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Volume 23

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THE REALITY OF THE FANTASTIC

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

UNIVERSITY PRESS OF SOUTHERN DENMARK
2017

Typesetting by Florian Grammel, Copenhagen
Printed by Special-Trykkeriet Viborg a-s
ISBN 978-87-7674-935-4
ISSN 0108-8408

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Acknowledgments

Writing this book has been a long and winding road. It began with the project *Translation, Transmission and Transformation: Old Norse Romantic Fiction and Scandinavian Vernacular Literacy 1200–1500*, led by Professor Karl Gunnar Johansson at the Institute for Linguistics and Nordic Studies at the University of Oslo and funded by the Research Council of Norway. This financial support made it possible for me to do the fundamental work for this book in the years 2008–2012. The project group gave me invaluable help as a historian to plunge into the rough terrain of New Philology and late medieval Icelandic manuscripts. Big thanks to Terje Spurkland, Stefka Eriksen, Karoline Kjesrud and Suzanne Marti for help, inspiration, discussions and good company. A special thanks to Kalle for invaluable help with manuscripts, and to Bjørn Bandlien for stimulating me and inspiring me to explore the diplomas.

Many people have helped me on my way in this process by reading large parts of the manuscript. Helle Vogt (University of Copenhagen) and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (University of Oslo) have commented on the entire manuscript and have given me valuable comments from their diverse perspectives. Ole-Albert Rønning and Søren Døpker have also read parts of the manuscript.

I have written more than a dozen articles and presented at a number of conferences which have involved parts of this book, and this has given me much-needed feedback. I particularly want to thank Keith Busby, Stephen D. White, William Ian Miller, Barbara Crawford, Barbara Rosenwein, John Hudson, Michael Penman, Ármann Jakobsson, Torfi Tulinius, Jürg Glauser, Stefanie Gropper, Fulvio Ferrari, Massimiliano Bampi, Wojtek Jezierski, Lars Hermanson and Steinar Imsen for inviting me to conferences and/or reading parts of the manuscript.

Much of the hard work on this book was done at the University College of Volda. I appreciate the generosity of my colleagues at the Historical Institute there as daily discussion partners, in particular Arnfinn Kjelland

and Atle Døssland. Philologist Bernt-Øyvind Thorvaldsen took many long walks with me, listening patiently to my endless talk about why AM 343a 4to never seemed to yield any sense – until finally it did.

The editorial board of the Viking Collection, the University Press of Southern Denmark, have been exemplary in offering feedback and support. Mats Malm, Margaret Clunies Ross and Matthew Driscoll have kept close watch on me in this process, thanks! Florian Grammel has been very helpful and extraordinarily careful in keeping track during the final phase. The anonymous peer reviewer also gave me useful comments.

The Research Council of Norway funded the main bulk of this project, and also contributed with financial support for publishing this book. Thanks also to the Caledonian Research Fund, which supported my final round of working on this book, and to John Hudson at University of St. Andrews for nominating me.

Kate Gilbert has proofread the book, although 'proofreading' is an understatement when judging Kate's work, which often tends towards 'rewriting,' but then always for the better, and always being loyal to the text. Of course mistakes in the text are my sole responsibility.

Finally, my wife Marte, my children Halvdan and Sverre, and my parents, Sissel and Otto, deserve big hugs for taking care of me, supporting me, bearing with me, and giving me glimpses into other realities than that of the fantastic.

Abbreviations

Án	Áns saga bogsveigis
Bós	Bósa saga ok Herrauðs
DI	Diplomatarium Islandicum
DN	Diplomatarium Norvegicum
EgÁsm	Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana
FlórKon	Flóress saga konungs ok sona hans
GrL	Gríms saga loðinkinna
HálfdEyst	Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar
Ket	Ketils saga hængs
Kjaln	Kjalnesinga saga
MeistPer	Perus saga meistara
Krók	Króka-Refs saga
Sams	Samsons saga fagra
Saulus	Sáluss saga ok Nikanórs
Vikt	Viktors saga ok Blávuss
Vilm	Vilmundar saga viðutan
VSj	Vilhjalms saga sjóðs
Yngv	Yngvars saga víðförla
Þórð	Þórðar saga hreðu
ÞorstBm	Þorsteins þáttr 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

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 fornsögur suðrlanda 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

