sturlu þáttur* and *Þorgils saga skarða* (Bragason 2005). However, while the complicated transmission provides a limit on this case study, and any reading of the

⁵ This is sometimes an assumption that can be tested by comparison with other medieval sources, in the same process as I am using for the present case study, but due to differences in level of detail, such a comparison is not always possible or definitive.

compilation as a source for thirteenth- and fourteenth-century worldview, it does not invalidate doing so. Guðrún Nordal reconstructs the narrative threads of the end of *SS* between the two manuscript traditions, and in so doing demonstrates both the variations and the consistencies between the two texts, and therefore provides a useful account of the many places in *ÍS* where the text of the two traditions agree (Nordal 2006, 309-310). In this account, there is only one fragment of *ÍS* in the chapters of the case study that is found in *Reykjarfjarðarbók* and not *Króksfjarðarbók*.

The reliability of *SS* as a historical source, especially *Íslendinga saga* (the longest saga in *SS*, probably written in the 1280s by Sturla Þórðarson) has been a matter of some scholarly debate (Þorláksson 2017, 201-202). Until recently, there has been significant trust in the veracity of the compilation. Sturla himself was seen as an objective narrator, despite participating in the events he recounted. When speaking of Sturla's account of Bishop Guðmundr, R. George Thomas claimed that "it is so balanced that someone other than a partisan extolling a personal hero seems to be at work." (McGrew and Thomas 1968, 37). The corresponding conclusion is that, although Sturla does mix fact and fiction, his saga is ultimately fairly reliable. The *Formáli* of *SS*, written by the compiler of the compilation, supports such a reading, stating that Sturla did consult with eyewitnesses of the events (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, 115). Úlfar Bragason cites the *Formáli* as proof that "the compilation was seen as a historical text" (Bragason 2005, 433).⁶ In addition, this same method of consultation is known to have been his methodology for producing *Hákonar saga Hákonarson* (Wærdahl 2017, 108-109). It is therefore likely that it is to some extent true; *ÍS* has significant historical source value, especially concerning who was where and fought who, if not on the level of what individual's personalities were like (Þorláksson 2017, 210).

The historical accuracy of the saga, however, has sometimes been accepted too completely. Because the *samtíðarsögur* were written by people within a generation of the events they describe and who were often at the events, thereby filling Astrid Ogilvie's two standards for reliability as a climatological source (Bell and Ogilvie 1978, 335-336), the assumption has been made that –unlike the "semi-historical" *Íslendingasögur* (Ólason 2005, 105)– they are accurate reflections of the events they describe. This belief has resulted in

⁶ However, the *Íslendinga sögur*, or Family Sagas, were also regarded as historical in the Middle Ages. Modern scholarship takes a more nuanced view; while the lead characters in the sagas were likely historical, the details of the narratives were at least partially inventions of the author of each saga (Ólason 2005, 105-106). Therefore, though *SS* was undeniably considered historical, it cannot be described as unique in that regard.

some scholars taking the approximately 350 deaths recorded in the compilation as an authoritative number, which is a remarkably low number to cause the end of the Icelandic Commonwealth. “Many peoples have suffered greater losses, it was said, and not surrendered.” (Karlsson 2000, 85).⁷ Much more recently, Bernadine McCreesh assumes that *SS* provides a straightforwardly accurate image of Icelandic weather in the 13th century, concluding that “these works can almost certainly be relied on as an accurate source of meteorological data” (McCreesh 2018, 23). This view, however, does not take into account the narrative nature of *ÍS*, and the ideological purpose of it. In fact, until quite recently, very few historians have accounted for the source problems of the saga (Bragason 2005, 433). Even literary scholars, including Peter Hallberg and Jónas Kristjánsson, regarded Sturla’s seemingly objective viewpoint as reliable (Kristjánsson 2007, 195; Þorláksson 2017, 201). However, just as *Hákonar saga* is clearly a royal biography, glorifying Hákon *gamli*, *ÍS* is written by a rich and powerful, though retired, chieftain (Orning 2017). There has been some debate about the exact nature of his ideology; Thomas concludes that it is truly impossible to know what Sturla intended with the text (McGrew and Thomas 1970, 39). However, the biases that are preserved in the text, regardless of intent, offer useful insight into how medieval people treated their own past, including the weather (Bagge 2000, 33).

Two main intentions have typically been assigned to Sturla and the compiler of *SS*: *exempla*, or a warning against renewed fighting between chieftains, and *apologia*, or a defense of the reputation of the Sturlungar. Stephen Tranter looks at the early sagas within the *Sturlunga* compilation (particularly the few sagas, such as *Hrafn saga Sveinbjarnarson*, that have attestations outside of *SS*) to discuss the compiler’s intent to record the fall of an independent Iceland, and the dangers of excessive greed and in-fighting. He writes: “our compiler sought to give people his own age a lesson from the past, in the hope that they would recognise the dangers, understand the remedies, and act accordingly” (Tranter 1987, 235). His analysis contextualizes *SS* in the civil unrest threatening to break out under the increased taxation from Norway at the start of the 14th century. While he does not discuss *Íslendinga saga* itself in his work in much detail, this does offer one compelling strand for the compilation as a whole. A second interpretation is offered by Helgi Þorláksson, who argues using evidence from *ÍS* and *Landnámabók* that Sturla is defending his family’s reputation and is therefore highly biased.

⁷ The unwarranted trust in medieval sources extends beyond *SS*, to *Landnámabók* in particular. Bruce Holsinger uses an anecdote of one Þorkell *farserk*, in particular, as a case study to criticize both early climatologists’ and modern amateurs’ uncritical trust in the medieval Icelandic textual tradition (Holsinger 2017).

[Sturla] is not objective in *Íslendinga saga* when he discusses some of his opponents. And obviously he became a dedicated royalist, inspired by theocracy, and sees the events of the Sturlung Age in that light. He admits the faults and vices of his family, at least Sturla Sighvatsson and Snorri, but demonstrates that many of the leaders of the other chieftain families were no better” (Þorláksson 2017, 211).

In other words, Sturla is defending his own reputation in the saga. This is, of course, not contradictory with it also being historically accurate. Helgi reminds us that it is likely accurate on the macro scale, on the plot of who sided with whom. “However, Sturla could be reticent, leave out points if they didn’t fit into his interpretation” (Þorláksson 2017, 210).

The other medieval Icelandic documentary materials used in the present dissertation are the Icelandic annals. There is a very long tradition of annal-writing in Iceland that continued into the 18th century, though the reliability of the later annals for the medieval period is highly inconsistent.⁸ The oldest surviving annals –*Resensannáll*, *Annales vetustissimi*, and *Høyers annáll*– appear to have been composed in the late 13th and early 14th century. Nonetheless, it is believed that the annal-writing tradition began in the 12th century, and is one of the earliest forms of Icelandic vernacular literary production (Tómasson 2006, 95).⁹ However, the oldest extant manuscript is for the *Annales regii*, in the early 14th century, making it one of five annals –*Annales regii*, *Skálholts annáll*, *Lögmanns annáll*, *Góttskalks annáll*, and *Flateyjarbókar annál*– that are preserved in 14th century manuscripts (Boulhosa 2010, 177).

Although the Icelandic annals are more reliable than the saga material, they still cannot be uncritically treated as a source for historical information. As Eldbjørg Haug demonstrates with *Lögmanns annáll*, generations of scribes can record events, and some, or all, of the older sections of an annal could be non-contemporary to the time of writing (Haug 1997, 272). Elizabeth Ashman Rowe qualifies this claim, writing “For any particular annal, anything from zero to one hundred percent of the first layer [i.e. the oldest scribal hand in the manuscript] may have been written more or less contemporaneously with the events described” (Rowe 2002, 235). In other words, the older entries in an annal may well be written all at once, long after the years they record. As a result, there is a risk of incorrect years and duplicate entries in most medieval yearbooks (Haug 1997, 267). Additionally, some annals contain factual errors. The author of the 18th century *Setbergs annáll* evidently

⁸ The oldest surviving annals are all collected in Gustav Storm’s 1888 edition, which is still the standard issue used today. I owe a debt of gratitude to Elizabeth Ashman Rowe for her assistance with Storm’s edition, and her forthcoming translation of the annals.

⁹ *Resensannáll* is also tentatively attributed to Sturla Þórðarson (Grímsdóttir 2017, 8).

had a desire to make the past entertaining, as he would make up facts if he could not find suitable authentic material (Bell and Ogilvie 1978, 342). Finally, even when they are contemporary and written year-by-year, annals almost never record things that are customary and common. Annals only record those events that are exceptional in some way (Ludlow et al. 2013, 3; Guillet et al. 2017, S4). Significant deaths are usually mentioned, as are miraculous stories. However, the annals are not weather reports, and the weather is often not exceptional. Therefore, only the very best and very worst weather is recorded in them. As a result, it is somewhat difficult to fully reconstruct medieval climate from the annals.

However, inaccuracies are not guaranteed in medieval annals. Even in young annals; many annalists copied older annals, which may now be lost; Patricia Boulhosa notes that “*Skálholts annáll*, *Lögmanns annáll*, and *Flateyjarbókar annálar* are based on annals related to *Annales vetustissimi* and *Annales regii*” (Boulhosa 2010, 179).¹⁰ And Haug notes that the annals are still best read, despite their risks, as historical fragments (Haug 1997, 272). Therefore, we certainly can use even later annals as sources for the past, as long as we recognize that, like every manuscript text, the annals “are the products of individuals writing about the past for reasons wholly of their present” (Rowe 2002, 241).

The final type of documentary material I use to conduct my analysis are weather compilations, particularly Þorvaldur Thoroddsen’s *Árferði á Íslandi í Þusund Ár* and a more recent compilation –derived partly from Storm’s edition of the annals– produced by Veðurstofa Íslands and Sigurður Þór Guðjónsson. Compilations are extremely valuable because they compile information from many different sources into a single place (Ogilvie 2010, 36-37). However, Thoroddsen’s compilation in particular suffers from a lack of source criticism, and even the Veðurstofa Íslands compilation displays some editorial decision-making in what is counted as a weather event or not. Therefore, I do not utilize either of these sources for their accounts of medieval material. Instead, I use them as a comparative element, for their information about 1815 Tambora’s climatic forcing, for reasons discussed in my methodology below.

