

The Eddas and Sagas of Iceland **FREE**

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1215>

Published online: 17 December 2020

Summary

The eddas and sagas are literary works written in Iceland in the 13th and 14th centuries but incorporating memories preserved orally from preliterate times of (a) Norse myths, in prose and verse form, (b) heroic lays with common Germanic roots, (c) raiding and trading voyages of the Viking Age (800–1030 CE), and (d) the settlement of Iceland from Norway, Britain, and Ireland starting from the 870s and of life in the new country up to and beyond the conversion to Christianity in the year 1000. In their writing, these works show the influence of the learning and literature introduced to Iceland from the 11th century on through the educational system of the medieval Church. During these centuries, the Icelanders translated the lives of the principal saints, produced saga biographies of their own bishops, and recorded accounts of events and conflicts contemporary with their authors. They also produced conventional chronicles on European models of the kings of Norway and Denmark and large quantities of works, both translated and original, in the spirit of medieval chivalry.

The eddas and sagas, however, reflect a unique and original departure that has no direct analogue in mainland Europe—the creation of new works and genres rooted in the secular tradition of oral learning and storytelling. This tradition encompassed the Icelanders' worldview in the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries and their understanding of events, people, and chronology going back to the 9th century, and their experience of an environment that extended over the parts of the world known to the Norsemen of the Viking Age, both on earth and in heaven. The infrastructure that underlay this system of learning was a knowledge of the regnal years of kings who employed court poets to memorialize their lives, and stories that were told in connection with what people observed in the heavens and on earth, near and far, by linking the stories with individual journeys, dwellings, and the genealogies of the leading protagonists. In this world, people here on earth envisaged the gods as having their halls and dwellings in the sky among the stars and the sun, while beyond the ocean and beneath the furthest horizon lay the world of the giants. In Viking times, this furthest horizon shifted

little by little westwards, from the seas around Norway and Britain to the Faroes, Iceland, Greenland, and eventually still farther south and west to previously unknown lands that people in Iceland retained memories of the ancestors having discovered and explored around the year 1000—Helluland, Markland, and Vínland—where they came into contact with the native inhabitants of the continent known as North America.

Keywords: orality, memory, Norse mythology, Viking sagas, settlement of Iceland, Gaelic influence, ethnic astronomy and mythology, Vínland voyages, Snorri Sturluson

Gods, Heroes, Vikings, Kings, and Icelanders: The World of the Eddas and Sagas

The terms “edda” and “saga” are used to cover a range of secular, in cases even heathen, poems and stories written in Iceland in the Middle Ages. There are two “eddas”: a textbook for aspiring court poets written by Snorri Sturluson (1178/9–1241) around 1220–1230, known as Snorri’s *Edda*—or the *Prose* or *Younger Edda*—and a corpus of traditional mythological and heroic poems, most of them found in a single late 13th-century manuscript, the Codex Regius (GKS 2365 4^o), known as the *Poetic Edda*, the *Elder Edda*, or (formerly) *Sæmund’s Edda*.¹ These poems and others like them are called the edda poems. “Saga” just means “story,” in whatever form, oral or written.² It takes on the special sense of a written prose narrative, in most cases anonymous and typically of broadly historiographical intent. This literature built on and was fed by an oral storytelling and poetic tradition in which special court poets had the role of composing poems about kings and chieftains to keep alive the memory of rulers who had gone before.³

Together, the eddas and sagas treat a world of gods and other supernatural beings in the heavens or beyond the farthest horizon in the realms of giants, and tell of the lives, conflicts, and journeys of men here on earth in the regions encountered by Scandinavian Vikings in their travels after the year 800. Heroes and chieftains, men and women, come out with occasional verses, the meter determined by their existential status: divine beings and heroes of ancient times speak in the meters of the edda poems, lines fairly loosely constructed but held together by the beat of alliteration; while mortal men of the present and recent past employed the intricate *dróttkvætt* meter of the court poetry (also skaldic poetry), where almost every stressed syllable is balanced through alliteration and internal rhyme, using highly artificial imagery involving poetic synonyms (*heiti*) about the most frequently mentioned phenomena such as leaders, ships, warriors, weapons, and women, and periphrases (*kennings*) that took their semantic nourishment from a knowledge of ideas and

stories about the gods that people visualized in the heavens (as explained and discussed in the *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturluson). *Suttung's mead* is a good example of a kenning that can mean poetry by reference to a myth told by Snorri about the origins of the gift for poetry which comes from consuming an intoxicating mead that the god Óðinn stole from the giant Suttungr and his daughter Gunnlöð. The characters in the more secular stories went on journeys, had adventures, and engaged in warfare throughout the world known to the Scandinavians of the Viking Age (9th–11th century), from the legendary lands of the North, around the White Sea and beyond—Ballarhaf, Svalbarði, Dumbshaf, Gandvík, and Bjarmaland—to Garðaríki in the east—covering what is now the Baltic States, Russia, Belarus, and the Ukraine—and on to Miklagarðr (Constantinople) in the south.⁴ Or, alternatively, south and west to Valland (France), Ireland, the British Isles, and by way of Orkney and the Faroes to Iceland, and so on westwards to Greenland, Helluland, Markland, and eventually southwest to Vínland, where wild vines grew in the lands of the Skrælingjar (presumably a term used for Native Americans) on the southern shores of the Gulf of St. Lawrence and beyond—the selfsame regions where many years later French explorers also found wild grapes and gave their names to Baye de Vin, New Brunswick, and Île de Bacchus (now Île d'Orléans), Quebec.

This entire area falls within the story world of the saga writers of Iceland.⁵ Their works present an Icelandic perspective on the legendary heroes of the ancient Germanic and Scandinavian past, kings, Norwegians, Finns, Saracens, Wends, Swedes, Danes, Irish, Scots, Faroese, Greenlanders, Native Americans, and Icelanders, ancient and contemporary, so capturing the living worldview of those who dwelt in Iceland and had for centuries used poems and stories to pass on their knowledge and ideas about the world—all without any aid of writing. The mind could reach out to the lands all around by sending story characters to them and letting exciting events happen in them. This literature constitutes an organic and coherent “story web” through its settings, events, and protagonists, whose kinships are traced back into the mists of antiquity, often to divine origins, and also forward, up to the time of writing in the 12th, 13th, or 14th century, such that the authors and their characters are linked by kinship bonds that span at least five centuries down here on earth and reach up to the gods in heaven.⁶

The stories whose events are placed outside Iceland cluster round the adventures of famed kings and heroes. Some have their roots in the remote past of the Germanic migrations—the Völsung/Nibelung cycle about the great hero Sigurðr the Dragon-Slayer, Guðrún, Brynhildr, and Atli (Attila) king of the Huns, figures that also appear in the German *Nibelungenlied* from around the year 1200 as Siegfried, Kriemhild, Brünhild, and Etzel. Others are set in the Viking Age and tell of kings like Ragnarr *loðbrók* (Hairy-Breeks) of Denmark and adventurers like Arrow-Oddr. These stories later provided the material for the written *fornaldarsögur* (sagas of ancient times, legendary sagas) discussed further in the article *The Lure of the Exotic: Translated Romances and Legendary Sagas*. Behind the so-called *konungasögur* (kings' sagas) lie

the traditions of the historical kings of Norway and Denmark, ordered chronologically, first in the short text *Ágrip* (“Synopsis”) toward the end of the 12th century and subsequently in longer serial works, *Fagurskinna* (c. 1220), *Morkinskinna* (late 13th century), *Hulda/Hrokkinskinna* (based on a text from around 1300) and *Flateyjarbók* (c. 1382–1387), in most cases going up to close to the time of writing. The best known of these anthologies of kings’ sagas is without doubt *Heimskringla* (Orb of the World), the work of Snorri Sturluson, which traces the royal line of Norway back to divine origins in Sweden as the Ynglingar dynasty (for more on the writing of kings’ sagas see the article *Snorri’s Stroke of Genius: From Word of Mouth to Written Text*). Another group—the family sagas, or sagas of Icelanders—tells of life in the early days of Iceland, the events leading up to the country’s settlement from Norway and the British Isles in the second half of the 9th century, and the creation of a new multicultural community that coalesced out of the prevailing Norse heathendom.⁷ These sagas continue up to and beyond the formal conversion to Christianity in the year 1000, and are set in a society presided over by the oligarchy of hereditary chieftains (*goðar*, sg. *goði*) that met annually at the Althingi (general assembly) at Þingvellir in the southwest of the country.