1 This is the general image given by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *The Age of the Sturlungs*, trans. Jóhann S. Hannesson (Ithaca and New York, 1953); Sigurður Nordal, *Icelandic Culture* (New York, 1990); Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie III* (København, 1924); Jón Helgason, *Norrøn litteraturhistorie* (København, 1934). See also Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Gautrek's saga and Other Medieval Tales* (London and New York, 1968), p. 14; Geraldine Barnes, 'Margin vs. Centre: Geopolitics in *Nitida saga* (A Cosmographical Comedy?)', in *Abstracts of Papers for the Thirteenth International Saga Conference* (Durham and York, 2006). www.sagaconference.org/SC13/SC13.html (visited 11.01.2017)

2 Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson, 'Manuscripts and Palaeography', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford, 2005), p. 250.

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

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.[4] 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',[5] but it is mainly through seminal studies like Jürg Glauser's *Isländische Märchensagas: Studien zur Prosaliteratur 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).[6] 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).[7]

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 Þorsteinsson, *Enska öldin í sögu Íslendinga* (Reykjavík, 1970).

5 Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas: Iceland's Medieval Literature* (Reykjavík, 2007), p. 339.

6 The sagas in AM 343a 4to are the following: *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns, Samsons saga fagra, Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana, Flóress saga konungs ok sona hans, Vilhjálms saga sjóðs, Yngvars saga víðförla, Ketils saga hængs, Gríms saga loðinkinna, Örvar-Odds saga, Áns saga bogsveigis, Sáluss saga ok Nikanórs, Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar, Bósa saga ok Herrauðs, Vilmundar saga viðutan* and *Perus saga Meistara*.

7 Stefán Karlsson, 'The Localization and Dating of Medieval Icelandic Manuscripts', *Saga-Book* 25 (1998–2001), pp. 138–158; Christopher Sanders, *Tales of Knights: Perg. Fol nr. 7 in the Royal Library, Stockholm* (Copenhagen, 2000). Probably several other manuscripts were produced in this environment: see Sanders, *Tales of Knights*, pp. 41–44.

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 Hvílft 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).[8] 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).[9] 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.[10] 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 keisarasonar*, *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, *Jómsvíkinga saga*, *Ásmundar saga kappabana*, *Örvar-Odds saga* and (fragments of) *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*.

10 Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, *The Development of Flateyjarbók. Iceland and the Norwegian Dynastic Crisis of 1389* (Odense, 2005); Karl Gunnar Johansson, 'Delen och helheten i medeltidens handskriftkultur – Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs och Hauksbók', in *'Vi ska alla vara välkomna'. Nordiska studier tillägnade Kristinn Jóhannesson*, ed. Auður Magnúsdóttir, Henrik Janson, Karl Gunnar Johansson, Mats Malm and Lena Rogström (Göteborg, 2008); Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Hauksbók and the Construction of an Icelandic World View', *Saga-Book* 31 (2007), pp. 22–38; Alaric Hall, 'Changing Style and Changing Meaning: Icelandic Historiography and the Medieval Redactions of *Heiðreks Saga*', *Scandinavian Studies* 77 (2005), pp. 1–30. Some inspiring new approaches are Lasse Mårtensson, *AM 557 4to: Studier i en isländsk samlingshandskrift från 1400-talet* (Uppsala, 2007); Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Ideology and Identity in Late Medieval Northwest Iceland: A Study of AM 152 fol.', *Gripla* 25 (2014), pp. 87–128.

somewhat more common in the wake of New Philology, but few have discussed 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 philological 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 interpretations of the manuscripts that form the core of and underlie the progression of the analysis: a narrative mode focusing on ideology, a structural reading 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 seinmellomalderen: variasjon i Eiríks saga viðfǫrla* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Oslo, 2010); Emily Lethbridge, *Narrative Variation in the Versions of Gísla saga Súrssonar* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Cambridge, 2008); 'The Place of *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* in Eggertsbók, a Late Medieval Icelandic Saga-Book', in *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, ed. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney and Ármann Jakobsson, (Reykjavík, 2012), pp. 375–404; Massimiliano Bampi, 'In Praise of the Copy. *Karl Magnus* in 15th-century Sweden', in *Lärdomber oc skämptan: Medieval 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 Literature and Ideology in Medieval Sweden: *Flores och Blanzeflor*', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 4 (2008), pp. 1–14.