1.5. Volcanological Context

Not every weather event found in these sources –even those in the timeframe of the case study– is guaranteed to be evidence of Samalas’ influence. Therefore, in order to

¹⁰ The *Annales vetustissimi* are the oldest surviving annal manuscript, but it is fragmentary, so the time between the years 1000 and 1270 are missing from Storm’s edition.

properly explain my methodology and how I identify volcanically-induced weather, it is necessary to first briefly introduce volcanic “forcing,” or how a large volcanic eruption can cause weather effects across the globe. Following an eruption on the scale of Samalas or Tambora, in addition to ash and lava, a massive amount of gaseous sulfur is emitted, which becomes an aerosol form of sulfuric acid in the stratosphere (Gao et al. 2008; Smithsonian Institute 2019; Francis and Oppenheimer 2004).¹¹ Unlike the gases emitted from an eruption like the Laki fissure eruption of 1783, this cloud is too high to create a dry fog or any other directly visible phenomena (Francis and Oppenheimer 2004). However, it can cross the earth in as few as 22 days, and can last in the atmosphere for two to four years (Francis and Oppenheimer 2004). Therefore, the Samalas sulfates were present in 1258 and 1259, with declining impacts still visible in 1260 and 1261 (Guillet et al 2017). The global weather effects are still uncertain, and appear to vary heavily between eruptions. However, frequently, for Europe, the aerosols strengthen the North Atlantic Oscillation, an air current between Iceland and the Azores (Ortega et al. 2015). In consequence, post-volcanic summers in Europe are often cold and rainy, while the winters are relatively mild, as was the case on Continental Europe in 1258 (Guillet et al. 2017). However, summer weather can sometimes be very hot, as happened in 1259 in France, and winter weather can also be regionally worsened following an eruption, often with unusual snow or freezes (Guillet et al 2017; Ludlow et al. 2013).

1.6. Methodology

In the case study that is the focus of much of this dissertation, I use the Icelandic historical material to detect abnormally harsh extreme weather, such as snow in the summer or hard freezes. This material is restricted to sources that cover in some detail the years following the Samalas eruption. Due to an Icelandic eruption recorded in the *Annales regii* in 1262, it will be completely impossible to determine any effects from Samalas 1257 after that date. “Elldr Sólheimajökli. Myrkr mikil sva at fal sól.” Therefore, I will not include any events after that eruption, though I will include its absence from *ÍS* as a closing point of my argument. The case study, then, is temporally limited to the years 1258-1262. With that limit, nine medieval sources will be used, other than *Íslendinga saga: Resens annáll*, *Høyers annáll*, *Annals regii*, *Porgils saga skarða*, *Skálholts annáll*, *Lögmanns annáll*, *Gottskalks*

¹¹ The sulfate aerosols are further altered when they cross the ozone layer, which is the most recent means of confirming the location and size of an eruption. This metric further confirms 1257 Samalas’ magnitude (Gautier et al. 2019).

annáll, *Flateyjarbókar annáll*, and *Oddaverja annáll*. If there are indications in multiple of these sources of severe weather, it is less likely that the events in question are excluded from *ÍS* because they are local, unimpactful events. If two sources contradict each other, *Resensannáll* and *Høyers annáll*, as the two oldest annal sources, will be given precedence, then *Annales regii* and *Porgils saga skarða*, and then later annals.¹² Within these sources, I am primarily looking at explicit mentions of weather events. However, I will also, following Bernadine McCreesh, include any accounts of implicit weather found in *PSS* and *ÍS*, such as mentions of being able to see someone from far away or of farmwork, as indications that the weather is fair (McCreesh 2018, 101). However, the inverse is not true; a lack of implicit weather events is not a sign of poor weather.

These conclusions will be compared against the weather reports following 1815 Tambora. Comparing Tambora and Samalas is appropriate for a few reasons. The two eruptions occurred very close to the same place geographically and at about the same time of year (Levigne et al. 2013, 16744). Additionally, both eruptions are a 7 on the Volcanic Explosivity Index, indicating a massive eruption. That is not to say the two eruptions are perfect parallels; Samalas ejected more than twice the amount of sulfur gas as Tambora (Gao et al. 2008, 5). Additionally, Iceland in the 13th century was relatively warm, with very few harsh years, in contrast to the 19th century, when Iceland was still impacted by the so-called Little Ice Age. (Ogilvie 1984, 140-141). As a result, Tambora's impacts may well be more severe than Samalas's. Therefore, I intend to use these comparisons as a guide of what other effects may have happened; I do not mean it as a hard and fast comparison. In addition, I am mostly following the models used by Sébastien Guillet et al, as introduced in my account of prior research in the field. While this offers limited utility, because Iceland has no nearby geophysical data, it does provide a second check for what weather events can reasonably be linked to volcanic eruptions. Through this process, I seek to establish climatological context for the weather at the end of *ÍS*, and to determine whether the weather was abnormally harsh during the time following the eruption or not. As a historical baseline, in the three years prior to 1258, there are almost no weather events recorded in any medieval sources. The closest indication to a weather event is the statement that “Þriu skip braut a Eyrum”¹³ in 1256 (*HA*). However, there are no indications in any other source about this event. In addition, the fact

¹² Although *Porgils saga* is likely from the 13th century, its narrative status make it potentially less reliable than the annals, as it potentially uses weather in the same way as *ÍS*, which are described in Chapter Two.

¹³ “Three ships wrecked at Eyraar.”

that all three are mentioned in a single sentence and are in the same place suggests that if it is weather-related, it was due to a singular event, not a systematic climatic shift.¹⁴ Therefore, I will assume that the climatic conditions at this time are close to those that Ogilvie describes in her sea-ice reconstruction: There were individual bad seasons, but sea ice did not usually reach Iceland (Ogilvie 1984, 141). In addition, the Atlantic Multidecadal Oscillation may have been entering a warmer phase, where sea ice presence was reduced, making any accounts of sea ice more easily attributable to the eruption's cooling effect (Miles et al. 2014, 467). For each year, the historical account will be followed by a close reading of the relevant chapters of *ÍS*, seeking textual explanations for the, by and large, silence within the text about these climatic conditions.

However, in order to ground the explanations within the case study, a literary understand of the multivariable uses of weather in *ÍS* also is required. There is a close relationship between the *Íslendingasögur* and the *samtíðarsögur*, as the two genres are both writings about Icelandic history that were created in the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Ólason 2005; Bragason 2005). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume at least some of the uses of weather outlined in discussions of the *Íslendingasögur*, as described above, also apply to *ÍS*.¹⁵ Not every category of weather observed in the *Íslendingasögur* applies; for instance, revenants or witches never change the weather. However, other structural and narrative uses of the weather are likely shared between the *Íslendingasögur* and the *samtíðarsögur*. Determining the patterns of weather usage within *ÍS*, therefore, offers suggestions of interpretation for the case study of 1257 Samalas, and its role in the final chapters of the saga. The discussion of weather in the saga generally will occur in Chapter Two, while the case study will occur in Chapter Three.

¹⁴ Patricia Boulhosa warns against using the annals as reliable indications of maritime trade and the assertion that shipwrecks are “nearly always recorded” (Boulhosa 2010, 178, citing Gelsinger 1981). This warning is pertinent also to assumptions that shipwrecks are necessarily indications of bad weather, which occurs in the *Veðurstofa Íslands* compilation.

¹⁵ Lena Rohrbach, among others, has also been approaching *Íslendinga saga* as a “historical narrative” guided by literary structural principles. She argues in “The Chronotopes of *Íslendinga saga*,” adapting Mikhail Bakhtin’s term, that the biographical chronotope and the chronotope of the house are the basic units of organizing space in the saga, but that Sturla intentionally subverts them (Rohrbach 2017, 351-352), and, in the volume edited by Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Sverrir Jakobsson, that references to letters in *Íslendinga saga* are used for narrative purposes, such as ironically betraying Snorri Sturluson leading up to his death (Rohrbach 2017, 97-99). I follow her example in approaching the saga this way.

Chapter Two: The Varied Uses of Weather in *Íslendinga saga*

There are numerous instances of weather-related descriptions in *Íslendinga saga*. Many of these are explicit accounts of storms or other weather events, though some are implicit in clothing descriptions or remarks of other geography. Additionally, a majority of instances describe shipwrecks or other consequences of particularly bad weather, leading Bernadine McCreesh to claim that “Conditions are much harsher in the thirteenth century than they are in the tenth or even the eleventh centuries” (McCreesh 2018, 22). I argue here that the depiction of weather in this saga is not a reflection of history, but instead a complex series of structural and moral purposes of precisely the same kind McCreesh outlines in her book. In other words, *ÍS* uses weather in similar ways to the *Íslendingasögur*. With over sixty weather references across the saga’s two hundred chapters, the saga is neither reticent nor vocal about weather. Certainly, there is not enough information to fully capture thirteenth-century climate. However, that further encourages analysis of *ÍS* as a considered literary creation.

Peter Hallberg claimed that the weather was described primarily as a servant of the saga’s human action. “Natural phenomena are usually mentioned only to the extent that they have significance for the action: the state of the weather or of the paths or roads, the moonlight... and things of that sort” (Hallberg 1962, 71). Paul Schach, slightly earlier, describes weather as part of what he termed “anticipatory literary setting,” which “consists in the depiction, at crucial points of the story, of pertinent details of natural scenery which set the events. This preliminary indication of the scene is often made in a detached, offhand manner, so that only the discerning reader will appreciate its significance.” (Schach 1955, 13). While the situations the two of them describe are undeniably some common uses, Hallberg’s “usually” concedes that relevance to action is not the only categorization of saga weather possible. Astrid Ogilvie and Gísli Pálsson and then, very recently, Bernadine McCreesh offer many other ways the weather is used. The former outline 4 main ways the weather appears in the *Íslendingasögur*: “sailing and the sea, references to the all-important subsistence and farming, the use of weather as a metaphor and to create a mood, and the manipulation and creation of weather through witchcraft and magic” (Ogilvie and Pálsson 2003, 268-269). McCreesh also describes weather events used as an antagonist, storms, and as a tool to glorify past heroes (McCreesh 2018). Many of these categories additionally fall under the umbrella structure of the anticipatory setting, but contain salient features distinguishing them from other uses.

Not every category described for the *Íslendingasögur* is paralleled in *ÍS*. The manipulation of weather by witches, in particular, is utterly absent. There are weather events in dreams, poems, and portents, but no humans can stir up the weather. This is not to say that the weather does not have a substantial influence on the narrative; weather is at times both an ally and an enemy to the feuding alliances of the *Sturlungaöld*, and it does seem to have a sense of Christian justice, as I will show in the section on “Dreams, Hellscapes, and Moralizing Weather,” as well as in the case study, in my analysis of 1258. However, the manipulation of weather is strictly God’s domain.¹⁶ *Íslendinga saga* also records weather in ways that the *Íslendingasögur* do not, reflecting some level of reliability in inclusion of extreme events. In this chapter, I will discuss the manifestation of weather events outside of chapters 191-198 of the saga, which are the chapters that I hypothesize record weather influenced by the Samalas eruption. Many of the weather events are easily described by the idea of anticipatory setting, but then I will discuss ways weather is an agent of the narrative, a describer of character, and the metaphorical and historiographic uses of weather.