The family sagas are a uniquely Icelandic phenomenon. Secular and largely realistic, they are closer to the novels of later times than anything else of their age.⁸ They number around forty altogether, mostly preserved in manuscripts from the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries. No author is named in any case.⁹ They deal with events—primarily feuds—in Iceland from the time of the settlements up to around 1050, though often following their protagonists on their journeys abroad. They draw up a picture of the first encounters between man and nature in the new country and bloody disputes over land and other resources, honor, power, and love, disputes that people attempt repeatedly to resolve by peaceful means within the framework of the law, with varying results, until eventually the arrival of Christian forgiveness brings peace to the community in the first decades of the 11th century.

This literature, unparalleled in the Middle Ages, presumably builds on a domestic tradition of oral narrative colored and influenced by the historiographical methods that people learned in Church schools.¹⁰ The dominant themes are conflict and vengeance and the problems of living a life of honor. Some cover several generations, or whole districts and groups of men; others are essentially biographies, in which case, the saga is generally named after the central character. In some, women and love play a major part. The heroes are generally the sons of chieftains or free landowners who farm their own land. In several cases, they become court poets to the kings of Scandinavia, or famous Vikings, or outlaws. The peace that comes to the story world of the family sagas with the advent of Christianity is only short-lived, however; in the 12th and 13th centuries the country is again racked by conflict and dispute and this turmoil is recorded in another group of sagas, the “contemporary sagas,” collected together under the name of *Sturlunga saga*. These are written in a similar style to the family sagas but tend to have many more characters and digressions.

Their authors were in many cases close to the events they describe, or even personal participants in them. In one or two cases, the names of these authors are known. The disputes related in *Sturlunga saga* escalate eventually into all-out civil war, and peace is only restored when the chieftains of Iceland accept the overlordship of the Norwegian crown in the years 1262–1264, bringing to an end nearly four centuries of the unique constitution of what is known as the Icelandic Commonwealth, governed by an assembly of thirty-nine chieftains of equal status representing all parts of the country, who elected a lawspeaker to act for three years at a time and preside over their assemblies and legislative activities.

Iceland's Special Position in Literary Matters, the Oral Culture, and Visual Images

Long before books came on the scene, people told stories and recited poems to describe their surroundings and emotions. The learning and ethics of a society were encapsulated in stories and passed down from generation to generation, century after century, with constant changes, new material being added and obsolete material discarded, as time went by and circumstances demanded. Religions and religious rituals were shaped around the word, whether in verse or prose, spoken, sung, or recited. Public administration went on without paperwork. People learned the law, pleaded cases, and issued verdicts without anything being written down. People traced their genealogies and communicated what they knew about distant lands and the movements of the stars through narratives. Whenever two or more people came together, stories could be told and poems recited; people could call up memories of ancient heroes in order to steel themselves in the face of conflict or to entertain themselves and others. People reflected themselves in stories, got a handle on reality through the art of storytelling, and shaped and sharpened their thoughts into poetry. Through stories and poems people were able to interpret their attitudes, present ideas, and communicate them to others—without a book in sight. When people met, this inheritance was passed on and kept alive with constant revision and innovation. No knowledge existed outside the spoken word; there was nowhere people could go to look things up, except in the memories of wise men and women. If a dispute arose, there was no way to determine who was in the right. Once something was lost and forgotten, it could not be recovered. Power over reality went hand in hand with power over the word.¹¹

Mankind's earliest attempts at systematizing its spiritual and cultural legacy and giving it permanent form appear in pictorial images from prehistoric times, first in simple cave paintings and stone carvings, later in more elaborate art depicting people and events from myths and heroic tales. The cultural role of such art is now unclear but we may suppose that it had value for people when stories were told, in religious rituals, or in connection with customs and traditions validated by particular myths. In

churches, pictures were later used in this way to inculcate particular Bible stories, both as a basis for exegesis and when telling the stories themselves. It is not unlikely that highly developed pictorial art like that found on stones from Viking Age Gotland is witness to the same kind of role in the preservation and dissemination of pre-Christian traditions. Many of the Scandinavian runestones are beautifully crafted works of art, with, in some cases, inscriptions containing poems and verse fragments. The best known examples are the Karlevi stone, erected on the Swedish island of Öland around the year 1000 in memory of one Sibbi Foldarson, where the inscription contains the oldest recorded stanza in *dróttkvætt* meter; and the Rök stone in Östergötland, Sweden, raised by Varinn in memory of his son Vémóðr (the inscription says that Varinn “fáði,” i.e., colored or painted the stone), which has a stanza mentioning King Þjóðrekr (Theodoric) in *fornyrðislag*, the simpler meter used in the heroic poems of the edda. However, although runes were used to carve individual verses and inscriptions on stones and wood, there is nothing to indicate that extended stories or poems were ever recorded in runes before writing with the Latin alphabet became widespread in Scandinavia and Iceland.

In Iceland the prevailing worldview and ethical system were rendered into stories about figures who were known throughout the Germanic cultural world. The forces of nature and different human characteristics were personified in the gods, and paradigms of human conduct were drawn up through hero tales. The stories of the gods reflect the life of the heroes, with love, jealousy, gold, and the struggle for power forming the primal forces that govern human fate.

Much of the ancient pictorial material found in Scandinavia and the British Isles can only be explained through reference to the edda poems—the mythological and heroic poems in the Codex Regius manuscript, written in Iceland around 1270—and the prose narratives in Snorri’s *Edda*, composed probably in the decade 1220–1230. In these two texts, the ancient legacy of stories and poems was set down in organized form for the first time. The two eddas are by far our most important sources for the intellectual life of the people of the North in pre-Christian times and they demonstrate systematic thinking about mythology and the art of poetry.¹² The written eddas help make sense of many of the pictures inscribed on the stones of Gotland. On one of the best known of these stones, the lower section depicts a Viking ship, giving an idea of the weaponry used, type of sail, and how the ships were manned. The upper part appears to show the god Óðinn on his eight-legged steed Sleipnir. Opposite him stands a woman holding a goblet, which corresponds well to ideas about the valkyries in Valhalla, Óðinn’s hall of the slain, and the role of the sacred drink in the consecration of kings. “Gunnlöð gave me, on a golden chair, a drink of the precious mead,” says Óðinn in the edda poem *Hávamál*, and in another edda poem, *Sigrdrífumál*, Sigurðr the Dragon-Slayer is received in a similar way by the valkyrie Sigrdrífa: Sigrdrífa takes a horn full of mead and gives it to Sigurðr to drink after he has shorn away her protective byrnie (mail coat)—a motif that resurfaces in modern form in the film *Something’s Gotta Give*, when Jack Nicholson as an ageing

playboy cuts away Diane Keaton's rollneck sweater, so breaking through the defenses of the single mother and celebrated author. An important element of royal consecration, found in the myths of many peoples, is that the king-to-be receives his authority when a woman, symbolizing the land and people, gives him a drink of a special mead. The consecration is then ratified by their sexual union.

Similar comments apply to an image from the 11th century on a stone at Ramsundberg, south of Lake Mälaren in central Sweden. Every feature of the picture takes on meaning by reference to the written sources, putting names to the figures and attaching stories to them: Sigurðr thrusts his sword into the dragon Fáfnir and elsewhere he roasts Fáfnir's heart on a spit. Birds warn Sigurðr of Reginn's treachery. Sigurðr's horse Grani stands tethered, carrying on its back a chest containing Fáfnir's gold, while Reginn, the smith, lies decapitated among his tools and implements. More images act as witness to the wide currency of the Sigurðr legend around Europe and its popularity is attested by the range of written sources—as well as the edda poems in the Codex Regius and Snorri's account in his *Edda*, we also have *Völsungasaga* (Saga of the Volsungs), *Þiðreks saga af Bern* (Saga of Theodoric of Bern), and the German *Nibelungenlied* from about 1200. The story is referred to in the Old English epic *Beowulf*, and turns up again in Richard Wagner's opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, itself based largely on the Icelandic eddas—yet another personal reworking of the ancient mythic motifs, with the difference that Wagner's sources are all known, while the oral and written sources of the ancient authors are now lost.

