



What's truth got to do with it?

Views on the historicity of the sagas

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Published in:
Skemmtligastar lygisögur

Publication date:
2012

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Driscoll, M. J. (2012). What's truth got to do with it? Views on the historicity of the sagas. In T. N. Jackson, & E. A. Melnikova (Eds.), *Skemmtligastar lygisögur: Studies in Honour of Galina Glazyrina* (pp. 15-27). Moscow: Dimitriy Pozharskiy University.

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What's truth got to do with it?

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There is probably no question more fundamental than that of truth. What is truth? And which stories, in the vast ocean of stories, are true and which are not? And how are we, the readers, or hearers, of these stories, to tell the difference? And does it matter? Does a good story need to be true?

The Icelanders were well known even in the middle ages as great story-tellers — and as keepers of tradition, rememberers of past events. Saxo Grammaticus, writing around 1200, mentions in the Preface to his *Gesta Danorum* the industriousness with which the Icelanders cultivate the memory not only of their own history but that of surrounding nations as well:

Nec Tylensium industria silentio oblitteranda: qui cum ob nativam soli sterilitatem luxuriae nutrimentis carentes officia continuaе sobrietatis exerceant omniaque vitae momenta ad excolendam alienorum operum notitiam conferre soleant, inopiam ingenio pensant. Cunctarum quippe nationum res gestas cognosse memoriaeque mandare voluptatis loco reputant, non minoris gloriae iudicantes alienas virtutes disserere quam proprias exhibere. Quorum thesauros historicarum rerum pignoribus refertos curiosius consulens, haud parvam praesentis operis partem ex eorum relationis imitatione contexui, nec arbitros habere contempsi, quos tanta vetustatis peritia callere cognovi¹.

This passage has been the object of much scholarly scrutiny, principally as it seems to point to the existence of narratives not unlike the mythical-heroic sagas which came to be known as *fornaldarsögur norðurlanda* — but a good century before we have any evidence for the existence of such sagas in written form. The *relationes* to which Saxo refers, then, are most likely to have been in oral form. Few will deny that such oral narratives must have existed, but what were they like? More specifically, to what extent did they resemble the *fornaldarsögur* we have today, most of which are thought to have been written down in the 14th or 15th centuries, or even later? And finally, how reliable a source were they? Were they just stories, or did they retain at least a kernel of truth.

¹ Olrik, J. & Ræder, H., eds., *Saxonis Gesta Danorum* (Hauniæ, 1931), p. 5.

Before the rise of philology in the 18th century, the *fornaldarsögur* and other principal saga genres (the Kings' sagas and Sagas of Icelanders) were generally regarded — and, after their (re-)discovery in the wake of Humanism in the late 16th century, extensively used — as reliable historical sources.

When Arngrímur Jónsson (1568–1648) arrived in Copenhagen in 1592 looking for a publisher for his *Brevis commentarius de Islandia*, a work intended to defend the honour of Iceland in the face of calumnies then circulating abroad, he met with the principal Danish historians of the time, who, remembering Saxo's praise of *Ty-lensium industria*, were keen to find out what information might be available in Iceland on the early history of Denmark. Arngrímur subsequently provided them with extracts from Icelandic texts, including, in the words of Jakob Benediktsson, "the most extravagant exaggerations and fantastic tales", all of which he was prepared to accept. This was partially due to the absolute trust placed by the humanists in the written word, but also, says Jakob, to the Icelanders' "unshakable conviction of the truthfulness and historical authenticity of the Icelandic sagas, a conviction which, we may note in passing, has been held since by many people with better opportunities than A[rngrímur] J[ónsson] to acquire a critical sense"².

This brought the richness of medieval Icelandic literature, in particular the *fornaldarsögur*, to the attention of historians in Denmark and Sweden, and further afield, in Germany, all of whom sought to mine it for information on the early histories of their own nations³.

Þórmóður Torfason (1636–1719), perhaps better known as Torfæus, worked for much of his life as Royal Historian of the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway on compiling extensive histories of early Scandinavia on the basis of then little-known Icelandic sources, producing the two major works *Series dynastarum et regum Daniae* (Copenhagen, 1702) and *Historia rerum Norvegicarum* (Copenhagen, 1711), both in four large folio volumes, and much else besides. His sources included both Kings' sagas and *fornaldarsögur* and he, like Arngrímur, was perhaps rather less critical in his use of them than we would like, being generally prepared to accept even the most fanciful depictions as historically reliable⁴.