2.1. Anticipatory setting

Weather descriptions, including storms, cold, and ice, appear most commonly in *Íslendinga saga* as a part of anticipatory setting. Accepting Paul Schach’s definition, when it is used as anticipatory setting, weather usually is described in such a way that it will appear again later during the scene. Chapter 36 of *ÍS* provides an example: “Þat var eina nótt, at laust á foraðsveðri með regni ok krapa-drífu. Þá riðu þeir Eyjólfr á Völlu ok sendu fyrir einn sinn förunaut til móts við Skúmu. Ok sagði hann þeim, hvat títt var, at sex menn vöktu yfir biskupi. Ok hrukku þeir menn in í búðina” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 273, *ÍS* chap. 36).¹⁷ Because of the storm, the men assumed it was safe to leave Bishop Guðmundr unguarded, and they fell asleep. As a result, Eyjólfr is able to rescue the bishop. The storm is mentioned first, in a notably terse style. It is a terrible storm to be out in. However, it quickly becomes apparent that it is mentioned not for its severity, but for the way it enables the human-oriented narrative to progress.

¹⁶ McCreesh also describes miraculous weather, including melting and freezing fjords, but that is only one kind of manipulated weather, alongside the pagan gods and witches (McCreesh 2018, chap. 4, 6, and 7).

¹⁷ “That was one night, that loosed with terrible weather with rain and showers of sleet. Then Eyjólfr and his men rode to Vellir and sent forward one of their companions to a meeting with Skúma. And he told them, what the situation was, that six men watched over the bishop. And they men sheltered in the booth.” All translations mine.

ÍS also has several variations on the standard anticipatory structure. The debate between Gizurr Þorvaldsson, Loftr Magnússon, and their allies about whether to retreat from Órækja Snorrason's pursuit illustrates this: “Þat er annat ráð at fara ofan um ís hjá Iða, -- þar var mjó spöng yfir, en þítt var at tveim megin, -- ‘ok vaka ísinn ok vita, ef vér fáim varit spöngina”” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 460, *ÍS* chap. 155).¹⁸ The aside sketches out a geographic feature in very few words, but also makes some weather information here implicit: it must be around freezing, if the ice is thawing, but is still stable enough to cross. However, Gizurr and his allies choose not to go down to the ice; Iða plays no part in the narrative. Instead, they stay at the bishopric at Skálhólt and make their defense there. Then, during the actual battle, the implicit weather information becomes relevant again. “Þeir Gizurr höfðu borit vatn á forskálann, ok var hált á þekjunni. Flestir Órækju menn höfðu skóbrodda, en máttu fáir jafnfram ganga” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 463, *ÍS* chap. 156).¹⁹ The earlier debate gives important weather information; the coldness is just enough to turn the wet thatch slippery. However, like his uncle Snorri did in *Heimskringla*, Sturla delivers this information not “in the offhanded manner of the [*Íslendingasögur*] tellers” but through the dialogue of his characters (Schach 1955, 11).

A second variation in *ÍS* is the anticipatory setting that does not have a corresponding payoff in the action of the narrative, instead being used to more completely illustrate a dramatic scene.²⁰ A meeting between Gizurr and Sturla Sighvatsson occurs in this way: “Sturla reið til Apavatns með allan flokkinn snemma dags. létu menn hesta sína á gras, því at eigi skorti áiganga, ok var þat fyrir helguviku. Þat vár var allra vára bezt” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 412, *ÍS* chap. 129).²¹ Although this line, positioned at the beginning of a scene before any character interactions, reads very similar to cases of anticipatory setting elsewhere in the saga, it does not end up having any bearing on the narrative. Gizurr is captured and forces to take an oath to leave Iceland, but the goodness of the spring, with heavy rains implied by the depth of Álftavatn, does not matter. The structure of the scene, therefore, invites readers to

¹⁸ “‘The second plan is to travel over the ice near Iða’ –there was a small bridge over, but thaw was on two sides– ‘and watch the ice and see, if we may hold the bridge.’”

¹⁹ “Gizurr and his men brought water to the covered way, and it was slick on the thatch. Most men of Órækja had ice shoes, but few could walk side by side.”

²⁰ This usage could reasonably be compared to modern film, where a wide shot sets the scene before cutting to the character interactions.

²¹ “Sturla rode to Apavatn with all [his] force early in the day. Men allowed their horses to grass, because there was no shortage of grazing places, and it was before Holy Week. That spring was best of all springs.”

understand this particular use of anticipatory setting as a way to make a scene of betrayal and capture more vivid. Sturla uses this technique in other places in the saga; when Jón *prestr* is slain in chapter 77 of the saga, he is described “Hann fór ok var í skinnfeldi” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 338, *ÍS* chap. 77).²² He immediately dies and the fur cloak is never mentioned again, but the cloak, and the implied cold weather, stand out in this random act of violence.²³ These anticipatory details heighten the brutality of the consequent scenes, in line with the interpretation of the saga as a warning against such strife.

Anticipatory setting is a highly varied category; weather does not always appear in scenes of anticipatory setting, and any type of weather can appear. Good weather ensures that Bishop Guðmundr witnesses an attack outside of the church at Hólar, and enables him to make an appropriate judgement for the slaying of Jón Birnuson against Kolbein *ungi* (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 337-338, *IS* 76). Meanwhile, darkness, descriptions of fortifications, and geography all serve as backdrops to fight and flight throughout the saga, just like the weather (e.g. *ÍS* chap. 55, 138, and 137, respectively). The weather in this usage, then seems to be used primarily when it adds some additional authenticity to the scene it precedes.

2.2. Weather as a Narrative Actor

Weather is also described in *ÍS*, following Hallberg’s interpretation, when it in some way changes the narrative. This is different from anticipatory setting; the weather is not described prior to a scene, in which it may or may not play a role. Instead, the weather event occurs in the middle of the scene. Storms that cause shipwrecks are the most common example; the storm very rarely appears before the shipwreck happens, and they are described in a way that “[tends] to be brief and undifferentiated” (McCreesh 2018, 98). This parallels the medieval annals, which usually describe shipwrecks along the lines of the example given in “Methodology,” where it is described in a single line. Nevertheless, these storms are still significant for the narrative. Shipwrecks are not only a devastating risk in a subsistence society, but also a good way to remove characters from the saga. When discussing the fate of the sons of Sæmundr Ormsson, Sturla writes “Hvessti þá svá veðrit, sem á leið nóttina. Ok þat veðr gerði mánadag, svá at skipit leysir undir þeim. Hljópu menn þá í bát, ok týndust þeir

²² “He came and was in a fur cloak.”

²³ Jón *prestr* was Sturla Sighvatsson’s cousin, so his death does provoke a reaction from Sturla. However, the instance of the fur cloak or implied coldness does not matter; it cannot reasonable be connected to the storm in the same chapter, which occurs weeks later.

allir” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 474, *ÍS* 161).²⁴ A couple chapters later, a case against Þórðr *kakali*’s followers falls apart because of the drowning (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 475-476, *ÍS* 163). The weather itself serves to remove future leading men from the narrative, and enables the rise of others. In a different shipwreck, though some main characters were involved with the shipwreck, notably Ari Ingimundarson and Aron Hjörleifsson, the minor characters of Eysteinn *hviti* and Benedikt Hesthöfðason drowned. (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 481, *ÍS* 169). As a result, Ari Ingimundarson becomes one of the burners at Flugumýri. Here, again, a shipwreck substantially changes the narrative, and the weather itself becomes an agent of the narrative. The fact that shipwrecks are not straightforwardly used to eliminate unwanted characters suggests that these are genuine events that are being reported. Nevertheless, the details reported in the aftermath of these shipwrecks gives them a role as a narrative actor.

On land, the weather also can serve as a narrative actor in battle and chases. Often, the cold serves that role; it was so cold at the burning of Flugumýri that Gizurr was left shivering and half-frozen while hiding in a vat of whey, to the point that “Hann var háss orðinn mjök af reyk ok kulda” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 493, *IS* 174).²⁵ The cold is mentioned earlier in the battle: “En Hallr var fáklæddr, ok kom kuld í sár hans. Munkrinn var ok berfættr, ok kól hann ok.” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 493, *ÍS* chap. 173).²⁶ The cold itself is an attacker against the burning farm, and its severity is used to great effect. The repeated mentions of cold also increase the suspense: “Svá hefir Gizurr sagt sjálfr, áðr þeir kæmi í búrit, at hann skalf af kulda, svá at svaglaði í kerinu” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 493, *ÍS* chap. 174).²⁷ It is a very near escape, made worse by the cold. The cold weather switches allegiances after the burning, however, as Hámundr *varbelgr*, one of the burners, becomes frostbitten himself while fleeing Gizurr’s revenge (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 498, *ÍS* chap. 176). In these instances, the weather is itself a narrative agent, acting alongside the human actors to increase the tension of the scene. In chapter 146 of the saga, Órækja Snorrason and Sturla Þórðarson “sátu báðir í Sælingsdalstungu hríðfastir sumarmála helgi þrjár nætr á fjórða tigi manna, ok var þá fátt

²⁴ “And then the weather blew up a gale, as the night wore on. And that weather was made Monday, so that the ship broke under them. Then men jumped into a boat, and they all drowned.”

²⁵ “he had become very hoarse from smoke and cold.”

²⁶ “But Hall was not clothed and the cold got into his wound. The monk also was bare-footed, and frostbit him also.”

²⁷ “So has Gizurr himself said, that before they had come into the storehouse, that he was shaking with cold, so that he was making noise in the vat”

með þeim” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 448, *ÍS* chap. 146).²⁸ The latent potential for violence is very close, made possible because of the storm. Though the disagreement over the farm at Sauðafell never turns into a battle, it is made more likely, and the scene more tense, because of the weather.