Old Norse/Icelandic Poetry in Oral Transmission: The Potential Influence of Ireland

The intense literary activity of medieval Iceland is a conundrum. In its literary history, Iceland stands utterly alone in Scandinavia; indeed, there is nothing remotely comparable to the vernacular literature of the Icelandic Middle Ages, except perhaps the heroic material found in ancient Irish. However, there is no way of accounting for this wealth of writing without acknowledging that it drew copiously on an oral storytelling and poetic tradition of similar material, dealing with characters that people could link themselves to and events that were set in places that people had before their eyes in the sky and on earth or that they knew of from the accounts of others; that is, a tradition based on the reciprocal interplay between stories and the actual world that people lived in.¹³

The edda poems were written down nowhere other than in Iceland. These poems reveal their ancient roots in part through their style: their meters are closely related to those of the Old English *Beowulf* and the Old High German *Hildebrandslied* and share their use of alliteration, irregular rhythm, and special poetic language (*heiti*). These shared features of meter and diction suggest that from very ancient times, long before

the days of the Vikings and the settlement of Iceland, the people of the North recited poems something like the edda poems. These poems constitute one of the two main genres of Old Norse poetry, the other being the *dróttkvætt*. The edda poems are traditional and anonymous. As elsewhere in the world, oral artistry and learning were cultivated without it being possible to speak of any true original. This was no problem so far as stories and poems were concerned but could lead to disputes in law, genealogy, and chronology when people disagreed; it is therefore not surprising that these were among the first subjects to be put into written form. Poems and stories in oral preservation are shaped and recreated at each performance, by the performers themselves and the audience's responses. Performers do not claim the poems and stories as their own and their training consists of developing mastery over both the material (stories) and the formal techniques of performance—for example, the poetic language. Verbatim preservation is rare but does occur, for example, in some ritual verses, and when named poets compose works such as the court or skaldic poetry (named *dróttkvæði* after the most archetypical *dróttkvætt* meter) where the diction is fixed by form (internal rhyme, alliteration, and regular meter).

The edda poems are divided between the mythological and the heroic. The mythological poems describe events from the world of the gods, though in many cases they reflect conditions among men by presenting human vices and the afflictions that can arise from them. The mythological poems have no parallels among other Germanic peoples and it has been much debated whether they constitute reliable sources for pre-Christian thinking or whether they are evidence of a Christian interpretation of myths.¹⁴ In his *Edda*, Snorri Sturluson used the mythological poems unhesitatingly as sources for the heathendom. The heroic poems are populated with actual people from the time of the Germanic migrations, from the 4th to 6th centuries—for instance, Atli (Attila) king of the Huns. However, the poems have no historical value; everything is melded together into a story world subject to its own laws. For example, major characters such as Helgi Hundingsbani (Slayer of Hundigr), Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, and Sigurðr the Dragon-Slayer are known only from poetry.

Most of the heroic poems center on a single legend, the tale of the gold over which the brothers Fáfnir and Reginn fought, which Fáfnir won and guarded on Gnitahéiði having turned into a dragon, and which was eventually captured by Sigurðr. The curse placed on the gold runs as a recurrent motif throughout the corpus. The individual poems are bound together by the figure of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, who is married three times and by the end has lost all her husbands, brothers, and children. The poems often reveal different attitudes to the same events, a product of their having lived for many centuries on people's lips and been shaped by the environment and performed on different occasions, as is normal with anonymous poetry in oral transmission. Particularly striking is the way the individual poems often present the causes of conflict in very different lights, according to whether the events are viewed from the perspective of the men who take part in them or the women affected by them. In the “masculine” poems, as in the first *Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani* (*Helgakviða*

Hundingsbana I) and the *Lay of Atli* (*Atlakviða*), the emphasis is on wealth and power as the driving force for vengeance, while in the second *Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani* (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*), the three “feminine” *Lays of Guðrún* (*Guðrúnarkviður*) and the *Lament of Oddrún* (*Oddrúnargrátr*), people’s conduct is explained rather on the basis of their loves and emotional lives; these poems include descriptions of embroidery and other female crafts, and even give glimpses into the experience of servants when they are said to have to serve drinks, make beds, and see to soiled underwear, such as in the *Ballad of Atli* (*Atlamál*)—a poem many think reflects conditions in Greenland with its mention of white bears and narrow fjords.¹⁵ Judging from the way the poems are arranged in the Codex Regius, it is quite clear that its compilation was a deliberate attempt to preserve and codify this traditional material and that the compiler spread his net wide in search of his material.

The other main form of Old Norse poetry, skaldic verse, and in particular its dominant meter, the *dróttkvætt*, is very different in its functions and formal characteristics, being immensely ornate and elaborate in its metrics, syntax, and language. *Dróttkvæði* (poems in the *dróttkvætt* meter) are primarily occasional verse, most often produced by professional poets in praise or commemoration of kings or chieftains. The events described are usually recent. The professional poet or *skald* (from Icelandic *skáld* for poet) delivered his poems ceremonially at court, and the poems played a major part in establishing the ruler’s status—that is, they acted as promotional propaganda. The cultivation of the *dróttkvætt* flourished in Iceland, and Icelandic skalds achieved a near monopoly as poets to the kings and chieftains of Scandinavia: indeed, poetry became, so to speak, one of Iceland’s earliest exports. Alongside the extended formal *dróttkvæði*, large numbers of occasional stanzas in the same meter have been preserved on a wide variety of subjects, ranging from love and nature to satire, curses, and scurrilous defamation. *Dróttkvætt* verse is chiefly known from Icelandic sources but a number of stanzas have been found in runic inscriptions from Bergen from around 1300.

The metrical features such as strict syllable counting, internal rhyme and “half rhyme,” and division into balancing half-stanzas of four lines each do not occur in other Germanic poetry but have direct parallels in Old Irish. A significant part of the settlers of Iceland came not directly from Scandinavia but from the Viking colonies in Ireland and the Scottish islands, bringing with them large numbers of people of Gaelic origin: genetic research in the 1990s and early 21st century has shown that around 20 percent of the male settlers of Iceland and 60 percent of the female settlers fall into this category.¹⁶ There is reason to suppose that these Hiberno-Norse settlers were sufficiently familiar with the Old Irish poetic tradition for it to have potentially had some part in shaping the culture that coalesced in the new country. As well as the formal metrical features, there is also the attitude toward poetry as a profession; in Ireland, there were special poetic schools at which aspiring court poets studied and from which they matriculated as *filiid* (singular *fili*). There is also evidence from the sagas themselves to suggest that the storytelling tradition of Iceland was to some

extent built on the legacy from Ireland and Gaelic settlements in the Hebrides. Individual narrative motifs and ideas that seem to have Gaelic origins turn up in written sources and later popular belief, and most notably in the family sagas set in regions where memories of settlement from Ireland and the Scottish islands was strongest: both *Laxdæla saga* and *Kjalnesinga saga* contain motifs that echo the Irish tales (of Cú Chulainn, in particular in *Kjalnesinga saga*), only transferred to a fully Icelandic environment and applied to Icelandic characters.¹⁷

Most knowledge of early *dróttkvæði* comes from the examples Snorri offers in his *Edda*. What he says suggests a conscious cultivation and memorization in oral transmission. Some of Snorri's examples claim to be from as far back as the 9th century, with Bragi the Old's *Ragnarsdrápa* being credited as the oldest of all. Sources mention and cite from Norwegian skalds from the 10th century, but after this early phase almost all remembered and named skalds came from Iceland and traveled around the courts of Scandinavia earning a living by their art. The best known of these early Icelanders who are said to have composed in praise of kings is Egill Skallagrímsson.¹⁸

The royal courts were also a venue for storytelling. *Íslendinga þáttur sögufróða* (Tale of the Story-Wise Icelander), tells of an Icelander named Þorsteinn who, sometime in the middle years of the 11th century, entertained the court of the Norwegian King Haraldr *harðráði* (Harald Hardrada) with an account of Haraldr's own exploits during his years of exile, having himself learned the story from another Icelander, Halldór Snorrason, back home at the Althingi in Iceland. Another tale tells of Sturla Þórðarson performing *Huldar saga* (probably a *fornaldarsaga*, now lost) at the court of Magnús *lagabætir* (Magnus VI, the Law-Reformer) in the second half of the 13th century. One of the four medieval manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda*, the Codex Upsaliensis, contains a list of skalds and the chieftains they composed for.¹⁹ This remarkable record gives us an idea of how the memory systems of oral society were used to establish a chronology back to the distant past, to the start of the Viking Age, and how the line of chieftains was associated with memories of the skalds and so with their poems which preserved the fame of these chieftains and were linked to stories about them.