For this he was criticised by his younger contemporary, fellow Icelander Árni Magnússon (1663–1730), who, in a letter written on the 4th of September 1690, expresses his reticence concerning a number of sagas, all *fornaldarsögur*, for the simple reason that neither the names nor the events they depict appear in the writings of more trustworthy authors. These sagas were composed as late as the fourteenth century, he says, and yet their authors purport to know things which were unknown to older authors like Ari fróði and Snorri Sturluson:

² Jakob Benediktsson, ed., *Arngrimi Jonae opera latine conscripta* I-IV, Bibliotheca Arnarnagana IX–XII (Havniæ, 1950–57), IV, p. 52.

³ Springborg, Peter, "Antiquvæ historiae lepores — om renæssancen i den islandske håndskriftproduktion i 1600-tallet", *Gardar* VIII (1977), pp. 67–71; Jakob Benediktsson, "Den vågnende interesse for sagalitteraturen på Island i 1600-tallet", *Maal og Minne* (1981), p. 167.

⁴ Ólafur Halldórsson, "Samskipti Þórmóðar Torfasonar og Árna Magnússonar", *Skáldskaparmál* II (1992), pp. 5–19.

Eg held miög lited af Hrolfsögu Gautrekssonar, Bosasögu, Þorsteins Vikingssonar, Hervarar Sturlaugs starfssama, et similibus [Eigle einhendta, Fridþjofi, Halfdani Eysteinnss., Hakoni Norræna, Sörla Sterka, Örvar Oddi *added in margin*]. Kiemur mest til þess, ad eg finn hvörke þeirra nöfn nie res gestas, sem þær innehallda, hia neinum truverdugum citerud, sem þo um flestar adrar vorar sögur finnst kann; giefur mier það þanka, ad þær mune skrifadar vera seculo decimo quarto, hvad ef er, þa er audsien þeirra truverdugleiki, ad þeirra autores skilldu vita það, sem Snorri, Ari frodi etc. alldreii höfdu heirt neitt um⁵.

Torfæus continued his endeavours undeterred, and in a letter to Árni Magnússon dated 11 December 1698 he explains that he wanted to add a fourth volume to the *Series* containing some of the Icelandic sources Saxo had used:

Jeg er kominn i þanka at lata verda fiorar bækur, su fiorda um fabulas, sem Saxo hefur seqverat nochurneigen ad uppschrifa, sidan jeg hefi hafft so mikid omak firir þeim, enn þar apposite ad syna, hvad hann hefur seqverat; svo er eg fri, at jeg eigi hef blandat historiunne med fabulis, enn vise hans fundamenta⁶.

Among those he intended to include, he said, were “alla Hrolfs kraka sögu, so sem jeg hefi hana sammamschriðad, og oratiunculas periphraðicerat”⁷. Árni suggested that Torfæus should only include an abstract of *Hrólfs saga* rather than the whole thing, which would only spoil an otherwise good book; “hvör vill og so vitlöftuga fabulam forliggia undir þrick, ef hann veit, hvad hann prenta lætur”, he asks, “og hvör vill lesa fabulam vitlöftugt diducerada?” Answer: “Einginn”⁸.

Torfæus followed his advice, but eventually, in 1705, published his translation of *Hrólfs saga* anyway, in a small octavo volume he had printed at his own expense⁹.

In Sweden, interest in Old Norse-Icelandic literature as a source of history was no less keen, and focused almost entirely on the *fornaldarsögur*. In 1667 the *Antikvitetskollegium* was founded to pursue research into philology, history and archaeology. Two Icelanders, Jón Jónsson Rúgman (1636–1679) and Jón Eggertsson (1643 or 1644–1689), supplied the *kollegium* with manuscripts and assisted in the production of editions and translations¹⁰.

Olof Verelius (1618–1682), Professor of Swedish antiquities at Uppsala University and member of the *Antikvitetskollegium*, made extensive use of the newly acquired manuscripts and produced a number of editions, starting with *Gautreks saga* and *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, published as *Gothrici & Rolfi Westrogothiæ regum historia lingua antiqua Gothica conscripta* in 1664, presenting the Icelandic texts parallel with Latin and Swedish translations and accompanied by extensive notes. These were the first two Icelandic texts ever to appear in a printed edition, and were quickly

⁵ Kålund, Kr., ed., *Arne Magnusson, Brevveksling med Torfæus (Þormóður Torfason)* (København, 1916), p. 66.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

⁹ Lansing, Tereza, *Post-medieval production, dissemination and reception of Hrólf's saga kraka* [PhD diss.] (Copenhagen, 2011), 15–19; Már Jónsson, *Arnas Magnæus philologus* (Odense, forthcoming).