Sometimes, though, weather influences the narrative by preventing conflict, rather than enabling or participating in it. When Hrafn Oddson and Sturla Þórðarson are attempting to capture Þorgils *skarði* and Gizurr Þorvaldsson, their pursuit is prevented because of a thaw. “Váru margir menn í þeiri ferð gjarnir á líf Gizurar ok ætluðu nú, at eigi skyldi við bera, at fund þeira bæri saman. Þeir riðu, þar til er þeir kómu at Ölfusá, ok var þat um nótt, ok var áin þá í lysingu, svá at enging veg máttu þeir yfir hana komast. Verðr þat þeira ráð, at þeir snúa aftr við svá búit ok ríða heim vestr” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 478, *ÍS* chap. 165).²⁹ *Þorgils saga skarða* provides an account of the same event: “Helzt illviðrit. Váru menn þá margir mjök þrekaðir, svá at til einskis váru færir, ok barg hverr þeira öðrum, þeira er betr máttu.” (*Sturlunga saga* II 1946, 141, *ÞSS* chap. 20).³⁰ In *ÍS*, unlike *ÞSS*, there is no indication that Gizurr would have escaped if not for the thawing river. As a result, the weather is forefronted in the narrative, and given agency. It, in an ironic twist, is such a hinderance that the zeal to kill Gizurr is broken. In this way, it seems to become Gizurr’s ally, providing almost supernatural aid to him, though the narrative never assigns a cause to the flooding more than warming weather melting the ice.

The examples given demonstrate how weather is sometimes an agent in the narrative as powerful, or more, than the human participants. Cold and storms form and break alliances, removing even important and wealthy men from the narrative, or protecting them from the actions of their enemies. This type of weather is, to some extent, random in who it spares, befitting a society that exists on the margins of survival. However, it also serves to increase the tension and rivalries between the leading men, as storms and thaws continue to make meetings and resolution, by pact or by battle, impossible. Though this weather is undoubtedly

²⁸ “sat both snowbound at Sælingsdalstunga on the first Sunday in summer for three nights with forty men, and was then coolness with them.”

²⁹ “Many men in their company were eager for Gizur’s life and planned now that nothing should be carried with [nothing should slow them down] when their meeting together arose. They rode until they reached the Ölfusá, and that was during the night, and the river was then breaking up, so that they could in no way cross it. That became their plan that they turned back from it so prepared and rode west home.”

³⁰ “The weather was the most rather bad. Many men were then very exhausted, so that they were able to go nowhere, and each of them helped others, of them that might be better.”

included because of human memory of these events (especially Sturla's own), it thus provides a clear narrative purpose as well.

2.3. Weather as a Means of Characterization

A third overarching way weather is used is as a way to inform the readers' understanding of a character. This category includes weather that reflects some part of the mind of a character and weather that a saga character can overcome, like a high river to be swam over. An example of the first comes after the burning at Flugumýr: "Þá var vetr svá góðr, at menn mundi eigi slíkan" (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 496, *ÍS* chap. 175).³¹ This description appears to be only half-true; even though the weather was clear, it was cold enough that one burner receives frostbite and "[Gizurr] var vápnaði vel, í blári kápu var hann ok kálfskinnskúar loðnir á fótum, því at frost mikit var ok kuldi" (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 498-499, *ÍS* chap. 176).³² The good weather initially described exists in false pretenses; it is fair to look upon but extremely dangerous to be exposed to. The *gluggaveður* –weather that is pleasant to look at through a window, but not to be out in– closely parallels Gizurr himself at this point: "ok bar vel af sér harma sína ok var kátr um vetrinn við menn sína ok vini, er til hans kómu. Hann var mikill borði ok lét lítt á sik bíta þat, er at höndum hafði borit" (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 496, *ÍS* chap. 176).³³ Gizurr proceeds, in his cheerfulness, to deceive the burners and kill seven of them at their homes. Just like the weather, Gizurr is superficially pleasant, but bitter and cold underneath. The weather provides clear information about Gizurr's hidden –at least to the other characters– psychological mood. It is likely that Sturla intended this parallel; Gizurr is the only named character well-adapted to the outside coldness, suggesting that he and it are tied together. A second example of cold reflecting character occurs when Oddr Þórarinnsson leaves the Northern Quarter after attempting to kidnap bishop Heinrekr of Hólar, "Fór hann í hríðinni, til þess er hann kom austr í fjörðu, ok settist á Valþjófsstaði ok var löngum fálátr, meðan han var heima þar" (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 509, *ÍS* chap. 183).³⁴ Using the previous example as a guide, it becomes clear that the

³¹ "Then the winter was so good that men knew of none like it."

³² "[Gizurr] was well armed, he was in a blue cloak and had lined calfskin shoes on his feet because it was a great frost and cold."

³³ "he bore well for himself his harms and was cheerful during the winter with his men and friends, who came to him. He was very strong-willed and allowed that little to affect him, which he had to hands [recently] endured."

³⁴ "He journeyed in the snowstorm until when he came to the East Fjords and settled down at Valþjófsstaðr, and was reserved for long times, while he was home there."

snowstorm is meant as a reflection of Oddr's mind. The blizzard conditions reflect the turmoil in Oddr's mind, and his concerns about being surrounded by enemies. The worries are well-founded; Oddr is killed in battle the next January.

The volcanic eruption at Reykjanes in the summer of 1226 provides an example of weather that provides characterization by being overcome. In the winter following the eruption, Sturla writes: “Þessi vetr var kallaðr sandvetr ok var fellivetr mikill, ok dó hundrað nauta fyrir Snorra Sturlusyni út í svignaskarði. Snorri hafði um vetrinn jóladrykki eftir norrænum sið” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 314-315, *ÍS* chap. 60).³⁵ Despite suffering massive losses of livestock Snorri is able to hold a feast and drinks for many of his allies.³⁶ This serves to emphasize his keen political mind. “Þá var fæð mikil með þeim Sturlu, frændunum,” so cementing the loyalty of his friends through a Christmas feast is a strategically good move (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 315, *ÍS* chap. 60).³⁷ At the same time, the harm of the weather has no impact on Snorri. It is left ambiguous whether the death of the cattle was the motivation for the feast, and he therefore recognized the opportunity provided by the eruption, or if he is so wealthy that he is able to hold a Christmas feast despite his cattle dying. In either case, his skill as a chieftain and wealth are emphasized here, a moment of praise from Sturla, who is often critical of his uncle (Þorláksson 2017, 202). A similar use of weather to praise a chieftain occurs in chapter 196, which corresponds to the spring of 1261. However, I will discuss that in more detail in Chapter Three, as part of the case study.

2.4. Dreams, Hellsapes, and Moralizing Weather

Weather sometimes serves a moral purpose, as well as a narrative one. Portents, dreams, and other commentaries are the most ideologically revealing use of weather terms in the saga. Dream weather is particularly notable as the only type of weather in the saga to be obviously fabricated. Dreams are also almost always used to make some kind of value judgement, so the language of weather creates similar associations between types of weather and positive or negative associations (Glendinning 1966, 84). Portents and miracles have a similar purpose by indicating a significant event or change in societal power relations.

³⁵ “This winter was called Sand-Winter and was a great death-winter, and one hundred cattle died for Snorri Sturluson out in Svignaskarðr. Snorri held a Yule-drinking during the winter according to the Norse habit.”

³⁶ This largely depends on how starved the cows were when they died; if they were slaughtered, then this is also a practical decision.

³⁷ “There was great coldness between Sturla [Sighvatsson] and his kinsmen.”

Occasionally, though, weather that occurs during an event, rather than before, provides moral commentary on the event it is a part of.

The death of Sæmundr Jónsson of Oddi in 1222 is marked with a portent: “Þat sama haust ok öndverðan vetr sást oft stjarna sú, er kómata heitir. Þá sýndist ok sólin rauð sem blóð” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 298, *ÍS* chap. 49).³⁸ The positioning of the two events in consecutive sentences, and the fact that the comet is temporally concurrent with Sæmundr’s funeral, establishes a link between the two; the appearance of the comet serves as a portent of the significance of his death, which helps bring both Snorri Sturluson and Sturla Sighvatsson into the leading positions of Icelandic society. All the associated battles and bloodshed those two men cause are related to and foreshadowed by the blood-red sun following Sæmundr’s death.

Prior to the battle of Örlygsstaðir, where Sighvat Sturluson and Sturla Sighvatsson die, there is a chapter entirely relating dreams.³⁹ These dreams all use the language of storms to highlight the battle: “Þornar heimr ok hrørnar, hríðeflir ferr víða” “Røkkir at éli, rignir blóði.” “Dust es á jörðu, dimmt es í heimi” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 424-425, *ÍS* chap. 136, stanzas 56, 62, and 63).⁴⁰ The dense prosimetric structure portends the climactic battle, but also shrouds it in the same weather which, as described when discussing weather as a narrative actor, can participate in conflict. Particularly exceptional, and weather that is not natural, is the rain of blood, which also appears in stanza 4.⁴¹ Robert Glendinning interprets that earlier stanza as a parallel to the stanzas portending the death of Thomas of Canterbury; in turn, then, the defending side (in stanza 4, Bishop Guðmundr) is morally superior, and is at risk of being martyred (Glendinning 1966). Looking again to Örlygsstaðir, Sturla foresees his

³⁸ “That same autumn and at the beginning of winter the star called Comet was often seen. Then the sun also seemed as red as blood.” A red sun or sunset, as is described here, is characteristic of volcanic aerosols, as seen dramatically in the paintings of William Turner from years following the 1815 Tambora eruption. The Smithsonian Institute Database of Global Volcanism only lists a small eruption of Hekla in that year, however.

³⁹ Guðrún Nordal notes that the list of dreams is only preserved in *Króksfjarðarbók*, and argues that they are an interpolation by the editor of that manuscript (Nordal 2006, 311). However, some of the language used is echoes in stanzas elsewhere in the saga, such as Stanza 4 in Chapter 23, so while they cannot be claimed to be Sturla’s commentary, it does reflect Icelandic cultural associations in the weather.

⁴⁰ “Home empties and withers, storms travel widely.” “The sky darkens, it rains blood” “Dust is on the earth, darkness is in the sky.”

⁴¹ A rain of blood is also a fairly common trope in Icelandic literature. The most famous example appears in *Eyrbyggja saga*, which McCreesh interprets as a somewhat horrifying Christian miracle, and Carl Phelpstead reads as an example of the corporeality of “non-human environment correlating with human fate” (McCreesh 2018, 44-48; Phelpstead 2014, 14-15).

own defeat, and acts penitently instead of violently until battle is joined. In this way, though Gizurr Þorvaldsson wins the fight, he is condemned through the dreams, and therefore the associations of storms and blood serve to condemn him.

