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THE BOOKISH RIDDARASÖGUR

Writing Romance in Late Mediaeval Iceland

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A slightly shorter version of the *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* discussion in chapter four appeared as '*Rémundar saga keisarasonar* and the Legend of Prester John' in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (2012); the analysis of *Dínus saga drambláta* in chapter two draws on my article 'Cognitive Dysfunction in *Dínus saga drambláta* and *Le Roman de Perceval*' in *Arthuriana* (2012); and the section on *Adonias saga* in chapter three will be published in a forthcoming volume arising from the 'Dreams of Fame and Honor' conference.

The research and writing of this book was carried out during my many years as a staff member in the Department of English at the University of Sydney.

Introduction

In the first half of the fourteenth century, a diverse body of imaginative narratives set in Europe, Africa and Asia emerged in Iceland. Although sometimes referred to as *lygisögur* ('lying sagas'), these stories usually go by the name of 'original' or 'Icelandic' *riddarasögur* ('sagas of knights') to distinguish them from the 'translated' *riddarasögur*, the Old Norse versions of Old French and Anglo-Norman chivalric romances and *chansons de geste* produced, for the most part, at the court of the Norwegian king Hákon Hákonarson (r. 1217–63). The majority of pre-Reformation *riddarasögur* manuscripts date from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, and it is generally assumed that *riddarasögur* composition reached its height in the mid-fourteenth.[1] The large number of *riddarasögur* manuscripts which postdate the Reformation attests to their popularity well into the nineteenth century.[2] As stories of quest, these thirty to forty narratives constitute the Icelandic contribution to that body of medieval literary composition known as romance, but in the context of Icelandic saga narrative they remain elusive of definitive classification in terms of matter, style, ethos and setting. There is, for example, no clear demarcation of subject and *mise-en-scène* between episodes in some *riddarasögur* and the sagas set in legendary Scandinavia known as *fornaldarsögur* ('sagas

1 For a summary of views on the dating of the Icelandic *riddarasögur*, see Jürg Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas: Studien zur Prosaliteratur im spätmittelalterlichen Island* (Basel and Frankfurt am Main: Helbing & Lichtenhahn Verlag, 1983), 22–23. The earliest manuscript evidence of an indisputably 'original' Icelandic romance is a fragment of *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* in the fourteenth-century manuscript AM 567 II 4to. For a description of this manuscript, see Christopher Sanders, ed., *Bevers Saga* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 2001), lxvii–lxviii. For a recent overview of the Icelandic *riddarasögur*, see Matthew Driscoll, 'Late Prose Fiction (*lygisögur*)', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 190–204.

2 On the popularity of romance in Iceland after the Reformation, see Matthew Driscoll, *The Unwashed Children of Eve: The Production, Dissemination and Reception of Popular Literature in Post-Reformation Iceland* (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1997).

of olden time').[3] Considered together, *riddarasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* form a category of Icelandic saga literature which operates in a temporal, social and geographical framework outside the experiential knowledge of its audience.

Foremost among book-length studies by those relatively few scholars who have tackled the Icelandic *riddarasögur* as a corpus are H. G. Leach's discussion of translated and original *riddarasögur* in *Angevin Britain and Scandinavia* (1921), Margaret Schlauch's seminal overview of the field *Romance in Iceland* (1934) and Einar Ól. Sveinsson's extensive survey of *riddarasögur* style, motifs and interrelationships in the preface to Jónas Kristjánsson's edition of *Victors saga ok Blávus* (1964). Jürg Glauser's *Isländische Märchensagas* (1983) examines the social milieu in which the *riddarasögur* corpus was produced, Marianne Kalinke has identified and analysed a substantial group of *riddarasögur* with bride-quests as their central motif in *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland* (1990) and Matthew Driscoll's *The Unwashed Children of Eve: The Production, Dissemination and Reception of Popular Literature in Post-Reformation Iceland* (1997) investigates the legacy of the medieval *riddarasögur* in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Icelandic 'saga romance'.