¹⁰ Wallette, Anna, *Sagans svenskar: Synen på vikingatiden och de isländska sagorna under 300 år* (Malmö, 2004), pp. 92–96.

followed by editions of *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* in 1666 and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* in 1672. By the end of the century editions of 15 *fornaldarsögur* had appeared. These editions were based on whatever manuscripts were available, and although, for example, the more obscene passages from *Bósa saga* were suppressed in the edition, no attempt was made to distinguish fact from fiction. Quite the opposite, in fact: the learned commentary often went to great lengths to argue for the veracity of seemingly improbable statements. In the introduction to *Herrauðs och Bosa saga*, for example, Verelius says that “man måste besinna hwad grufwelig troldom här hafwer wankat i hedendomen / at man intet hafwer hålltt sälsamt eller vndrat vppå / thär nogon hafwer giort sig osynlig / eller förwänt sig vthi en annan hamn” — one finds such things in the Old Testament and the work of the ancients too — “thenne Saga therfore ey må hållas för osann / thär hon nogot om sådant förtälier”¹¹.

As reflected in the titles of most of these editions, the language of the sagas is described as “Gambla Götskan”, the language of the ancient Goths — the Hyperboreans of the ancients — and thus the ancestor of modern Swedish. The high — or, if you will, low — point of Gothicist antiquarian endeavour was without doubt reached with the publication of *Atlantica*, by Verelius’s student Olof Rudbeck (1630–1702), in which it is demonstrated, using Old Icelandic literature as part of the argumentation, that Plato’s sunken city of Atlantis is to be identified as Sweden, with its old capital at Gamla Uppsala¹².

Scholars of the romantic period also took an interest in the sagas. In Denmark, we may mention Peter Erasmus Müller (1776–1834), professor of theology at the University of Copenhagen and from 1830 Bishop of Sjælland. Müller had a keen interest in Scandinavian antiquities, the chief fruit of which was his *Sagabibliothek*¹³, scarcely remembered today but a remarkable work for its time. Müller read virtually the entirety of Old Norse-Icelandic saga literature — much of it at that point still available only in manuscript. He divided the sagas into three basic types, “mystiske sagaer”, “historiske sagaer” and “fabelaktige sagaer” and provided a short summary of and commentary on each saga. The first volume of *Sagabibliothek* included a section entitled “Almindelige Bemærkninger om Reglerne, hvorefter de islandske Sagaers Ægthed kunde bestemmes”. These could be external, such as the nature of the support (parchment or paper), or internal, e.g. simple syntax, absence of loanwords such as “kurteisi” or the inclusion of exact topographical information, all of which argued in favour of a saga’s authenticity — whereas protestations by the narrator of the truthfulness of the narrative were a sure sign of the opposite. Although general improbability was a bad sign, one needed to distinguish between stories that were untruthful (*usandfærdige*) and ones that were untrue (*usande*) — a truthful story needn’t always be true¹⁴.

¹¹ *Herrauðs och Bosa saga* 1666, [iv-v]; see also Mundal, Else, *Sagadebatt* (Oslo, 1977), pp. 12–13; Wallette, *Sagans svenskar*, pp. 96–97.

¹² Wallette, *Sagans svenskar*, pp. 127–67.

¹³ Müller, Peter Erasmus, *Sagabibliothek med Anmærkninger og indledende Afhandlinger* I-III (Kjøbenhavn, 1817–20).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 15–33; Andersson, Theodore M., *The problem of Icelandic saga origins* (New Haven/London, 1964), pp. 25–30.

Freeprose vs. Bookprose

The terms *Freiproza* and *Buchprosa*, usually referred to as Freeprose and Bookprose in English, were first used by the Swiss scholar Andreas Heusler (1865–1940) in his book *Die Anfänge der isländischen Saga*¹⁵ to describe the two opposing schools of thought regarding the origin and development of the Icelandic sagas, in particular with regard to the degree to which oral tradition played a role in their early history. Proponents of the former believed the sagas to have achieved a relatively fixed form early on and then been passed on orally over several centuries, largely unchanged, until committed to parchment in the 13th century: “Bei vielen Sagas”, wrote Heusler, himself a Freiprosist, ”denkt man zuerst an ein Diktat: das Pergament fängt die gehörte Sprache des Geschichtenmannes mit der Treue des Phonographen auf”¹⁶. Because these texts had been preserved verbatim over many generations they were thought likely to be reliable records of past events. Adherents of the latter theory, on the other hand, saw the sagas as works of literature, created in Iceland in the 13th century by individual authors who would have regarded themselves as such, rather than as preservers of ancient lore. Although oral tradition may have been one of the sources used by these authors it was handled freely by them, and the sagas therefore had little or no value as history¹⁷.