The burning of the farm at Flugumýri is the strongest instance of moral commentary. The burning is characterized by repeated mentions of how cold the weather was, alternating with descriptions of parts of the farmhouse burning down. This language of extremes, unbearable heat and unendurable cold, is highly reminiscent of medieval conceptions of Hell. Paul Langeslag discusses the conception of Hell as a place of extreme temperature, citing *Sólarljóð* (Langeslag 2015, 38). The burners, because they juxtapose fire and frost, have created Hell. And the references to an infernal fate continue. Before Hrani Koðránsón, one of the burners, is killed, he says “En mik má mjök ugga, et eigi sé vís gistingin, sú er mér gegni” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 505, *ÍS* chap. 179).⁴² The burners are also called associated with heathendom in a dream later, further emphasizing that they are beyond God’s grace (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 520, *ÍS* chap. 190).

All of these weather events, regardless of their historicity (i.e. whether the conditions were exactly as Sturla described them), are meant to be read symbolically. They are significant because they foreshadow and elevate the events they surround. Even though weather is an experienced phenomenon every day, in some cases, it is so significant that it serves to case moral approbation or condemnation, at the authors’ wills.⁴³

2.5. Historical Weather.

Some weather events fit into none of the categories described above. The best explanation for these instances is a historical interest that is more in line with modern expectations of history. The second of two volcanic eruptions mentioned in the saga, an eruption at Reykjanes in 1231, is described thus: “Guðmundr biskup fór út um sveit um sumarit. Þetta var kallat sandsumar, því at eldr var uppi í sjónum fyrir Reykjanesi, ok var grasleysa mikil. ... Um haustit fór yfir land allt sótt sú, er hettusótt var kölluð” (*Sturlunga*

⁴² “But I may greatly fear, that the night-lodging may not be shown, that which I like.”

⁴³ I use the plural here because the dreams prior to Örlýgsstaðir may be an insertion by the writer of *Króksfjarðarbók* (Nordal 2006). Therefore, attributing this usage entirely to Sturla, or even the compiler of *SS*, is disingenuous.

saga I 1946, 346, *ÍS* chap. 82).⁴⁴ Though the tephra likely fell on the bishop's head, and the farms had a poor harvest, increasing the difficulty of feeding the bishop's entourage, no narrative events or conflicts come from this. Similarly, the narrative does not glorify or condemn anybody through their response to it. However, Sturla himself helped find Guðmundr lodging. As a result, it seems that this is an event he remembered as unique, and severe enough to be worth mentioning on its own merits. Similarly, one spring when Órækja is trapped in the Westfjords because of an arm infection, Sturla records the following: “Þat var hörð vist, því at vár var illt, en vetr allgóðr. Fjórtán hestar dóu í Æðey uppstigningardag, meðan menn váru at mat. Til landuðnar horfði í Ísafirði, áðr fiskr gekk upp á Kvíarmið” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 391, *ÍS* chap. 113).⁴⁵ This could be interpreted as nature reflecting Órækja's own illness, but given that ships still gather around him at Æðey, it seems more to be the case that the hard times are made worse by the increased population in the area. Órækja's inability to leave causes a situation where the farmers suffer greatly, but it is not a condemnation of Órækja.

These instances indicate a genuine historiographic interest from Sturla. Some weather, even though it is not consecutive with any moments of importance within the political narrative, are so significant that it would be remiss in a history of Icelanders to omit them. The interest in notable events of the year is unsurprising, since Sturla also likely composed *Resensannáll*, as mentioned in footnote 9, but it is significant for the saga. Narrative utility is not the only reason why a weather event might be recorded. However, it is not all significant weather events. Only weather that 1) at least tangentially touches on the main actors in the saga, 2) is unusual in severity or goodness and 3) does not intersect with moments of active conflict are recorded. However, because narrative conventions do not always govern weather in the text, the near-total exclusion of weather between 1257 Samalas and 1262 Katla from *ÍS* becomes more meaningful. Either the weather is not so severe as to be worth mentioning –an option that I will demonstrate to be untrue– or some ideological purposes underlie these years' exclusion.

2.6. Conclusion

⁴⁴ “Bishop Guðmundr traveled about the country during the summer. It was called Sand Summer, because fire erupted in the sea from Reykjanes and there was a great grasslessness..... In the autumn that sickness which was called mumps journeyed over the whole land.”

⁴⁵ “That was a hard time, because the spring was bad, although winter had been very good. Fourteen horses died at Æðay on Ascension Day while men were at meal. It appeared like devastation in Ísafjörðr, before the fish went up at Kvíarmið.”

ÍS has many different uses of weather. There is a genuine interest in recording weather events, but wherever it possible they are fit into the literary types well-known from the *Íslendingasögur*. A plurality of weather events can be described well as parts of Paul Schach's anticipatory setting, but there are additional narrative, character, and moralistic reasons to adapt weather. It should be noted that the categories I have outlined are neither precise nor entirely stable. A single weather event can apply to multiple purposes; the cold at Flugumýr is used both to heighten the suspense and as a means of Christian allegorization. Shipwrecks are sometimes recorded in other sources, and so are undeniably historical events, even as they change the narrative and, in the case of the aborted pilgrimage of Benedikt Hesthöfðason, a tool of moralizing. It speaks to Sturla's skill as a saga writer that individual events can be applied to such a wide range of narrative and structural goals.

Additionally, I do not take this category as a necessarily accurate description of how poor the weather usually was, like Bernadine McCreesh does. The saga does indicate that medieval Icelandic weather was often poor, as is still the case in Iceland today. However, it is an overstatement of the frequency and severity of the described storms to treat them as evidence that "the threat of frostbite, death in swollen rivers and starvation [was] never far off" (McCreesh 2018, 23). Sturla shows great care in what he includes. Only particularly severe weather and weather that interacts with the human actors in the narrative is included. Though it is unlikely he wholesale invents weather for narrative purposes, demonstrated by his willingness to use other features for anticipatory setting, there is no information about what Sturla does not include. Only in cases where weather events are known from other sources, but do not appear in *ÍS*, can insight be gained into further criteria. This is exactly the case with the weather from 1258-1262, following 1257 Samalas, which will be discussed next.

Chapter 3: A Case Study of 1257 Samalas in *Íslendinga saga*⁴⁶

With a fully contextualized understanding both of the weather in the saga and the nature of large-scale volcanic forcing, it is now finally possible to turn to the case study that will be the focus of this chapter. *ÍS* shows very few weather events between 1258 and 1262, in contrast to the repeated descriptors of cold weather during the burning at Flugumýri and the following year. Additionally, there is less detail on the final few years, which has caused some scholarly debate, especially in the first half of the 20th century. Björn Ólsen and Pétur Sigurðsson argued that the ending of the saga was not original, while Jón Jóhannesson believed they were (Nordal 2006, 310-311; Kristjánsson 2007, 194-195).⁴⁷ However, Chapters 191-198 of *ÍS* are included in both manuscript strands, indicating that regardless of the authorship, they were treated as part of the saga by the beginning of the 14th century. Though the analysis must be more limited, it still is informative of medieval Icelandic interpretations of the volcanic years.

This case study, as introduced more thoroughly in the Introduction, will examine each of the years following the Samalas eruption in detail. I will be beginning each year's analysis with a discussion of the source material apart from *ÍS*, compiling my own account of what weather events occur in each year. Figure 1 provides an overview of this information, including the weather events in *ÍS*. I mark each relevant description in the sources as either X, S, ?, or U. X, ?, and U all pertain to weather and environmental effects, such as storms, landslides, and earthquakes. Though these all certainly have human impacts, very often death, the phrasing in the annals focus on the event itself. S refers to more indirectly related events, especially when they are described primarily by their human impacts. The only instance of this impact described in the medieval sources is a plague, which I will argue was made more severe by the Samalas eruption. X and S are events that are very likely a consequence of 1257 Samalas, ? are those that are possibly related, and U indicates unrelated events. If a single source has two events in a single year, both are indicated in the same cell. As mentioned in the Introduction, the medieval sources will be supplemented as necessary with information

⁴⁶ I here use abbreviations for the sources, for the sake of brevity: *HA*: *Høyers annáll*, *PSS*: *Porgils saga skarða*, *RS*: *Resens annáll*, *AR*: *Annales Regii*, *SA*: *Skálholt Annals*, *LA*: *Lögmanns annáll*, *ÍS*: *Íslendinga saga*, *FA*: *Flateyjarbók annals*.

⁴⁷ Additionally, only *Króksfjarðarbók* records chapters 199-200 and the death of Þórðr Andréasson (Nordal 2006, 310). However, those chapters fall outside the bounds of this case study, and so that textual difficulty will be set aside for this dissertation.

about 1815 Tambora, to provide a wider indication of what climatic conditions may have been in the thirteenth century.

Source	1257	1258	1259	1260	1261	1262
Íslendinga saga		?			X	
Resens annáll		? S			X	
Høyers annáll		? S	X	U	X	
Annals regii		? S	X		X	U
Þorgils saga		X S				U
Skálholts annáll	S	?	X	? U	X	U
Lögmanns annáll		S				
Gottskalks annáll		? S				
Flateyjarbókar annáll		? S	X	U	X	U
Oddaverja annáll					X	
Key	X: Unusual Weather event likely related to the Samalas eruption ?: Weather or environmental event possibly related to the Samalas eruption S: Social, non-weather event (i.e. disease) likely related to the Samalas eruption U: Weather or environmental effect unrelated to the Samalas eruption.					

Figure 1: Weather Events in the Medieval Icelandic Written Record, 1257-1262.

3.1. 1258

According to known distributions of volcanic sulfates, the aerosol veil from Samalas should have circumnavigated the globe in the first few months after the eruption. At the latest, then, if the eruption occurred in the previous summer, the climatic effects in Iceland should have manifested themselves by early 1258. This year was politically significant for the island; in Norway, Gizurr Þorvaldsson was appointed jarl early in the year, and then sailed home during the summer of 1258.⁴⁸ In addition, Þorgils *skarði* was killed in January of that year. Two clear distinct environmental reports can be noted: A plague struck the Miðfjörðr region of northern Iceland, causing the deaths of 400 people (*ÞSS* chap. 77, *RA*, *HA*, *AR*, *SA*, *LA*), and there was a very harsh spring in Skagafjörðr (*ÞSS* chap. 77). In addition, there was a lunar eclipse in November 1258 (*RA*, *HA*).⁴⁹ Two ships that sailed from Iceland were wrecked, though no weather event is specifically tied to those wrecks in any known source. In 1816, the first year after the Tambora eruption, Iceland also had a hard spring. However, there was no “Year Without A Summer”; in fact, “hretasamt var í ágúst”⁵⁰ (Thoroddsen 1916, 216). The two eruptions correlate well; the ships that sailed early in the summer were wrecked, possibly due to cold, stormy weather, but Gizurr’s ship in the late summer had a swift and fair passage, indicative of warmer, calmer weather by that point in 1258.