Although it has become something of a given that the *riddarasögur* are modelled on Continental chivalric romances and influenced by the 'translated' *riddarasögur* in terms of subject matter, style and ethos, that debt tends to be limited largely to the surface attributes of romance – typically, princes on quests in exotic foreign lands for brides or for the restoration of their patrimony; combats with dragons, giants and Saracens; adventures in unknown lands which ultimately bring material rewards, noble brides and the acquisition of new kingdoms. A significant number of Icelandic *riddarasögur*, however, owe a more overtly substantial debt to medieval encyclopaedic and historiographical traditions than their Continental counterparts. One effect of this is to bring an element of 'biculturalism' to the textual landscapes of the *riddarasögur* which suggests that their authors, and, by implication, their audiences, were familiar with

3 On *riddarasögur* which might be classified as 'borderline' with *fornaldarsögur*, or 'hybrid', and on general problems in classifying late medieval saga narrative, see, for example, Marianne Kalinke, 'Riddarasögur', in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano (New York: Garland, 1993), 528; Driscoll 2005, 191–94.

both learned tradition and traditional lore and accustomed to moving back and forth between them in creative literary composition. This cultural dualism is most obvious in those *riddarasögur* which cross into the legendary Scandinavian world of the *fornaldarsögur*, where, for example, trolls and berserks fight in armies from Africa and Asia alongside the monstrous races of Pliny, Vincent of Beauvais and Isidore of Seville.[4]

The manuscript evidence indicates that the translated *riddarasögur* remained in circulation in Iceland in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Although often found together with original *riddarasögur*, as, for example, in the early fifteenth-century Stockholm Perg. 4:o nr 6,[5] the influence of translated *riddarasögur* on Icelandic romance is limited essentially to the occasional borrowing of motifs. Some *riddarasögur* nevertheless acknowledge a direct connection. The longer of the two redactions of *Sigurðar saga þǫgla*, for example, makes explicit reference to Flóres's quest for Blankiflúr[6] as related in *Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr* (translated from the Old French *Floire et Blanchefloire*); the 'hybrid' *Samsons saga fagra* concludes with a reference to *Möttuls saga* (here *Skikkju saga*), the Norse ver-

4 See, for example, the black-as-pitch army of Ermedon of Bláland ('Black Land'; Ethiopia) in the longer redaction of *Sigurðar saga þǫgla* (177:6–14), a coalition of giants, dwarves, and trolls, as well as dog-headed men (*Cenoefali*, 177:8) and other recognisable monstrous beings from encyclopedic tradition: the one-eyed Cyclopes, the Blemmyae with eyes in their chests, and the Epiphagi, with eyes in their shoulders. Normalized after Agnete Loth, ed., '*Sigurðar saga þǫgla*', in *Late Mediaeval Icelandic Romances II*, Editiones Arnamagnæanæ, Series B, Vol. 21 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1963), 99:20–100:1. Subsequent references are to this edition of the longer redaction of *Sigurðar saga þǫgla*. On the shorter redaction of this saga and its relationship to the longer version, see Matthew James Driscoll, ed., *Sigurðar saga þǫgla*: the shorter redaction (Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi: Reykjavík, 1992). For a descriptive list of the 'Plinian' monstrous races, see John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 9–23.

5 Preserved in this manuscript, in whole or fragmentary form, are *Amícus saga ok Amilíus*, *Bevers saga*, *Ívens saga*, *Parcevals saga, Valvers þáttr, Mírmanns saga, Flóvents saga, Elis saga ok Rósamundu, Konráðs saga keisarasonar, Þjalar-Jóns saga, Möttuls saga* and *Clári saga*. See Desmond Slay, 'The Original State of Stockholm Perg. 4:o nr 6', in *Afmælisrit Jóns Helgasonar. 30. júni 1969* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1969), 270–87.