Adherents of the Freeprosisist camp have included a number of Germans (or German-speakers), such as Heusler, as was mentioned, Rudolf Meissner (1863–1948) and Gustav Neckel (1878–1940), but the theory is associated especially with Norwegians, starting with P. A. Munch (1810–1863), who made scattered references to the sagas having originated in Norway and then been written down, not always correctly, in Iceland. The chief exponent of the Freeprosisist school was Rudolf Keyser (1803–1864), however. In his book *Nordmændenes Videnskabelighed og Literatur i Middelalderen*, published two years after his death, he argued that in their written form the more historical sagas at least (the King’s sagas and *Íslendingasögur*) were faithful representations of (Norwegian) oral tradition; the scribe who committed them to parchment used only his pen; the thoughts and words belonged to the tradition¹⁸.

Den historiske Saga havde baade i Norge og paa Island samt i de øvrige af Nordmænd befolkede Lande antaget en fast afrundet Form i det mundtlige Foredrag, længe før den blev ført i Pennen¹⁹.

He says that the first written sagas were relatively short and simple, but gradually became more complicated. The writer’s role remained the same, however: “Imidlertid vedblev stedse Sagaskriveren at spille en fuldkommen underordnet Rolle, idet han kun tog Sagnet, oftest ganske ordret, saaledes som han hørte det af

¹⁵ Heusler, Andreas, *Die Anfänge der isländischen Saga* (Berlin, 1914), pp. 54–55.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁷ In general see Andersson, *The problem of Icelandic saga origins*; Mundal, *Sagadebatt*; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, “Íslenski skólinn”, *Skírnir* 146 (1991), pp. 103–29.

¹⁸ Keyser, Rudolf, *Efterladte skrifter I-II* (Christiania, 1866–67), p. 15.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

en Fortællers Mund eller allerede fandt det optegnet for sig, og indførte det i en fuldstændig given Skikkelse i sit skrevne Arbeide”²⁰.

It was clear that the Kings’ sagas, although “oprindelig udgangne fra og sammansatte i Norge”, had been “bearbejdede af Islændinger”. He is quite certain, however, that “de islandske Sagamænd og Sagaskrivere [tillode] sig vistnok høist sjælden at forandre Formen, Sproget og Tonen i de Sagn, de havde lært i Norge, og af hvilke de sammensatte sine større Sagaverker”. As a result of this, “Anskuelserne af og Dommene om Handlinger og Begivenheder ere Nordmænds, den norske Almeenheds, ikke Islændingernes”²¹.

Although the Bookprose theory is first and foremost associated with Iceland and the so-called “Icelandic school”, about which more will be said presently, its origins can be traced to the German scholar Konrad Maurer (1823–1902), in particular his book *Ueber die Hænsa-Þóris saga*²², in which he compared passages dealing with the same events in *Hænsa-Þóris saga* and in *Landnámabók* and came to the conclusion that the saga, and probably the sagas generally, were the written products of individual authors who treated their sources, both oral and written, freely, and were therefore not to be regarded as reliable historical witnesses in comparison to works like *Landnámabók*.

Björn M. Ólsen (1850–1919), first professor of Icelandic at the newly established Háskóli Íslands, wrote a series of articles in *Aarbøger for nordisk oldkyndighed og historie* comparing *Landnáma* with various *Íslendingasögur*, starting in 1904 with *Egils saga* and culminating in 1911 with a study of *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* published by Videnskaberne’s selskab. Here he reaches the conclusion that it is clear that “höfundur hefur farið frjállega með það sagnaefni sem hann hafði og aukið í það skáldskap”. Because of this, he says, it is also clear that “saga sem tekið hefur slíka afstöðu til þess efnis sem lá fyrir getur að litlu leyti gert kröfu til að teljast trúverðug sem sagnfræðiheimild og verður að nota hana af mikilli varúð sem slíka”²³.

In his lectures on the sagas, delivered in the years 1913–1914 but not collected and published until 1937–1939, he expresses the same view:

Því betur sem vjer lesum sögur vorar ofan í kjölinn, því dípra sem vjer sökkvum oss ofan í þær, því nákvæmar sem vjer rannsöku þær, því betur munum vjer komast að raun um, að þær eru listaverk, og að listamaður hefur haldið á pennanum, sem festi þær á bókfell²⁴.

The “Icelandic school”

The term “Icelandic school” (“den islandske skole”) was first used in print in 1939 in an article in *Maal og Minne* by Hallvard Lie, who added, “eller kort og godt ‘Nordals skole’, hvormed man har villet uttrykke et eksisterende grunnsyn-

²⁰ Keyser, Rudolf, *Efterladte skrifter* I-II (Christiania, 1866–67), pp. 408–09.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 412–13.

²² Maurer, Konrad, *Ueber die Hænsa-Þóris saga* (München, 1871).

²³ Björn M. Ólsen, *Om Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu: En kritisk undersøgelse* (København, 1911), pp. 50–52.