The account of the events of early 1258 in *Þorgils saga skarða* merit further analysis.⁵¹ The potentially volcanic event occurs shortly after Þorgils is ambushed and killed by Þorvarðr Þórarinnsson, who Þorgils trusted. Sturla Þórðarson and Sighvatr Böðvarsson (Þorgils’ younger brother) went to pursue Þorvarðr, who had wintered at his farm in Skagafjörðr. The saga writes: “Fóru þeir þá með flokka norðr til Skagafjarðar. Gaf þeim veðráttá svá illa, at menn vissu eigi dæmi til, at jafnhart vár væri. Þá var ok sóttin mikla í Miðfirði.” (*Sturlunga saga* II 1946, 223, *ÞSS* chap. 77).⁵² The weather does not impact the

⁴⁸ The text of *Íslendinga saga* is inconsistent here; there is some confusion whether Gizurr’s return was in 1258 (Chapter 192) or 1259 (Chapter 193). However, Jóhannesson and the other editors of the 1946 edition argue that it must have been in 1258, and this has been widely accepted (Jóhannesson et al. 1946, 577)

⁴⁹ Lunar eclipses can be indicators of volcanic aerosols in the atmosphere, if they appear unusually dark. However, this only applies to total eclipses, which did not happen in Iceland (Espenak and Meeus 2009). Continental sources, however, indicate that it was an extremely dark eclipse (Guillet et al 2017).

⁵⁰ “It was hot in August.”

⁵¹ General weather usage in *ÞSS* is very similar to *ÍS*, as described in Chapter 2. McCreesh claims that “the emphasis in *Þorgils saaga skarða* ... is on how weather-events affect travel” (McCreesh 2018, 18). There are fewer weather accounts that do not serve some kind of narrative purpose, though, making the Skagafjörðr weather more significant.

⁵² “They went then with a troop north to Skagafjörðr. The weather to them seemed so bad, that men knew of none similar to it, that would be a similarly harsh spring. There was also the great sickness in Miðfjörðr.”

following action: Þorvarðr escapes, and the pursuit is called off because “en þeir urðu eigi meir en tíu” (*Sturlunga saga* II 1946, 222, *PSS* chap. 77).⁵³ In addition, the mention of the sickness in Miðfjörðr, which is two fjords west of Skagafjörðr, is completely unprompted. Two conclusions can be drawn: first, the saga provides a genuine account of unusually bad weather in northern Iceland and second, that the disease was regarded as linked to the bad weather, given their extremely close proximity in the text. Accepting the link between weather and plague based on the saga alone is risky; the longest account of the disease is in *Lögmanns annáll*, and partially contradicts the saga’s implied explanation, saying “her segir fra mannfalle pui enu mikla er j Midfirde var er till tok Mariu messo sidarre. lette eftir paaska uiku: ok do or sott .cccc. manna j pessum kirkiu soknum at Stad. at Nupe. a Backa. a Mel. J Huamme ok Holum. ok Tiorn.” (Storm 1888, 257).⁵⁴ The sickness therefore began in September 1257, potentially consecutive to the eruption of Samalas. Though it probably only took a few weeks for the acid aerosols to circumnavigate the globe and start the climatic forcing, as was the case with more recent eruptions (Francis and Oppenheimer 2004, 431), the short timeframe denies the possibility of a causative link. However, while there is no reason to connect 1257 Samalas to the onset of the plague, there is also no strong reason to find the link implied in the text completely spurious. I find it most probable that the harsh spring made the outbreak of plague worse, and it is therefore an indirect consequence of the eruption.

The harsh spring and sickness in 1258 are perhaps the most confounding of the Samalas weather events to be excluded from *ÍS*. *Þorgils saga skarða* explicitly states that Sturla himself was an eyewitness to the terrible weather while trying to capture Þorvarðr. As I showed in Chapter 2, weather events that Sturla himself witnessed are elsewhere recorded in *ÍS*. Two possible explanations present themselves. The first is that the compiler knew that the accounts were duplicated, and so edited out the account in *Íslendinga saga* so it would not duplicate *Þorgils saga skarða*. Thomas interprets the saga this way, writing, “[Sturla] was even prepared to leave a gap of two or three years in his own narrative, simply because he

⁵³ “They had become not more than ten.” The possibility must be entertained that this unnatural weather is a reflection of the unjust political situation in the region, much like the related trope in English literature, especially later in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period. However, the farmers at this point had already rejected Þorvarðr as *bóndi*, so this literary explanation does not, I think, hold water. Similarly, the weather could serve as a portent of Þorgils’ death, but unlike the appearance of a comet I described in the previous chapter, the weather is not positionally linked to Þorgils’ death or burial.

⁵⁴ “Here tells about the great man-death which was in Miðfjörðr, which began on the later feast of Mary. It eased up after Easter week, and four hundred people died of sickness in these church districts: at Staðr, Gnúpi, Bakki, Mel, Hvamm and Hólar, and Tjörn.”

had nothing new to add” (McGrew and Thomas 1970, 22). However, this interpretation falls short in two ways. First, *Íslendinga saga* does tell the same events as *Þorgils saga skarða* does multiple times in the narrative, especially when Sturla himself is involved in some way (e.g. *ÍS* 189 and *PSS* 50-52). The accounts are truncated, but are rarely completely absent. Second, *Þorgils saga skarða* is only part of the Reykjarfjarðarbók redaction and its copies (Bragason 2005, 433). This indicates that, even though some version of the saga likely existed around 1300 when the compiler was working, it is unlikely that the compiler was editing out parts of *Sturlunga saga* to avoid duplicating a text he himself was not including. This does not mean that the compiler did not edit out this part of the narrative; in fact, it seems likely, as Chapter 189 of the saga begins “Þorgils hafði mikit lið haft af Snæfellsnesi vestan með sér, sem fyrr segir” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 517, *ÍS* 189).⁵⁵ However, it is for some other reason than avoiding redundancy.

The absence of Sturla’s eye-witness account invites closer reading around the narrative at that point. *Íslendinga saga* in its surviving form skips almost 3 years, from 1255 to 1257 CE. Once Gizurr leaves Iceland the summer following the burning at Flugumýr, i.e. summer 1254, the primary action follows Oddr Þórarinnsson, who Gizurr had chosen to manage his properties. However, Eyjólfur Þorsteinsson, one of the burners, and Hrafn Oddson, who has been Gizurr’s enemy for a large part of the saga, attack and kill Oddr early in 1255. The story then skips to the beginning of the battle where Eyjólf is killed, which is described in much more detail in *Þorgils saga skarða* chapters 50-52. Then there is a chapter where Guðrún Gjúkadóttir appears to a priest’s wife and tells her stanzas about the fates of the burners and surviving main characters. Sturla here most harshly condemns the burners of Flugumýr, as Guðrún claims that “Þá ætla þeir með illvilja sínum at koma heiðni á allt landit” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 520, *ÍS* chap. 190).⁵⁶ This claim is obviously false, but does fundamentally align Gizurr and his allies with proper Christendom, a fact further supported by the close friendship shown in the saga between Gizurr and Bishop Sigvarðr of Skálholt. Then the narrative skips another few months, in another probable edit, to the summer of 1258, “Um sumarit eftir, er Þorgils skarði var veginn um vetrinn” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 522, *ÍS* chap. 191).⁵⁷ This chapter tells of the fate of two ships that sailed from Iceland to

⁵⁵ “Þorgils had had a great host west from Snæfellsnes with himself, as was said earlier.”

⁵⁶ “Then they planned with their wickedness to bring heathendom to the whole country”

⁵⁷ “The next summer after when Þorgils skarði was killed during the winter.”

Norway, the Hólmdælan and the Gróbúzan. “Þá um sumarit réðust til skips með Sindra margir íslenzkir menn, bæði brennumenn ok Fagranessmenn” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 522, *ÍS* chap. 191).⁵⁸ Both ships sank, condemning the “heathen” burners to remain unburied. In this way, the weather serves both as a reflection of action, by removing some of the people Gizurr wants to take vengeance on, and as a harshly negative moral judgement on the character of the burners. However, the Gróbúzan, which did not have any burners, may have made it to Scotland, where its passengers were executed. (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 522, *ÍS* chap. 191). Though this would be small comfort to the deceased, such a death would at least allow them a proper, terrestrial, Christian burial, as opposed to the deaths at sea. This alternative explanation serves to reveal the moral aspect of the shipwrecks as condemning the burners, an interpretation that is consistent with how weather is occasionally used in *ÍS* (see Chapter Two, “Dreams, Hellsapes, and Moralizing Weather”). The narrative then returns to Gizurr in Norway.

The saga in these chapters concerns itself with the consequences of the burning of Flugumýri, and the fates of the burners. And, indeed, if *Þorgils saga skarða* is even partly reliable, it seems that the time between Oddr’s death and Eyjólf’s was a fairly quiet time in Iceland on that front. Hrafn (who was warned of the burning, but did not participate in it) fought with Þorgils and Þorvarðr, but the people who wronged Gizurr specifically failed to play a particularly significant role prior to the large battle. When Þorvarðr betrays Þorgils and kills him, has no relevance to the tale of the burners. While these are undeniably significant events in their own right, they have no place in the focus on Gizurr the extant *ÍS* has. As a result, the harsh spring of 1258 ends up falling outside the compiler’s interests.⁵⁹

3.2. 1259

1259 also contains weather events relevant to 1257 Samalas. Most significantly, there was a large snowstorm in August, around the feast-day of Laurentius. (*HA*). There was also “Skriða liop i Bvðardal. .vij. menn letvz.” (*AR, SA*). *FA* also describes “hallæri” in this year, but it is the only source to do so.⁶⁰ 1817 shows some similarities; the spring was harsh, but the summer and fall were cool and dry. The autumn had heavy rains, especially in the south

⁵⁸ “Then during the summer many Icelandic men brought themselves to a ship with Sindri, both burners and men of Fagranes.”

⁵⁹ It seems to me likely that, given how severe it is, Sturla originally may have included the harsh spring of 1258, but this is impossible to determine from the extant manuscripts.

⁶⁰ “Famine.”

of the country. However, “Grasvöxtur víða rýr vegna hafssins,”⁶¹ which persisted well into the summer (Thoroddsen 1916, 217). Again, the correlation is very strong. Strong rains throughout the year could cause a significant landslide, especially in the Vestfirðir, a part of the country strongly tied to the Sturlungar. The documentary information, then paints a picture of a perpetually cold, rainy country.