The Icelandic Althingi was not only a site for learning stories; here aspiring poets could come and further their careers. In *Egils saga* we hear of one called Einarr *skálaglamm*, who

started to compose verses when he was young and was a keen learner. One summer at the Althingi, Einarr went to the cabin of Egill Skallagrímsson and they got talking and the talk soon turned to poetry. They both found these discussions entertaining.²⁰

They exchanged stories, and later Einarr gives Egill a shield he has previously received from Earl Hákon in payment for a poem. The shield “was written over with ancient stories,”²¹ and Egill took the gift to mean he should compose a poem about the shield, describing the images.

Historiography in Iceland and European Literature in Translation

After the settlement age in which Iceland inherited an oral story and poetic culture influenced by the Norse and Sami cultures from Norway, and by the Gaels of Ireland and the Hebrides, a long time passed before any stories and poems found their way onto vellum. During this period, the country entered the Christian fold (leading eventually to the establishment of bishoprics at Skálholt in the south in 1056 and at Hólar in the north in 1104), and books must have played a major part in people’s new religious observance. Historiography in Icelandic begins, presumably, with Ari Þorgilsson’s *Íslendingabók* (Book of the Icelanders).²² The few extant texts that exist in Icelandic that may be older consist of non-narrative material such as laws and registers of church muniments. *Íslendingabók* is a short and sober text of around four thousand words, giving a broad overview of the history of Iceland from the settlements up to the early 12th century, with special emphasis on the Church. Ari was writing sometime in the years between 1122 and 1133 and he mentions that not long before, in the winter of 1117–1118, work had been started on writing the secular law of the country on the initiative of chieftains with close links to the Church. Prior to this, the law had been preserved in people’s memory, as among other Germanic nations in pre-Christian times. A special lawspeaker had been appointed with the job of reciting the law in a public hearing at the Althingi, one third each year. The law was thus among the first things to be recorded in writing once Christian written culture had established itself in the country. With this, the final say in legal disputes passed from orally trained lawspeakers to the written lawbook. This oldest legal text is now lost but the laws of the Icelandic Commonwealth, later known as *Grágás*, are preserved in a number of ancient manuscript fragments and two vellum codices written around the time the Commonwealth collapsed and Iceland came under the power of the Norwegian king in 1262–1264.²³

Also during Ari’s lifetime, work may have begun on the collection of information on the land claims and genealogies of the original settlers of the country, work that was eventually to lead to the various versions of *Landnámabók* (the *Book of Settlements*) known from the 13th century onwards.²⁴ *Landnámabók* is a reference work, a directory that proceeds clockwise round the country starting in the southwest with Reykjavík, the home of Ingólfr Arnarson, the man credited as being the first settler. For each settlement, it names the site and the original claimant and gives his or her genealogy, both his or her ancestry and descendants, generally for the next three or four generations. *Landnámabók* is therefore the most important source of the genealogical

lore that was so important to the ancient Icelanders. Interspersed in the general scheme, there are often stories of varying length about individual settlers and their settlements. The book starts with a longer account of the original exploration of the country.

Some time between 1125 and 1175, the so-called “First Grammarian” produced his *Fyrsta málfræðiritgerðin* (First Grammatical Treatise) with the aim of adapting the Latin alphabet to the needs of the Icelandic language. To justify his work, the author pointed out that, with a standardized alphabet, it would be easier

at rita ok lesa, sem nú tíðisk ok á þessu landi, bæði lög ok áttvísi eða þýðingar helgar, eða svá þau in spakligu fræði er Ari Þorgilsson hefir á bækr sett af skynsamligu viti [to write and read, as is now the custom in this country too, both laws and genealogies, or exegetical writings, as well as the erudite lore that Ari Þorgilsson has set down in books with reason and intelligence].²⁵

This passage is the best source for the earliest days of literacy in Iceland in the 12th century and shows that, as might be expected, the first products were lawbooks, genealogies, and vernacular religious writings, together with various other types of information held to be of special importance to society. In medieval texts, the term *málfræði* is used to translate the Latin *ars grammatica* and covers not only grammar in the modern sense but also logic and rhetoric. One of the four medieval manuscripts of Snorri’s *Edda*, the Codex Wormianus (AM 242 fol.), contains four such grammatical treatises: the First Grammatical Treatise, the oldest, from the 12th century; the Second Grammatical Treatise, on phonology, which, among other things, makes the distinction, still maintained in Icelandic, between using *þ* initially in syllables and *ð* internally or at the end; the Third Grammatical Treatise, the work of Snorri Sturluson’s nephew Ólafr *hvítaskáld* Þórðarson (d. 1259), on rhetoric and poetic stylistics and using Icelandic examples to illustrate the Latin terms and concepts adopted; and the Fourth Grammatical Treatise, from the 14th century, which continues the Third and deals with similar subjects.²⁶

Ari’s *Íslendingabók* marks the start of Icelanders’ efforts to write their own history into the history of Europe that reached their country through books and the Christian culture cultivated within the ranks of the Church.²⁷ A large part in this assimilation of new cultural currents took place in the monasteries that were founded in many parts of the country from the 12th century onwards (see Table 1).

Table 1. Monasteries of Medieval Iceland³²

Benedictine Order	Augustinian Canons	Benedictine Convents
Pingeyrar (NW) 1112–1133	Þykkvibær (SE) 1168	Staður (NW) 1295

Munka-Þverá (mid-N) 1155	Flatey in Breiðafjörður/Helgafell (mid-W) 1172	Kirkjubær (SE) 1166
Hítardalur (mid-W) 1166–1201	Saurbær (mid-N) 1200	
	Viðey (SW) 1226	
	Möðruvellir (mid-N) 1269	
	Skriða (E) 1493	

At these monasteries, saints' lives were set down in Latin for reading in church on the relevant saints' days. Such works were translated into Icelandic from an early date and are preserved in the oldest Icelandic manuscripts from the 12th century. They were thus among the first texts to be written in Icelandic and so naturally had a major influence on the shaping of the written language. In the spirit of these saints' lives, monks also began to produce original works in their own language—hagiographical lives of various Icelandic bishops and a saga of St. Olaf, king of Norway. The early religious writings achieved considerable popularity and are preserved in large numbers of manuscripts, for example *Maríu saga*, *Placidus saga*, and *Tómasar saga erkibiskups* (Life of Thomas Becket). One of the oldest texts of this type to have survived in complete form is *Mattheus saga postula* (Life of St. Matthew the Apostle). The *Dialogues* of Pope Gregory the Great (540–604), an immensely popular collection of edifying miracles and wonders, was translated into Icelandic before the end of the 12th century and its influence can be felt in homilies, hagiographies, and even in the family sagas themselves. Probably the oldest manuscripts to survive in Icelandic is a homily book, written around 1200, containing over fifty homilies and based on earlier manuscripts going back to the early 12th century.

The 12th and 13th centuries also saw the translation and adaptation of some of the most important historical and learned writings of continental Europe. Around the middle of the 12th century, a long text of some thirty-two modern printed pages was put together in Icelandic under the name of *Veraldar saga* (Saga of the World), followed soon after by *Rómverja saga* (Saga of the Romans), a compilation of translated material from classical authors known from medieval textbooks—notably Sallust's *Jugurthine War* and *Conspiracy of Cataline*, and Lucan's *Pharsalia*—together with medieval accretions.²⁸ Perhaps a little later, Nikulás Bergsson, abbot of the monastery of Munkaþverá, produced a travel book for Icelandic pilgrims going to Rome and Jerusalem. A manuscript from around 1200 presents an essay on chronology that sets out means of calculating the length and number of months, lunar phases, the movement of the planets, church feasts and festivals and the date of Easter; this work is mostly based on foreign models but incorporates independent observations on the course of the sun and the changes in length of day by season, along with added material and references to heathen men having had their own ideas about the heavenly spheres and constellations.