²⁴ Björn M. Ólsen, *Um Íslendingasögur: Kaflar úr háskólafrirlesturum* (Safn til sögu Íslands VI, Reykjavík, 1937–39), p. 11.

fellesskap innen den krets av videnskapsmenn som preger sagaforskningen på Island i dag”²⁵. And certainly if there ever was an Icelandic school of saga studies, its chief exponent was Sigurður Nordal (1886–1974), who succeeded Björn M. Ólsen as Professor of Icelandic at the University of Iceland in 1918. This “krets av videnskapsmenn” also included Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1899–1984), Professor of Icelandic literature from 1945 and from 1962 head of Handritastofnun Íslands, subsequently Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, and a number of other scholars such as Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Björn Sigfússon, Guðni Jónsson and Jón Jóhannesson, but Nordal remained its chief ideologue. Its roots, as was said, are to be sought in the work of earlier scholars such as Konrad Maurer and Björn M. Ólsen. The school’s chief monument — and monumental it is — is the series *Íslenzk fornrit*, the first published volume of which, Nordal’s edition of *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, came out in 1933. The series now comprises some 27 volumes, with several more in the planning stage. Although in theory the series would cover all genres of Icelandic literature, it has concentrated on the more historical sagas, the *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*, and more recently the *Biskupasögur*.

The Icelandic school never issued any manifesto as such, but the approach of the editors of the various volumes of *Íslenzk fornrit* can, together with a few key critical works, primarily those of Nordal and Einar Ól. Sveinsson, be used to isolate what may be said to characterise it. Firstly, it is based on the principles of traditional philology, which most of the original editors had learnt in Copenhagen, by which is meant that there is assumed to have been an original form of each saga, to which the scholar must aspire to get as close as possible²⁶. In keeping with the tenets of the Bookprose theory, this original is also assumed to be the work of an author, and one of the by-products of the Icelandic school has been a series of studies identifying the authors of individual sagas²⁷. Although some of the material used by the author may have come from oral tradition, the idea of an oral saga is rejected. As Nordal states categorically in his introduction to *Egils saga*: “engin saga, sem vér þekkjum nú, sé í letur færð í sömu mynd og hún hefur verið sögð”. Rather, he says, like the *konungasögur*, the *Íslendingasögur* are “verk sagnaritara, höfunda, sem unnið hafa úr efninu og sett svip sinn á frásöguna”²⁸.

In addition to establishing the texts of the sagas, the scholars associated with the Icelandic school devoted much time to trying to trace the sources used by these saga-authors, in particular the written sources (since any oral sources were by their nature unknowable), through the identification of *rittengsl*, or literary relations. There are many cases where references or allusions to the same event occur in two or more sagas, and while these may be strikingly similar or even identical, it is not uncommon

²⁵ Lie, Hallvard, “Noen metodologiske overveielser i anl. av et bind av ‘Íslenzk fornrit’”, *Maal og minne* (1939), p. 97.

²⁶ Driscoll, M. J., “The words on the page: Thoughts on philology, old and new”, *Creating the medieval saga: Versions, variability, and editorial interpretations of Old Norse saga literature* (Odense, 2010), pp. 85–102.

²⁷ Reviewed in e.g. Mundal, *Sagadebatt*, pp. 266–70.

²⁸ Sigurður Nordal, ed., *Egils saga Skallagrímsson* (Íslenzk fornrit II, Reykjavík, 1933), p. lx.

for them to differ, even significantly. Incidences of verbal echoes are legion. Where an earlier generation saw these as the hall-marks of oral tradition, the “bookprosists” sought to explain these parallels as one author’s conscious borrowing from the work of another. Material differences were explained as the author’s attempts to reconcile different versions known to him, or to tidy up his narrative by editing out improbabilities or artistic infelicities — poetic licence, if you will. The most extensive discussion of the principles of literary-relation hunting is Einar Ól. Sveinsson’s chapter “Almenn rök um rittengsl” in his book *Um Njálu*²⁹ (identical for the most part in substance to the chapter “Literary relations” in *Dating the Icelandic sagas*³⁰). The search quickly reached quite extreme levels, where almost anything could be pressed into service as *rittengsl*, even the vaguest kind of verbal parallels. Postulating *rittengsl* with lost sagas, or lost redactions of extant sagas, also became common. In his introduction to the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition of *Njáls saga*, Einar Ólafur gives no fewer than four lost sagas from which the author of the saga is meant to have borrowed.