One point of difficulty is that it is unknown where exactly it snowed before August 10, due to the uncertain provenance of *Høyers annáll*. If it fell in the northern or western parts of the country, north of Skálholt, then it would certainly fall into the geographic focus of at least parts of *Íslendinga saga*. In addition, the chapters that may describe the events of 1259 have not been so obviously cut down in *SS* as the chapters describing the previous year. As a result, it is uncertain, but fairly probable, that the snowstorm occurred in an area that Sturla had focused on elsewhere in the saga. Accepting the 1258 date for Gizurr’s arrival, as discussed in the previous section, the the beginnings of Gizurr’s conflict with the Andréassynir would occur in this year as well. This would seem to be a good place for literary adaptation of the storm along the lines of what is described in the section on Weather as Characterization in the previous chapter. The snowstorm could reflect the cold interpersonal relations of Gizurr *jarl* and his final rival, Þórðr Andréasson. The saga writes “Þá var fátt með þeim Þórði Andréassyni ok svá um vetrinn áðr” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 525, *ÍS* chap. 194), though this is describing the Alþingi in June, not August.⁶² Later in the summer Þórðr plots to kill Gizurr, and the resulting pillaging in Rangárvellir in the south, which cause ninety head to livestock to die, would seem to have been intensified and reflected with the snow. However, the saga is completely silent on weather events. The storm may have not been included due to a lack of time or skill; *Íslendinga saga* was likely not finished before Sturla’s death (Grímsdóttir 2017, 11). However, the storm more likely was concentrated in the northern and western quarters of the country, corresponding to the landslide in Buðardalr. As the main conflict of the saga occurs along the Rangá in the south, as Gizurr pillaged there, the weather was irrelevant. This is certainly possible; the weather in the north and the south of Iceland is often dramatically different. This then, would explain why it is not included, and offer a more precise location for the snowstorm. The regional variation within Iceland is unsurprising, given the account given from the Tambora eruption. Nevertheless, it does indicate that, despite Samalas’ influence, it was less severe of a year

⁶¹ “the grass-growing was widely weak due to the sea-ice.”

⁶² “There was coldness between [Gizurr] and Þórðr Andréasson just like during the previous winter.”

than the annals would indicate for the country to be politically “kyrrt” in (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 525, *ÍS* chap. 194).⁶³

3.3. 1260

The annals for following year are extremely sparse on described weather events, with only two described. The first one is a big earthquake at the island of Flatey (*HA, SA, FA*). However, that event is not related to the Samalas eruption, and is also not recorded in *ÍS*. The other event is “Elding með reið,” referring to a lightning strike in Vestrholt, possibly along Borgarfjörður (*SA*). Lightning strikes are a highly unusual event in Iceland in general; the extreme temperature gradients needed for a thunderstorm are rare in the sub-arctic. However, that in and of itself is not sufficient to indicate any particular linkage to the Samalas eruption. The link is made slightly stronger by comparison to Tambora. In Thoroddsen’s weather compilation, the only time lightning is mentioned in the years following that eruption is in 1818, also the third year after the eruption. This inevitably may be coincidental, and the evidence for such a lightning strike is sparse, but it is certainly still unusual weather for Iceland. In contrast 1818, the third year after the Tambora eruption, was a very damaging year for much of the country. In that year “enda komu þá á óvanalegum tíma hafþök af ísi inn á Húnaflóa 23. Ágúst, og rak hann aftur burt 9. sept.”⁶⁴ (Thoroddsen 1916, 219). The contradiction may indicate how little time Samalas’ forcing lasted; the weather seems to have been improving in Continental Europe at around this time (Guillet et al 2017, 8). It could also mean that the poorer weather that Samalas brought had been normalized by that time to the medieval annalists, and it was no longer worth mentioning.

1260 is also a quiet year in *ÍS*, being covered in a single paragraph in chapter 196. The only noteworthy event in the saga is that “Sóru Rangæingar þá trúnaðareiða Gizuri jarli ok Hákonu konungi at upphafi” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 527, *ÍS* chap. 195).⁶⁵ As a result, it seems very likely that, even if the weather was not particularly good, there were no remarkable weather events to adapt to fit the narrative. Additionally, as it was a fairly quiet year politically, there were no dramatic scenes to set with whatever weather events did occur that aren’t mentioned in the sources.

3.4. 1261

⁶³ “Quiet.”

⁶⁴ “the sea came filled with ice at Húnaflói at an unusual time on the 23rd of August, and it broke up after the 9th of September.”

⁶⁵ “The men of Rangá swore then allegiance oaths to Gizur jarl and to King Hákon for the first time.”

1261 started off climatically very badly, with sea ice surrounding Iceland (*RS, HA, AR, SA*). *ÍS* has the longest account of the following events. I quote it at length here because it is so unusual.

Þá var mikill vetr, ok felldu menn mjök fé sitt. Þat vár stofnaði Gizurr jarl heit til guðs á einmánaðarsamkomu, at vatnsfasta skyldi jafnan fyrir Óláfsmessu fyrri alþýða manna á Íslandi. Var þat heit þá fest ok játat af alþýðu. Gizurr jarl sendi menn með bréfum á langaföstu suðr til Sigvarðar biskups, ok gekkst þar við þat heit um alla biskupssýslu hans. Varð ok svá við um heitit, at bati varð á veðráttu bæði góðr ok sjótr. Sigvarðr biskup lét þat festa heitit páskadag sjálfan í Skálaholti. Var ok þann dag veðr þegar svá gott, at langliga hafði eigi slíkt komit. (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 527-528, *ÍS* chap. 196)⁶⁶

The extremely harsh winter at the start of 1261 is the only event of this time period that Sturla mentions, and it is by far the easiest to classify. It is adapted to, slightly begrudgingly, glorify Gizurr. Gizurr *jarl* is the one who makes the vow, and this is in pattern with the binary established a few chapters earlier, when the burners were called heathens. And it seems to work; he is both powerful enough to make the entire country agree to his promise to God and pious enough that God listens to the terms he sets out. This contrasts with how Gizurr is called Óðinn in a verse in the very next chapter, when Gizurr reneges on a deal he made with Sturla (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 528, *ÍS* chap. 197). Úlfar Bragason proposes, following earlier scholars, that therefore the moments that are in praise of Gizurr are the result of the compiler (Bragason 2010, 232). However, this scene is less idolizing of Gizurr than first appearances suggest. Though Gizurr proposes terms that the people agree to, no effects are mentioned until after Bishop Sigvarðr decides to accept the vow. It is the clergy here who are actually pious. Gizurr is simply doing his duty as a lay person to ask for the clergy to intercede on his behalf. Instead, he forces the people to swear an oath at a time when none of them are gathered together at the Spring assemblies or the Alþing. The unusual timing indicates how dire the weather situation must have been and how thoroughly in control of Iceland Gizurr is at this point, with his final enemy safely trapped at Gizurr's home at Staðr.

⁶⁶ “That was an extreme winter and men killed much of their livestock. That spring Gizurr jarl established a promise to God for a monthly assembly and a water fast always before the Feast of St. Olaf for all the people of Iceland. That promise was then agreed to and binding for the public. Gizurr jarl sent men with letters south to Bishop Sigvarðr during the long fast, and this promise went about throughout all his bishopric. It became such also about the promise, that an improvement became in the weather both good and sudden. Bishop Sigvarðr allowed himself to pledge the promise on Easter day at Skalaholt. Also, the weather on that day was immediately so good, that for a long time none like it had come.” This is in contrast to the Tambora eruption, where 1819 started off extremely pleasantly.

Glorifying Gizurr in this chapter also serves a dramatic purpose. Sturla, at the moment of the action, was unaware that Hákon *gamli* had not approved the titles Gizurr was handing out. When he does find out, at the arrival of Hallvarð *gullskór*, Sturla was furious, calling Gizurr “Óðinn,” the harshest rebuttal of his piety possible (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 538, *ÍS* chap. 197 stanza 94). Previously establishing Gizurr as pious heightens the dramatic tension of his duplicity and coldness through the end of the saga, leaving him an ultimately ambiguous character, in line with his description as indecisive; “hann var afskiptalítikk, ok þótti þá eigi víst, hverjum hann vildi veita” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 402, *ÍS* chap. 121).⁶⁷

3.5. 1262

Two weather events are described in 1262 across the medieval Icelandic corpus. There was a snowstorm the last week of Lent, where “Lögðust þá fyrir bæði menn ok hestar af óveðri” (*Sturlunga saga* II 1946, 224, *PSS* chap. 80).⁶⁸ Additionally, Katla erupted at the Sólheimar glacier (*AR, SA, FA*). Most of the tephra from this eruption fell towards the center and east of the country (Óladóttir et al. 2018, 9). Even so, it was enough that *Skálholt annáll* records that “fylgði myrkr mikit sva at fal sol.” (Storm 1888, 193).⁶⁹ However, neither event has any reason to be attributed to 1257 Samalas; a snowstorm in early April is not a climatically unusual event in Iceland.

There are no weather events in chapters 197 and 198 of *ÍS*. The saga relates the swearing of allegiance to Hákon, then closes the final chapter of the Reykjarfjarðarbók text “Þann vetr sat Hákon konungr í Niðarosi” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 529, *ÍS* chap. 198).⁷⁰ The volcanic eruption is unmentioned. However, a possible reason for this can be found by looking to *Kristni saga*, which used to be tentatively interpreted as being also written by Sturla (Kristjánsson 2007, 195; Grímsdóttir 2017, 8). “Þá kom maðr hlaupandi ok sagði, at jarðeldr var upp kominn í Ölfusi ok mundi hann hlaupa á bæ Þórodds goða. Þá tóku heiðnir menn til orðs: ‘Eigi er undr í, at goðin reiðist tölum slíkum.’ Þá mælti Snorri goði: ‘Um hvat reiddust goðin, Þá er hér brann hraunit, er nú stöndum vér á?’” (*Íslendinga sögur* 1946, 270,

⁶⁷ “He was indecisive, and seemed then to not know, who he would support.”

⁶⁸ “Both men and horses collapsed than against the bad weather.”

⁶⁹ “Great darkness accompanied [that] so that the sun fell.”

⁷⁰ “That winter King Hákon stayed in Niðaros.”

Kristni saga 11).⁷¹ As noted in the Introduction, weather events, especially eruptions, could be interpreted as signs of divine displeasure. *Kristni saga* downplays the eruption as unable to be a sign of supernatural wrath. However, its inclusion in a late thirteenth-century saga, within a Christian context, indicates that there may have been a similar folk belief. As a result, if *Sturlunga saga* was meant as a warning, then providing such a possibly negative omen at the last moment, when oaths of allegiance had already been sworn to, would have been counter-productive.⁷² In this case, then, it appears that ideological purposes of the saga completely overrode recording something that everyone in the country must have been aware of.