Shortly after 1200, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* was translated as *Breta sögur* (Sagas of the Britons); the text is preserved in manuscripts containing Arthurian material, *Trójumanna saga* (Saga of the Trojans), and excerpts from Virgil's *Aeneid*. During the 13th century, five Arthurian romances were translated into Norse: the first of these *riddarasögur* (courtly or chivalric sagas) was *Tristrams saga* (1226), followed by *Ívens saga*, *Erex saga*, *Percevals saga*, and *Möttuls saga*.²⁹ *Gyðinga saga* (Saga of the Jews) is a 13th-century translation/compilation attributed to the priest and later bishop of Hólar, Brandr Jónsson (d. 1264). Its main source is the Old Testament Apocryphal Book of the Maccabees, with additions based on the *Historia Scholastica* of Peter Comestor (d. 1178), Flavius Josephus's writings on the Jews, and others. The saga ends with the story of Pilate and Judas, here following medieval hagiographical sources.³⁰ This same Brandr Jónsson also translated *Alexanders saga* at the behest of King Magnús Hákonarson of Norway. Later, Magnús's son, Hákon V (1270–1319), commissioned the work known as *Stjórn*, an anthology of translations and synopses of the first books of the Old Testament, together with exegetical material from medieval devotional writings. Learned works like the *Elucidarius* were also translated into Norse, while in Iceland the *Disticha Catonis* was translated in the style of the edda poem *Hávamál* under the name of *Hugsvinnsmál*. Alongside these translations, Latin works, such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, seem to have been read in the original and exerted their own influence on Icelandic learning and tastes.³¹

The age of writing thus gets under way in Iceland in the 12th and 13th century with translations of the most important devotional, historical, and educational books that were available to learned men in neighboring countries. For a long time, the Icelanders made few original contributions of their own, except for the laws, Ari's *Book of the Icelanders*, The First Grammatical Treatise and genealogical lore relating to land ownership—at a time when the original consecration of the land that formed part of the settlement claim was still alive in the memories of those who owned the land. But it was by no means inevitable that these literary activities would move on to encompass the Icelanders' secular oral traditions of storytelling and poetry—a tradition that was cultivated both for entertainment and for profit by those Icelanders who peddled their poetry professionally around the nobility of the Norse world. In mainland Europe, such material generally failed to find its way into writing, though there is no reason to doubt that mythological and heroic tales and all kinds of secular verse lived a good oral life in many places, just as elsewhere in the world, before Christianity spread from the Mediterranean lands, and with it, literacy. It was only in Ireland and Iceland that material of this kind came to be written down in any measure.

Snorri's Stroke of Genius: From Word of Mouth to Written Text

There is reason to think that the turning point in Icelandic literary history may have occurred in a flash of inspired originality in the mind of Snorri Sturluson. Snorri was brought up among young men destined for the priesthood and cloister at Oddi in the south of Iceland, the home of the chieftain Jón Loftsson.³³ Jón was the proud grandson of King Magnús Barefoot of Norway, and at the time his farm was the leading seat of learning in the country. Snorri's clerical studies at Oddi appear limited; it is unclear whether he could even read or write Latin.³⁴ In view of his subsequent career, however, he must have received a systematic training in the law and skaldic arts and the histories of the kings of Norway. As a young man, he engaged actively in litigation in Iceland, earned a living as a court poet with political ambitions in Norway, and acted as lawspeaker of Iceland in the years 1215–1218 and 1222–1231.³⁵

At the time Snorri was born, writing in Europe and Iceland had the primary functions of spreading the Gospel and elevating the status of kings and nobles through the creation of historiographical works. Earlier, of course, in the classical period, the Greeks and Romans had produced books about gods and heroes, visualizing them as housed in the sky and reflected in the stars in the way people have done over the ages throughout the world. This is the picture, for instance, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which remained widely known and read throughout the Middle Ages. But Ovid's example had little effect on the cultures that were gradually being brought within the Christian fold and acquiring from it the art of writing; their newly abandoned gods and myths were not felt to be fit material for scribal endeavor. Nor were narratives about people from humbler ranks of society—farmers and chieftains, for example; subjects of this kind did not naturally lend themselves to the values and attitudes that came with the Church and the kind of literature it fostered. Although secular vernacular writing became increasingly common, it tended to remain strongly aristocratic. The impetus for such writing originated mainly in France: from the late 11th and 12th centuries, we get the *chansons de geste*, oral heroic poetry transformed into literary written form; and around the same time, we find the first written romances, probably inspired by the stories and poems of Breton singers of tales. This kind of literary activity opened the way for a variety of other secular narratives in French, both in verse and prose, probably commissioned by learned laymen of the nobility (*le chevalier lettré*)—that is, by people of a comparable social standing to Snorri in Iceland and around the time that Snorri was coming of age.³⁶

The literary scene in Iceland that Snorri inherited was thus very different from the one he passed on to others. The writing of extended narratives in Iceland had started with accounts of the kings of Norway written by the monks of Þingeyrar, both in Latin and Icelandic. This work was presumably well known to Snorri's friend, Styrmir fróði (“the Learned”) Kárason, especially if it is correct that Styrmir grew up at Þingeyrar as has been suggested. As lawspeaker, Snorri seems to have worked in close collaboration with Styrmir, and this collaboration is likely to have extended to other fields as well.³⁷ Unfortunately, very little about Styrmir other than the fact that he was a writer is known: he compiled a version of the *Book of Settlements* and an earlier *Ólafs*

saga helga (Saga of Saint Olaf) than Snorri's (both works are now lost but it is possible to deduce something of their contents from later works that may have used them), and that he played some role, perhaps as editor, in *Sverris saga*, the biography of King Sverrir of Norway, originally written by Karl Jónsson, abbot of the monastery of Þingeyrar.³⁸

In view of his foster-father Jón Loftsson's connections with the royal house of Norway and the precedent already set by the earlier hagiographic kings' lives, it is hardly surprising that Snorri embarked on his writing career with the lives of kings, culminating in his *Heimskringla*. Snorri's biographical work is clearly of a far higher quality than that of his predecessors; apart from a superior command of narrative, Snorri manages to incorporate the political motivations of his characters and reflects the contemporary ideas of educated Icelanders on society and the role of the king and the state.³⁹ In his self-standing *Ólafs saga helga* (Saga of Saint Olaf) and in *Heimskringla*, Snorri raises the already well-established writing of kings' sagas to a new aesthetic level. *Heimskringla* evidences conscious care over form and structure: the collection is given a mythological framework in its opening saga, *Ynglinga saga*, while the main body of the work is centered in biblical typological fashion around the lives of the two missionary kings, Óláfr Tryggvason and St. Olaf (Óláfr Haraldsson). In addition, Snorri cites as source evidence large numbers of skaldic stanzas not found in earlier written sources.⁴⁰ The introduction to *Heimskringla* provides striking evidence of Snorri's independence and originality in his evaluation of sources, as well as an overall vision and understanding of historical development that raises him far above most medieval historians. *Heimskringla* can thus be read as a natural but brilliant extension of earlier historical writing, both Icelandic and from elsewhere, on the lives of royal leaders. It is also likely that Snorri intended his royal biographies to raise his own profile among the social elite of Norway, where he had high personal ambitions for himself.

The Prose Edda: Traditional Lore Codified for the Written Page

The real breakthrough in Icelandic literature comes, however, when Snorri sets about writing, or having written, works that do not build directly on familiar literary models — though this is not to say that in this he learned nothing from ideas and narrative techniques found in earlier works.⁴¹ Snorri stood at a cultural crossroads: in his youth, he was immersed in this world of oral poetry and storytelling as part of his training for a career in poetry and law, but he was also a member of one of the first generations to realize the profound changes the introduction of writing was bringing to this society. In particular, he must have been aware of how the written codification of the law was changing power structures within Iceland, especially the status and influence of the orally trained lawmen and lawspeakers. Snorri may also have observed with some envy the young men around him at Oddi training for priesthood, who could read

and review in a systematic fashion all the learning and wisdom they had to acquire—while he in his secular curriculum had to make do with purely oral sources. He would have had every opportunity to observe how useful books could be for structuring clerical learning, and from there to make the leap to applying these techniques to the kind of learning he himself had had to acquire. What makes the works attributed to Snorri so new and important is therefore not just their literary value but, more importantly, the fact that they reach across the boundary between the oral and the written worlds in a way unprecedented in medieval Europe.