Rittengsl were in turn important in establishing a chronology for the sagas, another area in which the contribution of the Icelandic school has been significant. This was by no means an easy task, since the sagas are all anonymous and undated and such contemporary references as could conceivably be used for dating could be (and have sometimes been shown to be) later interpolations. The dates of the manuscripts in which the sagas are preserved are of little help since on the basis of palaeographic and orthographic evidence alone it is rarely possible to date a manuscript more precisely than to within a fifty-year period, and even so the dates of the manuscripts, even when they can be dated precisely, provide only a *terminus ante quem* for the writing of the sagas they preserve. There are, so far as we know, no authors’ autographs or originals, and no way of knowing how far even the best text is removed from the original (even assuming there to have been one). The so-called *theta*-fragment of *Egils saga* (AM 162 a θ fol.), the oldest extant fragment of an *Íslendingasaga*, is thought to date from around 1250, but it is clear (from a number of errors and so on) that it cannot be the original (Snorri’s original, if you will).

Einar Ól. Sveinsson summarises the findings of the Icelandic school in this area in his monograph *Dating the Icelandic sagas* (1958), which he wrote specially for publication by the Viking Society (an expanded version appeared in Icelandic in 1965 under the title *Ritunartími Íslendingasagna: Rök og rannsóknaraðferð*), and arguments for the dating of individual sagas can be found in the introductions to the volumes of *Íslenzk fornrit*. Apart from a few attempts to show that sagas hitherto thought to be early were actually late and *vice versa* (e.g. *Fóstbræðra saga*, which because of its general awkwardness was thought to be from the beginning of the saga-writing period c. 1200, but was subsequently dated by Jónas Kristjánsson³¹ to the end of the period, about a century later; Bjarni Guðnason³² has similar-

²⁹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Um Njálu*, (Reykjavík, 1933).

³⁰ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Dating the Icelandic sagas: An essay in method* (London, 1958).

³¹ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Um Fóstbræðrasögu* (Reykjavík, 1972).

³² Bjarni Guðnason, *Túlkun Heiðarvígasögu* (Reykjavík, 1993).

ly argued that *Heiðarvíga saga* is much younger than was supposed; and Dietrich Hofmann³³ tried to move *Reykðæla saga* back by 30 to 40 years) the system has in general achieved the status of doctrine. But how were these dates arrived at? Einar Ólafur lists several criteria for dating, but says that “of all the means of deciding the ages of sagas it is their literary relations which are the most fruitful”. The problem with this method is of course that even if one is convinced that similarities between two sagas cannot be explained in any other way — as common oral source, formulae, later interpolation or coincidence — it is rarely possible to say with any certainty which saga did the borrowing. Even where this can be established the method can at best date sagas only relatively. The whole system, even if sound, could be off by 50 years³⁴.

Another method of determining when sagas were written was by assessing them in terms of artistry. Here, it seems to me, we are on especially thin ice. In forming what is still the standard theory on the development of saga-writing in Iceland, critics began by assuming that saga-literature had reached its high point with Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla* and in the *Íslendingasögur*, *Njáls saga* in particular (although *Njáls saga* has been compared to slightly over-ripe fruit). In their linear conception of literary history, everything else had to be seen as either leading up to or falling off from this apogee. This is, of course, the old romantic view of literary history, but was nowhere more fully articulated than by Sigurður Nordal.

Nordal outlined his conception of the progression of Icelandic literature first in his book *Snorri Sturluson*³⁵, subsequently and in greater detail in his introduction to his edition of *Egils saga* for the series *Íslenzk fornrit*, and finally and most fully in his article “Sagalitteraturen” for the series *Nordisk kultur*³⁶. Nordal saw the history of Icelandic literature as a process spanning a three-hundred-year period, from about 1100 to 1400. In the introduction to *Egils saga* he says: “Vér vitum, að sagnaritunin þokast smám saman frá vísindum til skáldskapar, frá Ara til Víglundar sögu”³⁷. For Nordal the key to the history of Icelandic literature was “baráttan milli alþýðlegs smekks og söguefnis og vandfýsni sagnaritara”³⁸. And paralleling this was the battle between native and foreign elements in Icelandic culture.

The early historical writings of Sæmundur and Ari — both of whom were based in the south of Iceland — dealt in a learned, critical way with genealogy, chronology and history. This “southern school” was active throughout the 12th century. It was, Nordal says, “höfðingjaskólinn í sagnaritun”, which sought truth and made no concessions to the tastes of the masses. In the north, at the monastery at Þingeyrar, a new “northern school” of saga-writing appeared somewhat later. Here,

³³ Dietrich Hofmann, “Reykðæla saga und mündliche Überlieferung”, *Skandinavistik* 2,1 (1972), pp. 1–26.

³⁴ On attempts at dating the sagas see Örnólfur Thorsson, “‘Leitin að landinu fagra’: Hugleiðing um rannsóknir á íslenskum fornþókmenntum”, *Skáldskaparmál* I (1990), pp. 28–53.

³⁵ Sigurður Nordal, *Snorri Sturluson* (Reykjavík, 1920).

³⁶ Sigurður Nordal, “Sagalitteraturen”, *Nordisk kultur* VIII:B (Stockholm/Oslo/København, 1953), pp. 180–273.