6 'King Flóres sought her with many adventures, as is related in his saga' (*hafði Flóres kóngr sott hana með miklum ævintyrum, sem segir í sögu hans*) (99:20–100:1).

sion of the *lai*-cum-*fabliau*, *Le mantel mautaillié*.[7] Elsewhere, motifs from *Tristrams saga* (from Thomas's *Tristan*) and *Ívens saga* (from Chrétien's *Yvain* or *Le Chevalier au lion*, 'the Knight with the Lion') are identifiable in, for example, *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* and both redactions of *Sigurðar saga þǫgla* respectively. There are indications, too, that Icelandic *riddarasögur* writers may have been familiar with the two romances by Chrétien not known to have been translated into Old Norse, *Le chevalier de la charette* and *Cligès*, and Marianne Kalinke has recently argued for the direct influence of Arthurian romance on the structure and ethos of the knightly adventures related in *Ectors saga*.[8] The imprint of *Alexanders saga*,[9] the Icelandic prose translation of Walter de Châtillon's epic Latin poem *Alexandreis*, is evident throughout the corpus. Other vernacular translations from French and Latin with which *riddarasögur* writers were evidently familiar are *Karlamagnús saga*, a collection of translations and adaptations from Old French Carolingian *chansons de geste*, and a group of sagas with historical sources: *Rómverja saga*, a compilation of works by Sallust and Lucan; *Trójumanna saga*, a retelling of the legend of Troy;[10] *Breta sǫgur*, from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, and, possibly, *Gyðinga saga* ('The Saga of the Jews'), the first part of which translates the Vulgate First Book of the Maccabees.[11]

The typical *riddarasaga* hero is a European prince who seeks fame, fortune, a bride and the extension of his power and territory, but the idealistic underpinning of European chivalric romance with its code of

7 Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, ed., '*Samsons saga fagra*', in *Riddarasögur* III (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), 401:17–18.

8 Marianne Kalinke, '*Ectors saga*: An Arthurian Pastiche in Classical Guise', *Arthuriana* 22 (2012), 64–90.

9 On *Alexanders saga*, see David Ashurst, *The Ethics of Empire in the Saga of Alexander the Great: A Study Based on MS AM 519a, 4to*, Studia Islandica 61 (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2009) and David Ashurst and Francesco Vitti, 'Alexander Literature in Scandinavia', in *A Companion to Alexander Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. David Zuwiyya (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 315–28.

10 On the sources of the three redactions of *Trójumanna saga*, see Randi Eldevik, '*Trójumanna saga*', in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano (New York: Garland, 1993), 658.

11 On these historical sagas, see Stefanie Würth, 'Historiography and Pseudo-History', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 163–68.

service, especially to women, is often conspicuously lacking. Although the hero of *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* develops into an exemplary Christian knight, the religious dimension of chivalry, which became the driving force in the Grail quest romances by Robert de Boron, Wolfram von Eschenbach and Thomas Malory, is largely absent. Wholly absent is a Norse Arthurian cycle, that is, a set of Arthurian tales of Icelandic provenance.[12] The only account of King Arthur himself in the Icelandic *riddarasögur* is the brief report in *Kirialax saga* of Arthur's imperial conquests.[13] Constantinople (ON Mikligarðr, 'Big City') takes the place of Camelot as the pre-eminent *locus* of chivalry, ceremony and courtesy.

'Romance', Geraldine Heng has suggested, 'effloresces at a particular historical moment and remakes itself thereafter across a register of contexts – featuring women, children, nations, empires, war, races, classes, sexualities, modernity, travel, places, science and geography, along with the conventional knights, ladies, love and quests of chivalric tales'.[14] For fourteenth- and fifteenth-century composers of English romance that moment, as Heng and other scholars have argued, was the culmination of two centuries of East-West rivalry in the sack of Constantinople by French and English forces of the Fourth Crusade in 1204. Over the next two centuries chivalric romance may have served its writers and audiences as a form of 'cultural rescue' in the bitter aftermath of the Crusades, through, for example, the transfiguration in the Middle English *Richard Coer de Lyon* of the historical trauma of eyewitness reports of cannibalism by soldiers of the First Crusade as a joke which celebrates Richard I of England as 'a magnificent cannibal of a gloriously unapologetic, bellicose kind'.[15]

The authors of Icelandic romance had no comparable history of religious dispute, violated cultural taboos, military failure, territorial conquest or the involvement of their countrymen in the sack of Constantinople

12 On the dissemination of the Arthurian legend in Scandinavia, see Marianne E. Kalinke, ed., *The Arthur of the North: The Arthurian Legend in the Norse and Rus' Realms*, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages V (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011).