Snorri's *Edda* was written in the third decade of the 13th century and is a handbook in skaldic poetics. It is divided into three main sections: *Gylfaginning* (Gylfi's Illusion) provides a coherent and systematized overview of Norse mythology; *Skáldskaparmál* (The Language of Poetry) categorizes and explains kennings and *heiti* by their mythic content; and *Háttatal* (List of Meters, *Clavis metrica*) provides glossed examples of skaldic meters. In an introduction to the work, Snorri describes the creation of the world and the origins of religion and the Norse pantheon, the *Æsir*, who are said to have been great leaders who came out of Asia and were later taken as gods. The aim of Snorri's *Edda* is to educate skalds in the use of meters and the myths that lay behind skaldic diction. The frame Snorri sets around this lore is borrowed in part from medieval scholastic writings—for example, *Gylfaginning* is couched in a question-and-answer form like that of the *Elucidarius*, a handbook of Christian theology that was translated into Icelandic late in the 12th century.⁴² The actual contents—the knowledge and ideas about the mythology, which are related to celestial phenomena and the abodes of the gods—Snorri would have learned from his masters in the art of oral poetics.

A detailed knowledge of the sky and the movements of heavenly bodies is common to all human cultures, however technologically primitive. In preliterate societies, this knowledge is typically presented through mythological narratives and poems.⁴³ Lore of this kind must have been part of the traditional training of the Norse oral cultural elite from long before the arrival of book learning and written astronomy from the Mediterranean south.⁴⁴ All the more so, perhaps, because the Scandinavians were a mobile and seafaring people who required accurate observations of the heavens for their travels. This traditional knowledge is likely to have been embedded in the mythological conception of the world, perhaps accounting for how it survived the Christianization of the religious aspects of life to eventually find its way into Snorri's *Edda*. It remained both essential to the training of aspiring poets in the skaldic tradition and part of the everyday vocabulary used in describing astronomical phenomena. By Snorri's time, the myths had presumably lost their religious and ritual roles, but they are likely to have remained current as part of the age-old language used to describe the dome of the heavens and the movements of the sun, moon, planets, fixed stars, and other celestial bodies.

In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri presents a remarkably lucid and systematic exposition of the inherited cosmological view of the world, couched in the context of an illusion—the name means “Gylfi’s illusion.” The central feature of the illusion is to envisage the white and transparent Ash that towers above the heaven as well as deities and mythological phenomena as being located at various points in the sky—called *staðir* (places), associated with the stars, or *salir* (halls), associated with the sun, *á himni* (in the sky). The world, and the heavenly dome, in particular, as observed with the naked eye, is not what it appears to be but rather the illusion “metamorphoses” it before Gylfi’s eyes into the setting for the myths and adventures told in the stories. The oldest translated texts on astronomy in Icelandic use equivalents from the Roman pantheon to refer to the planets: Óðinn is identified with Mercury, Freyja with Venus, Týr with Mars, Þór with Jupiter.⁴⁵ The naming and describing of celestial phenomena is one of the many roles of myths in all known cultures, and there is no reason to suppose that Old Icelandic/Norse culture was any different. Despite the superficial Latin clothing, this is almost certainly traditional Scandinavian star lore. From this perspective, Snorri’s *Edda* is not a learned synthesis or reconstruction of paganism based on poetic sources, but rather a systematic presentation of a coherent traditional worldview current among the elite of poets in the 12th and 13th centuries, expressed in mythological terms and set down in writing for the benefit of students in the art and practice of skaldic verse.⁴⁶

The mastermind behind the *Edda* that bears Snorri’s name was presumably the first European since classical times to realize the potential of book writing to record a whole system of learning hitherto having been transmitted entirely orally. Traditional court poetry required a mastery of the accumulated heritage of poetic lore—lays of ancient heroes, mythological verse, and stories about the world and its place in the greater cosmos, ornate skaldic poems in praise of kings and nobles, as well as occasional verse, metrics, poetic diction, etc.—and all this needed to be ordered within a coherent framework. Oral poetics was presumably studied in a fairly formal way among aspiring skalds. It was neither folk culture nor folklore in the customary sense of these words, but rather an all-encompassing system that only fully trained individuals could ever aspire to master after years of serious and demanding study. The ultimate goal of their studies would have been the acquisition of the ability to compose verse in the various skaldic meters, using the tropes and diction of the trade—as the *Edda* sets out to explain.

Snorri’s revolution thus lay in his seeing ways of using the skills and techniques possessed by the monks who acquired their learning through the written medium to create something entirely different. By a bold leap of imagination, he realized that subjects beyond the lives of saints and kings could also be the matter for books—that is, the mythology inherited from pre-Christian times in his *Edda*. This required an adaptation of the methods and ideas on literary structure that he had probably first become acquainted with at Oddi. His own education may not have been focused in this direction but his friend and colleague Styrmir certainly possessed the skills and

knowledge required. Snorri may therefore have worked with Styrmir and his scribes on a new and novel task, taking the knowledge, scholarship, poetry, and stories he had learned in his younger years from the lips of his learned elders—material that had hitherto been entirely oral and that had prepared him for his adult career in the world of politics, legal disputes, storytelling, and court poetry—and recording it in book form.⁴⁷

Pushing Back the Boundaries: The Family Sagas

There are grounds for believing that Snorri's fount of literary originality was not exhausted with his recasting of systematic oral mythological "science" and poetics for the written page. It may gradually have occurred to him that the secular chieftains of Iceland could raise their own "cultural capital" just as the kings and knights of Europe had done, by having the lives of their forefathers set down in writing.⁴⁸ It may be this that gave Snorri the germ of the idea for a biography or saga of his own ancestor, the poet, chieftain, and warrior Egill Skallagrímsson, thus instituting the crowning glory of medieval Icelandic literature, the family sagas, or sagas of Icelanders.⁴⁹ Many scholars have remarked on parallels between Egill and Snorri's own life and vicissitudes, and there is thus every reason to think that the stories Snorri inherited about Egill may have struck a peculiar chord with him. Thus *Egils saga* may have been written at Snorri's behest or under his supervision.⁵⁰ The oldest extant manuscript fragment of any of the family sagas is the so-called θ -fragment of *Egils saga*, dated to the middle years of the 13th century, making it by no means impossible that this particular manuscript was actually written before Snorri's death in 1241. The date of this manuscript is established; all ideas and speculation about other sagas being older than *Egils saga* rely on theories and impressions that are impossible to prove. Most of these theories are based on uncertain notions of literary development within the saga genre and putative written connections between them (so-called *rittengsl*).⁵¹ There is no hard evidence of other sagas existing earlier in written form (see Table 2).

Table 2. The Family Sagas and the Dates of Their Earliest Known Manuscripts

Year(s) of Earliest Known Manuscript	Title of Family Saga
1250	Egils saga Skallagrímssonar (W)
1250–1300	Laxdœla saga (W)

1300	Heiðarvíga saga (NW), Eyrbyggja saga (W), Brennu-Njáls saga (S)
1302–1310	Fóstbrœðra saga (Westfjords)
1300–1350	Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu (W)
1330–1370	Droplaugarsona saga (E), Hallfreðar saga (NW), Kormáks saga (NW), Víga-Glúms saga (NE), Bandamanna saga (NW), Finnboga saga ramma (NE, NW)
1350–1400	Bjarnar saga Híttdœlakappa (W)
1390–1425	Vatnsdæla saga (NW), Gísla saga Súrssonar (Westfjords), Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss (W), Flóamanna saga (S), Harðar saga ok Hólmverja (W), Þórðar saga hreðu (NW), *Høensa-Þóris saga (W), *Kjalnesinga saga (W), *Króka-Refs saga (W, Westfjords)
1400	Ljósvetninga saga (NE), Reykdæla saga (NE), Gull-Þóris saga (Westfjords)
1400–1500	Høensa-Þóris saga (W)
1420–1450	Vápnfirðinga saga (E)
1450	Svarfdæla saga (NE)
1450–1500	Kjalnesinga saga (W), Króka-Refs saga (W, Westfjords)
1475–1500	Grettis saga (NW)
1500	Víglundar saga (W)
1500+	Hrafnkels saga (E)
1600+	Valla-Ljóts saga (NE), Fljótsdæla saga (E), Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls (S), Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings (Westfjords)
1700	Þorsteins saga/Þáttur Síðu-Hallssonar (E)

* Note: indicates that the manuscript in question is now lost but is known securely to have once existed. The dates given for manuscripts are based on *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog: Register* (A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose).⁵⁴ The principal setting of the saga is given in brackets. The table omits *Færeyinga saga* and the *Vínland sagas*; their settings being largely outside Iceland.⁵⁵

The suggestion that *Egils saga* is the work of Snorri Sturluson and that it was the first of the family sagas to be written fits the picture of Snorri's centrality to the development of Icelandic letters—though of course nothing can be taken as certain. There is an obvious parallel with his work on the *Edda*: the use of book writing to record and pass on what was traditionally oral knowledge (stories or poetry). Even after Snorri had committed such learning to parchment, it would have continued to be

transmitted by word of mouth as it had been since time immemorial, and that such oral delivery was cheaper, quicker, easier, and more natural than writing it down. Snorri's willingness to defy received practice therefore constitutes a major ideological revolution.