³⁷ Sigurður Nordal, ed., *Egils saga Skallagrímsson*, pp. lxi–lxii.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. lxiii.

initially, the interests of the church were paramount, with an attendant emphasis on hagiography — the translation of saints' lives, the *heilagramannasögur*, were produced here. These two poles reached a synthesis in the work of Snorri Sturluson, which was both learned and entertaining. Snorri himself was brought up in the south, but moved to Borgarfjörður in the west around 1200. The greatest of the *Íslendingasögur*, *Laxdæla*, *Egils saga* etc., are also products of this great synthesis, which Nordal sees as spreading out from this epicentre in Borgarfjörður, but not making any inroads in the south until after the middle of the 13th century (*Njáls saga*, written in the south, is normally dated around 1280). Shortly thereafter the synthesis began to break down and split into pure entertainment (“late” *Íslendingasögur* such as *Gull-Þóris saga*, *Króka-Refs saga* and the majority of the *fornaldar*- and indigenous *riddarasögur*) on the one hand, and annals on the other. The movement of Icelandic prose as Nordal envisioned it was governed by the movements along three axes, as it were: bare facts–entertainment, native–foreign and north–south. The greatest works were produced when all three were in balance, in the 13th century.

Nordal distinguished five stages of saga-writing, in part on the basis of the relative ages of the individual sagas, which it was possible to ascertain through an examination of their “literary relations”, and in part according to what he called their “level of literary development”, i.e. their position in the scheme just outlined. Nordal’s fifth stage was “decline”; there had never been any serious disagreement as to which sagas belonged to this period of decline, he said, because of the clear influence of the *fornaldar*- and *riddarasögur* on them³⁹.

The Icelandic canon

One result of the dominance of Nordal and the Icelandic school was the establishment of an Icelandic canon. Those texts were chosen for inclusion in the canon which were in keeping with Nordal’s view of the history and development of Icelandic literature. The *Íslensk fornrit* series, of which Nordal was the first general editor, established the canon as far as the medieval literature was concerned: *Íslendingabók* and *Landnáma*, the principal *Íslendingasögur*, Snorri’s *Heimskringla*. Although the range of text types has broadened somewhat to include other Kings’s sagas and, most recently, the sagas of Bishops, there is no sign of the *fornaldarsögur* or romances on the way.

Nordal published two anthologies, both of which were used extensively in schools in Iceland. In 1924 Nordal published his *Íslensk lestrarbók 1400–1900*⁴⁰, the introductory essay to which was called “Samhengið í íslenskum bókmenntum”, in which Nordal put forward the ideas that were to inform all his writings on ancient and modern literature, in particular the idea that the history of Icelandic literature is continuous, and no gap can be established between Old Icelandic literature and the literary re-awakening of the 19th century.

³⁹ Sigurður Nordal, “Sagalitteraturen”, p. 235.

⁴⁰ Sigurður Nordal, ed., *Íslensk lestrarbók 1400–1900* (Reykjavík, 1924).

In 1953 the anthology *Sýnisbók íslenzkra bókmennta til miðrar 18. aldar* was published, edited by Nordal, Guðrún P. Helgadóttir and Jón Jóhannesson⁴¹ (much of the last part derives from the first part of the *Íslenzk lestrarbók*, the second part of which was expanded and published as *Íslenzk lestrarbók, 1750–1930* in 1942). In the *Sýnisbók* extracts are included from a large number of works, not just *Njáls saga* and *Heimskringla*. Even so, there are excerpts, extremely short, from only five *fornaldarsögur* (in the case of two of them chiefly the verses) and two original romances, in all only some 20 pages.

The decisions as to which aspects of Icelandic literary culture were to be regarded as “really” Icelandic and which were not were made with little or no reference to or regard for the actual cultural practices of the majority of ordinary Icelanders over the centuries, practices which were fast disappearing even as these decisions were being made — and to some extent certainly because of them. I refer in particular to the practice of *sagnaskemmtun*, the reading aloud of sagas and recitation of *rímur* (the majority of them based on prose sagas) which was an integral part of the *kvöldvaka*, or “evening wake”⁴². What was read and recited in the *kvöldvaka* can be seen from the hundreds and hundreds of manuscripts produced precisely for that purpose, and it was not *Njála* and *Heimskringla*. Had this been taken into account, I think we would have had a very different canon. But that, as they say, is another story.

Conclusion

Reviewing this material, one thing at least seems abundantly clear: the role of nationalism.