13 See Kr. Kålund, ed., *Kirialax saga* (Copenhagen: Samfund til Udgivelse af Gammel Nordisk Litteratur, 1917), 89:12–17.

14 Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 5.

15 Heng 2003, 65.

to address. It is, in fact, likely that the anti-Byzantine propaganda which circulated widely throughout Europe in the tenth and eleventh centuries never reached Iceland. The mutual excommunications in 1054 of papal legate and Patriarch of Constantinople, and other disputes between the Western and Eastern Church, had no discernible impact in Iceland, where the Byzantine emperor continued to be acknowledged as the undisputed ruler of Christendom.[16] Norwegian-Icelandic participation in the crusades was minimal. Sigurðr Magnússon assisted Baldwin of Jerusalem in the capture of Sidon in 1110, but his company was too late for action in the First Crusade, and pilgrimage appears to have been its first priority.[17] There were Danish ships at the siege of Acre in the Third Crusade[18] but no evidence that Scandinavians were among the crusaders who stormed Constantinople in 1204. Constantinople nevertheless plays a substantial role in a number of *riddarasögur* as the capital of Christendom, sometimes vulnerable to external attack but, unlike Camelot, not to internal intrigue and treachery.

Riddarasögur action takes place across the three *partes* of the medieval world, Europe, Africa and Asia. With a few notable exceptions, the Scandinavian North tends to be relegated to the narrative fringes, but templates for the peregrinations of *riddarasögur* heroes can be found in the travels of Scandinavian kings in Old Norse historical sources such as *Fagrskinna*, *Morkinskinna, Heimskringla* and *Orkneyinga saga*. According to *Morkinskinna*, for example, during his adventures before he became king of Norway, Haraldr harðráði (r. 1046–66) travelled from Russia to Constantinople through Wendland, Saxony, France, Lombardy, Rome and Apulia,[19]

16 See Sverrir Jakobsson, 'The Schism that Never Was: Old Norse Views on Byzantium and Russia', *Byzantinoslavica* 1–2 (2008), 173–88.

17 Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A History*, 2nd edn. (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 114.

18 See Richard W. Unger, 'The Northern Crusaders: The Logistics of English and Other Northern Crusader Fleets', in *Logistics of Warfare in the Age of the Crusades*, ed. John H. Pryor (London: Ashgate, 2006), 256, 259.

19 Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, eds., *Morkinskinna*, Íslenzk fornrit XXIII and XXIV (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2011), I: 86–7. Subsequent references and quotations are from this edition.

spent years in 'Africa',[20] fought heathens, campaigned for the Byzantine re-conquest of Sicily and made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.[21] King Sigurðr Jórsalafari Magnússon skirmished with heathen pirates on his journey to the Holy Land, via England, Spain and Sicily.[22] In *Orkneyinga saga*, Rǫgnvaldr kali Kolsson travels from Orkney to England and France, where he enjoys a romantic interlude in Narbonne, engages in skirmishes with pirates off the coast of Moorish Spain and in the Mediterranean, journeys from Crete to the Holy Land and thence to Constantinople.[23]

Who, then, were the *riddarasögur* authors, and what was their inspiration? As Schlauch, Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Glauser have shown, these sagas show substantial evidence of a clerical stamp, not least of which is a wealth of learned material of ultimately Latin origin. The only person connected by name with *riddarasögur* composition is Jón Halldórsson, bishop of Skálholt (1322–39), who is said in the opening words of *Clári saga* (1:1–4)[24] to have discovered that work's alleged Latin verse source in France. There are no named *riddarasögur* dedicatees, but Glauser has argued persuasively for the upper reaches of fourteenth-century Icelandic society as *riddarasögur* commissioners and audiences, with clerics in

