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THE REALITY OF THE FANTASTIC

The Magical, Political and Social Universe of Late Medieval Saga Manuscripts

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Abbreviations

ÁnÁn Áns saga bogsveigis
BósBós Bósa saga ok Herrauðs
DI DI Diplomatarium Islandicum
DN DN Diplomatarium Norvegicum
EgÁsm Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana
FlórKon Flóress saga konungs ok sona hans
GrL Grímss saga loðinkinna
HálfdEyst Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar
Ket Ketils saga hængs
Kjaln Kjalnesinga saga
MeistPer Perus saga meistara
Krók Króka-Refs saga
Sams Samson’s saga fagra
Saulus Sáluss saga ok Nikanórs
Vikt Viktors saga ok Blávuss
Vilm Vilmundar saga viðutan
VSj Vilhjalms saga sjóðs
Yngv Yngvars saga víðförla
ÞórðÞórð Þórðar saga hreðu
ÞorstBm Þorsteins þáttar bæjarmagns
Örv Örvar-Odds saga (long version)
Örvb Örvar-Odds saga (short version)
Introduction
The advent of more anthropologically inspired perspectives in saga studies from the 1970s onwards once more opened this field to historians eager to try to uncover the realities behind the sagas of Icelanders, from which they had been cut off since the Book Prose theory became dominant around 1940. Yet even in this more recent period interest has almost exclusively centred on the so-called ‘historical’ or ‘realistic’ saga genres such as sagas of Icelanders and king’s sagas, whereas less attention has been devoted to the ‘fantastic’ genres such as riddarasögur (chivalric sagas), fornaldarsögur (legendary sagas) and fornsögur suðrlanda (romances). As these latter genres were considered as lacking in originality, being either translations or stereotyped adventures, the verdict passed on them has been particularly negative. Moreover, most of the attention has been focused on the alleged time when sagas were written, even though we hardly ever have ‘original’ versions extant. The fact that surviving versions postdate the originals, sometimes by centuries, and that these versions normally show considerable variation, has seldom aroused interest or attention among historians.

In recent decades some scholars have challenged these shortcomings and ventured in new directions. Legendary sagas have been the subject of several studies and conferences, and under the auspices of the so-called New Philology, differing saga versions and the process of transmission of texts have been explored. Nonetheless, these tendencies have hardly reached historians, who still tend to look with suspicion on ‘non-realistic’ sagas and normally build their investigations on alleged ‘originals’. My aim is to address this mixture of ignorance and scepticism on the part of the historians by studying manuscripts of legendary sagas and romances as historical sources. This implies a departure from two common concepts/methods normally endorsed among historians: sagas and genres. First of all, my focus will be on specific versions of sagas as they are found in concrete manuscripts. This means that a saga can be viewed not only as a
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separate entity, but also as part of a whole, namely a manuscript (normally containing more than one saga). A second consequence is that the mandatory genre debate relating in particular to fornaldarsögur and fornðöguðuðraðt af þeim can be avoided. As these labels are modern inventions, and the concrete sagas appear in different manuscripts without any order reflecting these divisions, focus can instead be put on the sagas in manuscripts, or better: on manuscripts as wholes.

The shift of attention from original texts to manuscripts coincides with a shift of focus from high medieval Norway and Iceland to Iceland in the late Middle Ages, when most of the surviving vellum manuscripts were written down. Traditionally this period has been viewed as one of decay both historically and literarily in Iceland. Many scholars have stated or implied that when the island lost its independence it thereby also lost its literary vigour, and its inhabitants retreated into the realm of the fantastic for consolation in light of the harsh and unbearable realities.\(^1\) Apart from the tight connection implied between historical and literary development in this perspective, it contains a heavy bias in favour of the modern predilections of literary realism and originality, and a concomitant condemnation of fantasy and supposed interpolation. If we instead choose to work from what we know for certain, namely the manuscripts, and try to avoid being guided by modern literary tastes, we may agree with Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson that 'it was the fourteenth century that was the golden age of manuscript production in Iceland'\(^2\) – and as Shaun Hughes has suggested, this golden age can very well be expanded until 1700.\(^3\) Moreover, if we dismiss the modern idea of national sovereignty, Iceland in the fifteenth

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3 Hughes states that this golden age actually continued until 1700 if we include genres
Introduction

century emerges as a prosperous region, with plenty of fish, and situated in the midst of an economic rivalry between English and Hanseatic merchants that resulted in an economic boom superseded only in modern times. Acknowledging this opens up the opportunity of studying this literature not as a sign of decay and escape, but as a source for the ideology and the mentality of those who produced it and listened to it. Jónas Kristjánsson was one of the first to admit that fornaldarsögur suðrlanda have their qualities and deserve more respect and study than they have had, but it is mainly through seminal studies like Jürg Glauser’s Isländische Märchensagas: Studien zur Prosliteratur im spätmittelalterlichen Island (Basel, 1983), Stephen Mitchell’s Heroic Sagas and Ballads (Ithaca and London, 1991) and Torfi H. Tulinius’s The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-century Iceland (Odense, 2002) that these genres have had their Renaissance.