It was (na)cent nationalism that led to the (re-)discovery of saga literature in the late 16th century, in that Arngrímur Jónsson’s *Brevis Commentarius de Islandia* was intended to defend the honour of Iceland in the face of calumnies circulating abroad. Arngrímur’s works brought the richness of medieval Icelandic literature, in particular the *fornaldarsögur*, to the attention of historians in Denmark and Sweden, and further afield, in Germany, but their interests were chiefly in what it could tell them about the early histories of their own countries. Each country also tried to claim Old Norse-Icelandic literature as its own, for essentially nationalistic reasons.

Denmark’s relations with its neighbour to the south were never entirely easy, and Danish scholars of the romantic period reacted badly to the idea put forward by German scholars that Old Norse literature, principally the *Edda*, was essentially Germanic, preferring to see it as “Nordic”, created by and expressing the beliefs of the Scandinavian people as a whole; the Norwegians, for their part, having achieved their political independence from Denmark in 1812, reacted rather badly to this Danish attempt to appropriate, as they saw it, what belonged solely to the

⁴¹ Sigurður Nordal *et al.*, ed., *Sýnisbók íslenzkra bókmennta til miðrar 18. aldar* (Reykjavík, 1953).

⁴² Driscoll, M. J., *The unwashed children of Eve: The production, dissemination and reception of popular literature in post-Reformation Iceland* (London, 1997), pp. 38–46.

Norwegian people (of which the Icelanders were merely an extension). The Free-prose theory, in its more extreme form, should obviously be seen in the light of this Norwegian nationalism.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries it was again nationalism which shaped the views of those who established the Icelandic literary canon and the academic discipline devoted to its study (the so-called "Icelandic school"), views which were plainly not founded entirely on aesthetic principles⁴³.

Curiously, in arguing that the sagas were works of fiction, created in Iceland in the 13th and 14th centuries by individual authors who regarded themselves as such and hence were more interested in telling a good story than in telling the truth, the Icelandic school went directly against what every Icelander intrinsically believed, viz. that the sagas were essentially faithful representations of what had actually happened. Even Finnur Jónsson, writing in as late as 1921, was in no doubt: "Sagaernes historiske troværdighed — hvor 'stolt' dette end lyder — vil jeg hævde og forsvare til jeg tvinges til at nedlægge min pen"⁴⁴. But if the sagas were fiction, made up by clever Icelanders in the Sturlung age, then they were at least Icelandic fiction, and not based on centuries' old oral tradition coming from God knows where.

The funny thing is that everyone bought it, and not just in Iceland. The view of the Icelandic school became the standard view of Icelandic literary history in the 20th century, enshrined in works like Turville-Petre's *The origin of Icelandic literature*⁴⁵, Stefán Einarsson's *A history of Icelandic literature*⁴⁶, Peter Hallberg's *Den isländska sagan*⁴⁷ etc.

But this wasn't the only baby that needed to be thrown out with the bathwater. A large part of Icelandic literature, literature which in many cases had been copied and read for centuries, was also rejected as un-Icelandic. Here the *fornaldarsögur* were doubly suspect: not only were they quite clearly based on older oral tradition, and therefore not the creations of Icelandic authors of the Golden Age, but they were also quite palpably influenced by translations of continental romance, products of the period of decline. It was hard to imagine anything less Icelandic: in substance pan-Scandinavian, even Germanic, in style cloyingly French.

In the last 30 years or so, in some ways at least, much has changed. The debate today is less (overtly) politicised, it seems, partially as scholars have begun to investigate other aspects of the sagas than their origins⁴⁸. There is now greater interest in artefactuality, in manuscripts as text-bearing objects, created at a certain place and for a particular purpose, and in particular reading the sagas as remnants, as sources for the history of mentality of the age in which they were produced, dis-

⁴³ Byock, Jesse, "Modern nationalism and the medieval sagas", *Northern antiquity: The post-medieval reception of Edda and saga* (London, 1994), pp. 163–87.

⁴⁴ Finnur Jónsson, *Norsk-isländske kultur- og sprogforhold i 9. og 10. årh.* (København, 1921), p. 141.

⁴⁵ Turville-Petre, E. O. G., *The origin of Icelandic literature* (Oxford, 1953).

⁴⁶ Stefán Einarsson, *A history of Icelandic literature* (Baltimore, 1957).

⁴⁷ Hallberg, Peter, *Den isländska sagan* (Stockholm, 1956).

⁴⁸ E.g. Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking age: Narration and representation in the Sagas of the Icelanders* (Reykjavík, 1998).

seminated and consumed. There is also renewed interest in orality, as witnessed by recent works by e.g. Gísli Sigurðsson⁴⁹. At the same time we have seen an expansion of the canon, with far greater interest in an appreciation of other genres, in particular the *fornaldar*- and *riddarasögur*, which have been the focus of several large research projects and many individual studies.

⁴⁹ Gísli Sigurðsson, *The medieval Icelandic saga and oral tradition: A discourse on method* (Cambridge MA, 2004).