The standard histories of Icelandic literature tend to assert an entirely natural progression, from hagiographical writing, to royal historiography interspersed with short narratives about Icelanders at court, to the longer family sagas proper. This may be a misconception: the step taken from writing the lives of saints and kings to producing works like the *Edda* and *Egils saga* was far from self-evident or simply the product of a natural development. For an innovation of this kind to take place, some individual in special circumstances must perceive the possibility, must have a one-off moment of inspiration (never forgetting that new ideas do not appear out of thin air but are always part of the culture, time, trends, learning, and thinking of their times). The individual in question needed to be thoroughly familiar with both mediums and what each had to offer, and how each was limited—the oral in status and permanence, the written in permitted subject matter and established technique.

Taken a step further, the family sagas can be seen as the outcome of an original idea in the mind of an individual innovator (as seems indisputable in the case of the *Edda*), rather than as the result of a long development from the primitive to the mature as envisaged in the standard model. The age of manuscripts, taken alone, is of course a simplistic and unsatisfactory way of dating the sagas, but it at least gives us a more secure starting point than uncertain and impressionistic methods based on stylistic sophistication and questionable interborrowing. The time line in Table 2 suggests that the innovation evidenced in *Egils saga* triggered a growing avalanche of written sagas which drew on the oral world of storytelling distributed around the country. Traditions of the settlements clearly preoccupied the minds of later Icelanders: characters were linked between stories through bonds of family and friendship; and individual chieftains played a part in several stories, mostly locally but sometimes on a national level. This preoccupation is also manifest in the *Book of Settlements*, which includes information on many characters who also appear in the sagas. Often the information found in the sagas corresponds to that in the *Book of Settlements*, sometimes it contradicts it—as is only to be expected in a traditional culture whose records were preserved orally, and this should not be taken, as has often been the case, as evidence for highly speculative theories about authorial creativity and/or lost written sources.⁵² The picture that emerges is of a people united by a homogeneous system of values, laws, and vision of the past, but with clear regional differences. These were the stories that people now started to remold into the written medium. Perhaps even more remarkably, they also saw that the same methods could be applied to events closer to their own real-life experiences of the 12th and 13th centuries, leading them to produce the sagas comprising *Sturlunga saga* and those preserved in manuscripts from the second half of the 14th century. The narrative themes and

structures found in the contemporary sagas of the *Sturlunga* collection have much in common with those in the family sagas even though the writers clearly stand much closer to the actual events and people they describe.⁵³

Saga Writing Gathers Momentum

Once Snorri had set the ball rolling and had shown willing to invest the substantial resources required to commit to parchment secular stories about individuals of his own social class, others stepped forward to follow his lead. Monks and clerics could continue writing about saints and evangelizing kings and the life of Christ and his apostles, but Snorri had shown that it was possible to treat other subjects in books and how to go about it. The age of surviving manuscripts suggests that it was Snorri's neighbors (and perhaps relations) in the west of Iceland who were the first to pick up on the new trend, since the next oldest manuscripts contain *Laxdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, and *Heiðarvíga saga*, all set in the west. After this come the earliest manuscripts of *Njáls saga*, suggesting perhaps a level of ambition on the part of the people of Rangárþing in the southern lowlands where Snorri grew up, a conscious attempt perhaps to outdo their western forerunners by producing something much longer and more complex than had hitherto been attempted.

Once the trend for saga writing had been established, it likely played a role in local identity and regional self-esteem, something not altogether dissimilar from the competition among different families and power groupings in Italy in the late 12th century to build ever taller and more glorious towers—or at least a tower of some kind—as in the little town of San Gimignano, where the craze generated no less than seventy-two towers before it fell out of fashion.⁵⁶ In Iceland, the enthusiasm for saga writing spread across the country until eventually every region other than the Reykjanes peninsula in the southwest had its own written sagas of one kind or another.

Using the age of known manuscripts as evidence of the age of texts is obviously inadequate and problematic. Manuscripts have been lost, for instance, and sagas may have been written that do not survive in any extant copies. But a comparison of the age of manuscripts and the regional settings of the sagas—good, bad, or indifferent—contained in them can be instructive. The picture that emerges is of a trend originating in the central west and spreading out until it comes to cover the entire country; this is a very different picture from the one presented in many literary histories of a fairly rapid chain of natural development in the 13th and 14th centuries, from primitive to mature and finally to decadence and decline.

The Lure of the Exotic: Translated Romances and Legendary Sagas

Secular literature from continental Europe first became accessible in the North in 1226 with *Tristrams saga*, a Norwegian translation by Brother Robert of Thomas of Britain's *Tristran*. Robert's translation reflects a new interest within Norway in literary trends from what were seen as the more cultured regions of Europe and may well have played a part in inspiring Snorri to think about how writing could be put to use to create something new out of local subject matter. *Tristrams saga* was followed by a spate of further translations as well as original works in the same vein. Similarities of style and subject matter have led many scholars in recent years to link the writing of the so-called *fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* (legendary sagas, sagas of ancient times) with this courtly literature.

Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda is a 19th-century term applied to a group of Icelandic prose narratives, interspersed with verse, set outside Iceland in Viking and pre-Viking times.⁵⁷ While the *fornaldarsögur* contrast with the family sagas proper in several respects—in the period in which they are supposed to have taken place, in their settings (which range over the wider Viking world of Scandinavia and the lands to the north, east, south, and southwest of Scandinavia), in their fondness for mystery, and in their exaggerated heroics—the two genres share many characteristics of style and composition. The similarities to the *fornaldarsögur* are particularly marked in the episodes in family sagas set outside Iceland. Though there are similarities and parallels to continental literature, the differences are even more striking—for example, in the *fornaldarsögur*'s obvious independence in vocabulary and in their treatment of subjects such as love and the emotions, which can hardly be explained unless they were based on a source of inspiration and a system of values from somewhere other than the translated literature.⁵⁸ Once again, the Icelanders adopted techniques, themes, and structures from continental literature but adapted them to existing stories found within their own native tradition. It may have been Snorri who inspired this new trend, since his *Edda* contains synopses in prose of some of the same heroic legends we find in the *fornaldarsögur*, notably the story of Sigurðr the Dragon-Slayer, the hoard of dragon's gold, and the destruction of the Völsung/Nibelungs.