3.6. Conclusion

Though the evidence is undeniably sparse, it is clear that 1258-1262 are the harshest span of years since 1212 and until 1274, with multiple years of exceptional weather in a row (Ogilvie 1984; 141). However, the impacts seem to have been fairly non-catastrophic. The worst season was the winter between 1260 and 1261; however, by the end of April, which Astrid Ogilvie claims is the iciest month of the year (Ogilvie 1984, 133), it had completely broken up. The Tambora eruption matches closely the medieval documentary material from Iceland. Generally, there appears to have been harsh winters and cool, drier summers, but also a high degree of regional variation. The weather events from 1258 and 1259 match most closely, making it very likely there was also some famine in parts of the country in 1260. Though the harsh spring of 1261 is unusually timed, it is so unusual within the context of the rest of the thirteenth century that it is likely a residual effect of the Samalas eruption, even though the previous year had been unremarkable, and the majority of the sulfate acids had already left the atmosphere. It can take up to five years for weather systems to fully recover from an eruption, making this well within the realm of possibility.

Iceland certainly had two years of volcanically-influenced weather; the correlation of events with Tambora is strong enough to come to that conclusion. However, it does not affect the upper echelons of Icelandic society; according to *ÍS*, Gizurr Þorvaldsson was able to

⁷¹ “Then a man came running up and said that a lava flow had come up at Ölfus and it meant to leap to the farm of Þoroddr *goði*. Then the heathen menn said: ‘It is not a wonder that the gods are angered by such talk.’ Then Snorri *goði* said: ‘About what were the gods angered, then, when the lava here burned, which now we stand on?’”

⁷² Though *Íslendinga saga* does record two other eruptions, and the *sandvetr* following them, without this ideological parallel, both occur at sea off the coast of Reykjanes, and therefore lack the close parallel that 1262 Katla does to the eruption in *Kristni saga*.

collect a tax of one sheep from each person not going to the Alþingi in 1259 and there is no report of this being a hardship (ÍS, 194). In addition, people were able to go pillaging and kill cattle, which is significant, but not crippling (IS, 195). Iceland was not over the impacts; between the harsh weather and multiple years of raiding, Sturla reports in 1263: “ok galt margr óverðr þessa ófriðar ok ófagnaðar” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 533, ÍS chap. 199).⁷³ Ultimately, however, the historical question of Samalas’ duration and significance comes down to whether Sturla means a few months or several years when he writes “langliga hafði eigi slíkt komit” (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 528, ÍS chap. 196).⁷⁴ Unfortunately, with the documentary material available, that question cannot be answered.

The absence of weather events in ÍS is much less uncertain. It is here, with an ecohistorical perspective, that the saga’s and its character’s attitudes towards their environmental and social contexts emerges. The saga follows Gizurr Þorvaldsson’s perspective in the final chapters, and any information about Iceland that does not intersect with his movements is not mentioned. The single-minded narrative focus on Gizurr interacts with the regional variation in weather, and some severe weather events are left out of the narrative seemingly by coincidence. However, two ideological stances emerge from this focus. Gizurr’s ambiguity is reinforced throughout the focus, including in the singular weather event that is mentioned. He is vengeful and untrustworthy; pious in one moment and deceitful as a pagan god in the next. However, his negative qualities are mitigated by the Norwegian throne, and are still less bad than the conflicts described earlier in the saga. As a result, the saga writer still supported him and the annexation by Norway, a decision agreed to by all the leading men in Iceland. This supports the interpretation of the saga as a warning against repeating the violence and inability to reconcile that it describes.

The second ideological angle is socioeconomic. Gizurr Þorvaldsson, his allies, and his enemies are the wealthiest men in Iceland. To them, the slaughter and reckless seizure of property is insignificant in exchange for their political ends. However, medieval farmsteads were usually subsistence farmsteads and resources were usually spread very thin. Less affluent households could not afford to support many extra mouths in a harsh year. Compounding the violence and the weather, then, there was very likely famine in the early 1260s. However, the saga is interested in the political violence; until the situation gets so bad in 1263, there is no word of condemnation, or even disgruntlement. After that point, much

⁷³ “Great suffering repaid this hostility and joylessness.”

⁷⁴ “for a long time none like it had come.”

like when “Til landuðnar horfði í Ísafirði,” described earlier in the text, the saga is sympathetic (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 391, *ÍS* chap. 113).⁷⁵ However, the sympathy only emerges in the crisis, and is expressed in the barest possible terms. This is revealing of the limits of *ÍS* as a historical source. Beyond the narrativizations of weather, the final chapters and the hardships Samalas induces indicate an overwhelming bias in the text. The saga says little about how society as a whole endured the years between 1258 and 1262, though the indication that can be glimpsed suggest it was a very difficult time. Instead it tells us about how the richest people in the country could manage the crisis: they were so wealthy that it functionally did not affect them. Politics, not environment, brought them to accept Norwegian rule.

⁷⁵ “It appeared like devastation in Ísafjörðr.”

Chapter 4: Conclusion – Biased Focus, Biased Weather

In this dissertation, I set out to explore the adaptation of weather events in Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga*. I used one of the largest volcanic eruptions of the Common Era as a case study of this adaptation, because the abnormally cold weather should be more easily visible in the medieval record. Therefore, it is a time period particularly well suited to explore the interaction between the weather and human action. The climatic forcing caused by the 1257 CE eruption of Samalas caused significant regional cooling for several years after the eruption, a weather anomaly for the 13th century. Although a pattern of cooling, sickness, and landslides emerges from the medieval annals and other saga sources, *ÍS* records only the harsh winter at the beginning of 1261. I argue in the previous chapter that this weather event serves to characterize Gizurr Þorvaldsson as an ambiguous character and to moralize about the time as a whole, two ways of using weather that—as I demonstrated in Chapter Two—occur elsewhere in *ÍS*. Though Sturla called Gizurr Óðinn, Gizurr's actions ultimately have more impact, and his prayers to God are answered. As a result, the saga author, with some reluctance, accepted Gizurr's rule as less bad than the feuding of the Sturlungar and the other leading families. This interpretation is consistent with readings of *ÍS* as a warning against potential unrest at the beginning of the 14th century.

The absence of the other weather events in the chapters of the saga, as argued in Chapter Three about 1259, is most likely due to regional variation of the severity. The saga has a very close narrative focus on Gizurr *jarl*, and his conflicts in the south of the country. However, the few place names in the annals, such as a landslide, are in the Westfjords. In these cases, the most probable explanation for why *ÍS* does not describe this weather, although it is abnormal, is related to the narrative focus. No sufficiently harsh scenes intersected with Gizurr's itinerary to be narrativized in the ways that were described in Chapter Two. Additionally, unlike with the *sandvetr* caused by a volcanic eruption, the severe weather was not so widespread as to need to be mentioned in its own right. The only case that would have had such an effect, the 1262 eruption of Katla, has a clear ideological reason to not be recorded, as it may be read as a negative portent for the agreement in the summer of that year.

This case study is revealing of the limits of past written material for historical climatology. Medieval annals and other types of writing were written for a specific purpose and audience. In the case of *ÍS*, this reason is not to produce a work of history, at least

according to modern expectations of impartiality and thoroughness. It was a work by and for the elite members of the society, and focused on them. The primary goal was to tell a story about the political feuding of the Sturlungar and the other notable families, and though historiographic interest plays a role, most environmental information in the saga was included to assist that purpose. The image of thirteenth century climate is very incomplete, and focused on weather that coincides with political conflict. The regional variation that is apparent from the examination of other sources is completely obscured in the saga. Nevertheless, it is precisely that regional variation that is valuable to understandings of volcanic forcing; the societal impacts are dependent on the variation. Though written sources are the most detailed source of climatic information available, no individual source, no matter how seemingly complete or impartial, describes the weather in an entire country, and needs to be treated very carefully in an environmental reconstruction.

The analysis of 1257 Samalas has also been revealing of the limits of the historical source value of *ÍS*. The saga is primarily interested in storytelling, and skillfully uses literary techniques to do so. Even though many of the events it relates are documented in other sources, it uses many of the same techniques as the more transparently literary sagas, such as the *Íslendingasögur*, to adapt weather data to its narrative. Sturla's treatment of the weather is done primarily insofar as it intersects with the wealthy chieftains he interacted with throughout his lifetime, and only secondarily as recording of severe weather. As a result, many weather events documented in the years after 1257 Samalas are absent from *ÍS*. Though this can to some extent be explained by the brevity of the final chapters as a whole, it casts some doubt on the reliability of the saga as a whole. Though the saga is about its author's own life, information in *ÍS* exists to create a narrative, and to warn against renewed infighting. It must be read as such in order to be able to extract any meaningful historical data from it.

This analysis could be expanded in a few ways. As mentioned in my introduction when discussing my sources, *Sturlunga saga* has a complicated manuscript transmission. Performing a comparative analysis on weather events throughout individual redactions of *Íslendinga saga* would be a fruitful means of exploring the differences in individual manuscripts of the saga, and possibly how the ideological purpose of the text changed in the later medieval and post-medieval period. Looking beyond *Sturlunga saga*, it would also be a worthwhile comparison to analyze how the 1257 Samalas eruption manifests in continental Scandinavian texts. Guillet et al. argue, based on Scandinavian tree ring data, that cooling in

Norway and Sweden was approximately .5 °C, as opposed to about .2 °C in Iceland (Guillet et al. 2017). A very similar analysis could be performed on *Hákonar saga Hákonarson* and the Scandinavian annals, then, to explore how a slightly different society differently adapted the same ecological crisis.

One of the goals of any ecocritical analysis, including an ecohistorical approach of the kind employed in this thesis, is to deal with “the present and future state of the world” (Abram 2019, 38). Exploring a time of joint political and ecological crisis has distinct parallels to modernity, even if the crisis is one of cooling, instead of warming. By looking to past methods of navigating and interpreting changing weather patterns, it can inform a more critical alternative to the interpretation of modern crises. The experience of weather is subjective and socially-mediated, and therefore determining the ideologies of the past allows a different understanding of the relationship between humans and climate to emerge. However, the relationship *ÍS* described through this case study, is discouraging. The weather, as abnormal as it was, very rarely caused stress on the wealthiest farmers, and did not force them to adapt into a more sustainable means of subsistence. The slaughter of livestock continued, unabated, until the damage was done. Weather and man conspired until “óverðr” occurred (*Sturlunga saga* I 1946, 533, *ÍS* chap. 199).⁷⁶ Though the compiler of *SS* was warning against renewed political strife, a different warning emerges for modern readers, against the luxury of wealth to ignore even localized environmental hardship.

⁷⁶ “Suffering.”

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