The main manuscript to be investigated in this analysis is AM 343a 4to. This is a huge manuscript containing fifteen sagas: nine fornaldarsögur, five fornsögur suðrlanda, and one æfintýr (moral fable). It was probably written in an active literary milieu at a farm known as Möðruvellir fram in a valley south of Eyjafjörðr in northern Iceland in the third quarter of the fifteenth century. Through analyses of scribal hands, Stefán Karlsson and Christopher Sanders have identified several other manuscripts from this farm, which I will return to in greater detail later (see pp. 81–84).

such as fornsögur suðrlanda and rímur. See Shaun F. D. Hughes, ‘Late Secular Poetry’, in A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture, p. 219.

4 Björn Borsteinsson, Æska öldin í sögu Íslandinga (Reykjavík, 1970).


6 The sagas in AM 343a 4to are the following: Borsteins hátt rægmagns, Samsons saga fagra, Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjahana, Flóress saga konungs ok soma hans, Vilhjálms saga sjóðs, Yngvars saga viðförra, Ketils saga hangu, Grims saga loðínkinna, Ósrar-Odds saga, Áns saga bogsveigs, Sáluss saga ok Nikanórs, Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar, Bósa saga ok Herrauðs, Vilmundar saga viðtuman and Perus saga Meistara.

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In the first part of this investigation AM 343a 4to will be analysed in detail, both as a textual entity and as a historical record. The results will then be compared to analyses of two other manuscripts. One of these, AM 471 4to, dates from the same period but was probably written at a farm called Hvílf in Önundarfirði in the north-western part of Iceland (see pp. 231–233). It contains several of the same sagas as AM 343a 4to in rather similar versions, but also other sagas, which makes it suitable for comparing both similarities and differences between roughly contemporaneous manuscripts (i.e. a synchronic analysis). By contrast, Holm perg 7 4to from the early fourteenth century contains a radically different version of Örvar-Odds saga from the one in AM 343a 4to (see pp. 271–274). The huge differences within the same saga, as well as the differing sagas coexisting with it in the respective manuscripts, provide an excellent opportunity to study change in time, i.e. diachronically. Thus, a major goal of this investigation is to study manuscript texts as historical records and as evidence of historical changes in late medieval Iceland. Very few analyses of this kind have been undertaken previously, apart from studies of manuscripts such as Hauksbók and Flateyjarbók, where the historical context can be specified with great certainty. Diachronic analyses have been

8 AM 471 4to comprises the three first Hrafnista sagas, as well as three late sagas of Icelanders (Þórðar saga hreðu, Króka-Refs saga and Kjalnesinga saga) and one fornsaga suðrlanda (Viktors saga ok Blávus).

9 In Holm perg 7 4to, Örvar-Odds saga figures together with Konráðs saga keisara-sonar, Hrólf’s saga Gautrekssonar, Jómsvíkinga saga, Æmundar saga kappabana, Örvar-Odds saga and (fragments of) Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar.

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somewhat more common in the wake of New Philology, but few have dis-
cussed such changes in the context of the manuscripts in which sagas are
situated.11

In the rest of this introduction I will first discuss the challenges of
using legendary sagas and romances as historical sources from a philo-
logical and historical point of view before turning to three dimensions or
themes to be studied in the manuscripts: the magical, the political and the
social. All aspects will be analysed from a centre-periphery perspective
(see pp. 45–57). I will also explain three different readings or interpreta-
tions of the manuscripts that form the core of and underlie the progression
of the analysis: a narrative mode focusing on ideology, a structural read-
ing with focus on underlying myths, and finally, a processual reading of
the manuscripts as efforts to negotiate differing and often contradictory
impulses.

11 Recent examples of this are Elise Kleivane, Reproduksjon av norrøne tekstar i sein-
mellomalderen: variasjon i Eiríks saga víðförla (unpublished doctoral dissertation,
Oslo, 2010); Emily Lethbridge, Narrative Variation in the Versions of Gísla saga
Súrssonar (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Cambridge, 2008); ‘The Place of Por-
steins saga Vikingssonar in Eggertsbók, a Late Medieval Icelandic Saga-Book’, in The
Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development, ed. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney and Ár-
mann Jakobsson, (Reykjavík, 2012), pp. 375–404; Massimiliano Bampi, ‘In Praise of
the Copy, Karl Magnus in 15th-century Sweden’, in Lärdomber oc skämptan: Medi-
eval Swedish Literature Reconsidered, ed. Massimiliano Bampi and Fulvio Ferrari
(Uppsala, 2008), pp. 11–34, and studies of changes in Örvar-Odds saga to be discussed
further below. Particularly interesting in the last decade has been the effort to trace
changes in translations of riddarasögur into Old Norse: see Stefka G. Eriksen, Writing
and Reading in Medieval Manuscript Culture: The Translation and Transmission of
the Story of Elye in Old French and Old Norse Literary Contexts (Turnhout, 2014);
Suzanne Marti, Kingship, Chivalry and Religion in the Perceval Matter: An Analysis
of the Old Norse and Middle English Translations of Le Conte Du Graal (unpublished
doctoral dissertation, Oslo, 2011); Massimiliano Bampi, ‘Translating Courtly Literat-
ure and Ideology in Medieval Sweden: Flores och Blanzeflor’, Viking and Medieval