Perhaps the people responsible for writing the family sagas themselves came under the influence of continental secular literature, once this literature had been translated and become available to secular Icelandic storytellers. This influence is probably most evident in a group of sagas known as the poets' sagas (*Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, *Hallfreðar saga*, *Kormáks saga*, *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, and *Víglundar saga*), all of which center on the theme of thwarted love that forms the mainstay of the continental courtly literature.⁵⁹

Discussion of the Literature

The study of medieval Icelandic texts from a literary and historical perspective has come a long way since the 17th century, when Þormóður Torfason, keeper of the privy archives and historiographer royal to the king of Denmark, wrote his history of Viking Age Scandinavia directly from his Old Icelandic sources, without distinction between the legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*), kings' sagas and family sagas (and in defiance of the strictures of Árni Magnússon in his review of Þormóður's *Series dynastarum et regum Daniæ*).⁶⁰ Philology, source criticism, and textual interpretation had not as yet entered the scholarly armory and the texts were treated pretty much as on-the-spot reports of real societies and real events. The importance of the manuscript history of texts was first appreciated by Þormóður's contemporary, Árni Magnússon, and since then historians and paleographers have come to realize the necessity of investigating the manuscripts and genesis of texts before anything worthwhile can be said about any relation they might have to the external reality they claim to describe. The early notion, shared by most scholars, was clearly that the oral tradition behind the texts had been strong and reliable, and that the original scribes had done little more than set down on parchment what the tradition had handed down to them. Different methodological problems concerning the relationship between literature and reality have since been investigated for the family sagas on the one hand, and for *Sturlunga saga* on the other.⁶¹

The 19th century saw huge advances in classical philology, led by the areas of biblical research and Homeric studies.⁶² On the Homeric poems, two main schools of thought emerged according to the emphasis placed, on the one hand, on the part of tradition in the shaping of the poems and, on the other, on the creative input of the individual poet Homer.⁶³ The role of scholarship thus became either to elevate Homer's unique poetic genius or to identify the sources of individual episodes in older sources. This quest for origins shed light on many aspects of the texts but on occasion led scholars some distance away from the actual object of their research—the works themselves—as memorably described by the English medievalist John R. R. Tolkien in his lecture “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics.”⁶⁴

A similar preoccupation with origins manifested itself among those working in the area of Old Norse literature. Andreas Heusler categorized these approaches as the *Freiproza* (“freeprose”) theory and the *Buchproza* (“bookprose”) theory, according to the importance scholars ascribed to the assumed existence of oral tales behind the written works or to the part of the individual authors at work at their writing stands.⁶⁵ The subjects scholars chose to investigate were largely determined by the theory of origins they adhered to: within the bookprose school, research centered around questions of literary relations (intertextuality) and age, along with attempts to put names to the authors of particular texts and the search for the influences of learned Latin and Church culture; freeprose research tended to concentrate on the historicity

of the sagas and explained related passages by appeal to an underlying oral tradition. For a long time, the bookprose theory held almost absolute sway, providing for instance the scholarly basis behind the standard editions of the texts presented in the *Íslenzk fornrit* series—that it was the editors' job to sift carefully through each work for indications of manuscript transmission, literary relations, age, and possible author, thereby avoiding the risk of letting the research be distorted by unprovable theories of origin.⁶⁶

There is no doubt that literacy in any modern sense, that is, the knowledge needed to be able to read and write and use vellum to make books, arrived in Iceland with Christianity. Christian monasteries became centers of learning and culture and played an important part in the writing of the sagas, although wealthy farmer-chieftains also took up their pens or employed scribes to record and copy sagas and poems.⁶⁷

The importance of the Church's literary activities has become an ever more prominent feature of Old Norse research since the latter part of the 20th century, in part due to the pioneering work of Hans Bekker-Nielsen and his colleagues on the aesthetics of narrative.⁶⁸ The Latin learning introduced by the Church was already firmly established by the time the Icelanders started to write their kings' sagas and family sagas. This led Sigurður Nordal, Gabriel Turville-Petre, and later Lars Lönnroth to the view that Icelandic literature developed as a domestic efflorescence upon a stem of Latin historiography.⁶⁹ However, others have found this development as envisaged by Nordal and Lönnroth—broadly from foreign saints' lives and hagiographical writings to royal biography, which then merged with an internal tradition to produce the family sagas—far from self-evident. For instance, in his critique of these ideas, Michael Chesnutt observes that the subject matter of the family sagas is not such as to suggest itself automatically to clerics intent on putting their native language to literary use.⁷⁰

Thus Nordal and Lönnroth's theory of an autogenous literary development of saga writing is far from unchallenged. On top of this, in recent years there has been a considerable modification in ideas about the age of the sagas—ideas that were central to Nordal's system. Individual sagas have been shifted around within the system as he constructed it, though without any general assault on the underlying thesis of a development starting with saints' lives, through kings' sagas (with a stopover in short episodes within the kings' sagas about Icelanders, called *Íslendingaþættir*), to the family sagas, which then “degenerated” into legendary and chivalric sagas.⁷¹ Örnólfur Thorsson has started a root-and-branch reassessment of all our ideas about the age of the sagas on the basis of their vocabulary and the dates of the manuscripts, but no firm conclusions are yet to hand.⁷²

A second main approach to the origins of the family sagas follows the line taken by Margaret Schlauch.⁷³ This relates the Icelandic literary tradition to mainland Europe, especially French romances, which arrived in Iceland fairly early and, according to

Schlauch, “meant nothing less than a literary revolution, accomplished in a very short time.”⁷⁴ Similar ideas were expressed by Rubow in 1928, for whom the main literary influences on the family sagas came almost entirely from translations of European literature rather than from any internal tradition.⁷⁵ Many other scholars since have done work on identifying the influence of continental secular literature on the Icelandic saga tradition.⁷⁶

A great amount of research has also gone into tracing the influence of Latin scholastic writings on Old Icelandic literature. The importance of this influence is no longer disputed and is manifested in individual motifs, ideological influences, and various features of the narrative technique of the sagas.⁷⁷ It has been shown that in the way narrative elements are put together to create integrated works, the sagas owe something to methods developed in historiographical writing in continental Europe in the 12th century.⁷⁸

The Parry–Lord description of a living oral tradition of epic poetry greatly strengthened the position of those who believed oral tradition to be a significant source of the form and material of the Icelandic sagas.⁷⁹ It was clear that the Parry–Lord “oral theory” had answered many of the chief reservations of the bookprose scholars concerning the oral origins of sagas—for instance, as regards long term social memory, the number of stories individual performers could master, and the aesthetic possibilities of oral literature.⁸⁰ The rug had previously been pulled from under the literary–relations approach by Theodore M. Andersson, who had drawn attention to so many flaws in Einar Ól. Sveinsson’s argument for verbal borrowings between *Njáls saga* and other sagas that there was no alternative but to assume that the sagas owed some kind of debt to an oral tradition—as opposed to their relying on literary borrowings from each other.⁸¹ Others, such as Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, went on to apply the Parry–Lord theory to Old Icelandic literature, and these were soon followed by a host of others.⁸² Carol Clover draws attention to oral narrative techniques in the settings of events.⁸³ The studies of Richard Allen and Lars Lönnroth on *Njáls saga* attempt to bring out narrative patterns that they associate with orality, while also attempting to evaluate the part of the author in the overall composition of the work.⁸⁴ Finally, Vésteinn Ólason uses not dissimilar methods to uncover traditional narrative patterns in the *Eyrbyggja saga*, while also emphasizing the role of an educated writer in bringing the various elements of the saga together into a whole.⁸⁵

The new ideas represented in these writings have been given the covering label of “formalist–traditionalism” or “new traditionalism”—a movement that established itself firmly in Iceland with Óskar Halldórsson’s book on the origins of *Hrafnkels saga*.⁸⁶ Halldórsson demonstrated the existence in the east of Iceland of stories concerning the events related in the saga and went on from here to interpret the saga in the light of oral tradition. A further contribution to this debate appeared with Jesse L. Byock’s book on the feuds in the sagas, which put forward a number of challenging

ideas on links between oral narratives and the handling of real disputes during the Commonwealth period.⁸⁷ Byock envisaged an interaction in which feuds engendered sagas, which in turn offered people lessons in how to deal with and solve similar kinds of disputes—not unlike Eric Havelock’s ideas on the function of the Homeric poems in Greek society, which Havelock saw as a kind of knowledge bank and model for ethical and social behavior.⁸⁸

That the Icelandic sagas should have features in common with learned writings of the Middle Ages need come as no surprise. Much more remarkable is just how different the Icelandic literature is from the works that are supposed to have influenced it. The explanation can hardly be other than that in Iceland there was a strong and independent tradition of oral storytelling that merged with the learning newly come from abroad and modified it to its own rules and demands. Without this learning, there could have been no sagas as we know them, since it was the learning that made it possible for the native tradition to find expression in written form. But it is equally clear that this learning on its own and unsupported could not have engendered the eddas and sagas and the literary output as we know it from 13th-century Iceland; as proof of this, we need only look to mainland Scandinavia, where the same learning arrived, at much the same time, but produced only negligible results in terms of original literature.⁸⁹

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date: 11 January 2021