20 Bjarni Einarsson, ed., *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sǫgum. Fagrskinna – Nóregs konunga tal*, Íslenzk fornrit XXIX (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1985), 230–31; *Morkinskinna*, I: 93. 'Africa' here probably refers to the Arabic-speaking world of Asia Minor. See Sigfús Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium: An Aspect of Byzantine Military History*, ed. and rev. Benedikt Benedikz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 61–2.

21 *Fagrskinna*, 231–2; *Morkinskinna* I: 95–6, 97–106, 106–8. For English translations of the passages cited here, see Alison Finlay, trans., *Fagrskinna: A Catalogue of the Kings of Norway* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), 185–87; Theodore Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade, trans., *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030–1157)* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), 132, 135–56, 137–44.

22 *Morkinskinna* II: 73–87 (Andersson and Gade 2000, ch. 61); Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, ed., *Heimskringla* I, Íslenzk fornrit XXVIII (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2002), 241–42. Subsequent references are to this 3-volume edition (Íslenzk fornrit XXVI–XXVIII).

23 Finnbogi Guðmundsson, ed., *Orkneyinga saga*, Íslenzk fornrit XXXIV (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1965), 209–35 (chapters 86–88). Subsequent references are to this edition.

24 References are to Gustaf Cederschiöld, ed., *Clári saga*, Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek 12 (Halle: Niemeyer, 1907).

a central role as authors or scribes.[25] The manuscript Stockholm Perg. fol. nr 7 (ca. 1450–1475), which contains eleven complete or fragmentary *riddarasögur*, including *Rémundar saga, Adonias saga, Konráðs saga keisarasonar, Victors saga ok Blávus* and *Ectors saga*, may come from the Möðruvellir monastery in Hörgárdalur and may have been written for the circle of the poet and chieftain Loptr ríki Guttormsson (d. 1432).[26] If the original purpose of monasteries as suggested by Orri Vésteinsson[27] – to serve as retirement homes for aristocrats – continued from the twelfth and thirteenth into the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when there is evidence of lay people retiring to religious houses as paying boarders,[28] they would have provided an hospitable milieu for *riddarasögur* composition. In the absence of our knowledge of individual authors or the compositional specifics of *riddarasögur* writing, which include the creative aspect of medieval scribal practices,[29] the terms 'narrator' and 'writer' are used of the producers of the individual *riddarasögur* texts discussed in this study. Three of these – *Dínus saga drambláta*, *Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns* and *Sigurðar saga þǫgla* – survive in more than one redaction; unless otherwise indicated, references are to the longest and earliest.

The springboard for the approach to the *riddarasögur* under discussion in this study is another provocative observation by Margaret Schlauch about their literary value: 'At most we can suggest', she remarks, as a possible explanation for the impetus to *riddarasögur* composition, 'that Icelanders may have welcomed the unreality and the imaginative fantasy of the *lygisögur* as a sort of intellectual narcotic which gave them release

25 Glauser 1983, 64–78.

26 Glauser 1983, 76. For a detailed discussion of the provenance, composition and contents of this manuscript, see the introduction to Christopher Sanders, ed., *Tales of Knights: Perg. fol. nr 7 in the Royal Library Stockholm* (*AM 567 β 4to, NKS 1265 II c fol.*) (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 2000).

27 Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland: Priests, Power, and Social Change 1000–1300* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 140–43.

28 Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 143.

29 For some recent discussions of this question, with particular reference to Old Norse literature, see the essays in Part Three ('Modes of Authorship in Old Norse Literature') and Four ('Scribes, Redactors, Translators, and Compilers as Authors') of Slavica Ranković, ed., *Modes of Authorship in the Middle Ages*, Papers in Mediaeval Studies 22 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2012).