JÓNAS KRISTJÁNSSON

EDDAS AND SAGAS

Plate 1. Þingvellir

As its name implies, the Alþingi, *"General Assembly", was a meeting of the whole nation. It was laid down that it should last for two weeks over midsummer each year – a time of perpetual daylight in Iceland – and meet at* Þingvöllr, *"Assembly plain" (now most often in the pl.,* Þingvellir*), in a magnificent natural setting some 40 km east of Reykjavík. In the picture* Almannagjá, *the biggest of the many rifts running through and bordering Þingvellir, is on the left,* Ármannsfell *in the background. The flagpole marks the site of* Lögberg, *"Law-rock", where the Lawspeaker had his reserved place and where much assembly business was done. – Photo: Hjálmar R. Bárðarson.*

Eddas and Sagas

JÓNAS KRISTJÁNSSON

Eddas and Sagas

Iceland's Medieval Literature

TRANSLATED BY
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Preface

This book was originally written as part of a general history of Iceland, intended for the Icelandic reading public and published to commemorate the eleven hundredth anniversary of the settlement of Iceland in 874. The present translation is slightly augmented, and certain passages have been rewritten, but otherwise there is little change from the Icelandic version. As a consequence the book occasionally presupposes an Icelander's knowledge of the subject or gives a different emphasis than would have been the case if it had been originally intended for foreign readers. But if there is a slight disadvantage in the fact that the book was written *for Icelanders,* there ought to be a decided advantage in the fact that it was written *by an Icelander,* for none but Icelanders can fully participate in this unique national literature. Only we speak this ancient language and only we have the setting of the sagas in our daily view. Thus it ought to be of benefit for foreigners to be led through this landscape by an Icelandic guide.

A novelty in this book is the attention given to prose works, as opposed to poetry. As a rule, histories of Icelandic medieval literature devote as much space to poetry — i. e., the eddaic and scaldic poems, with a few lines reserved for the late poetry — as to all the prose genres together. This is out of all proportion, for only a few of them can be considered great poetry, and they do not have any longer our full confidence as sources for ancient culture, whether pagan or Christian, for many scholars consider them as part of thirteenth and fourteenth century literature. The present book devotes only about one-fourth of its space to the eddaic and scaldic poems, and the remaining three-fourths to the other literary genres. This is a fairer proportion.

Iceland was settled by Norwegians, and in the Middle Ages Norway and Iceland were a cultural unity. For this reason it is necessary to say something about Norwegian literature when one is discussing Icelandic literature. In addition, whenever a Norwegian text is being discussed or

there is doubt about the country in which a text was produced, this will be clearly indicated.

In the citations from medieval texts the spelling is harmonized according to reconstructed orthography of the thirteenth century, when Icelandic prose was at its peak. Thus for example, *ö* is printed for both earlier *ǫ* and *ø*, and sometimes *æ* for both *æ* and *œ*, reflecting the merging of these sounds around 1200 and during the thirteenth century. Place-names are printed with the ending *-ur* (e. g. Borgarfjörður), in accordance with modern practice, unless they appear in a citation from a medieval text.

I wish to express my appreciation to the many people who have helped to make this book possible, although there is not space to name them all individually or thank them as they deserve. However, I do wish to express my special gratitude to Dr. Brian Dodsworth, who most kindly and painstakingly read the proofs of the book and brought a number of improvements to my attention.

It was a stroke of good luck to get Peter Foote to translate this book into English, for he possesses the three skills necessary for such a task: he has a profound knowledge of Icelandic literature, understands the Icelandic language like a native, and is a master of English style. Except where attributed, English versions of passages from early texts cited in the book are the work of the translator. He is well aware that the translations of verse are feeble in comparison with the originals, but he expects readers to turn to them only when their own determined efforts to read the Icelandic have foundered. Changes and improvements to the Icelandic text as printed in *Saga Íslands* are the work of both author and translator.

Reykjavík, April 1988
Jónas Kristjánsson

A new land

The history of the Scandinavian North begins in the twilight of prehistory. Archaeological evidence shows these lands to have been inhabited for thousands of years, since the Stone and Bronze Ages, with fluctuating prosperity and a slow advance. The aboriginal inhabitants of Scandinavia were of unknown racial stock, but it was later invaded by a Germanic people, a branch of the great Indo-European stem that spread across Europe and Asia in the last millennia before Christ.

The ancient Romans came into contact with the Germanic tribes of the south on the borders of the Empire, beyond the rivers Rhine and Danube. These southern tribes had certain customs in common and spoke various dialects of the same language. They had long since emerged from the herdsman stage to form a number of kingdoms with some kind of organisation and social structure, but their participation in the classical Mediterranean culture had been small. They had no written literature; the characteristic Germanic runes were used almost exclusively for inscriptions on objects, and later on gravestones. In the eyes of the Romans, with their richer culture and more developed social system, these tribes were no better than semi-savage barbarians. Roman historical works make frequent reference to these people, while Tacitus devoted a separate book to them, our chief source of information on them in the first centuries of our era. But this comes from a foreign and hostile nation with no overall knowledge of Germanic culture and customs. And although, as far as it goes, the Roman account may be correct where neighbouring Germani are concerned, it is not certain that it applies to the Scandinavians on the shores of the Baltic, far from the Roman homelands.

The Germanic peoples came originally from the south and east, and centuries later they flowed back in the same directions, like a tide of the sea. What part the Scandinavian peoples may have played in the Germanic backlash that flooded more southerly areas of Europe, and

played a major role in the downfall of the thousand-year-old empire of Rome, is not known with any certainty. However, Jordanes, the Ostrogothic historian, believed his nation had its origins in the southernmost part of Scandinavia, while the Cimbri, who with their kinsmen the Teutones were the first Germanic tribes to invade Roman territory, are thought by some scholars to have originated in the Jutland peninsula, where their memory is preserved in the regional name Himmerland. But if direct participation by Northmen in the great migrations is somewhat doubtful, there is no doubt about their contacts with more southerly nations at the end of the Dark Ages and the beginning of the Middle Ages. From the south they obtained not only tools and ornaments, but also lays on historical themes which have only survived in the north, in Iceland.

Shortly before the end of the eighth century the Northmen make their first definite appearance in written records — and then in the records of other nations, for as yet they were themselves without the art of letters, apart from the runes already mentioned. But they were skilled in other arts and their technical and military development was advanced. The Scandinavian peninsula is mountainous and inaccessible, while the enormous length of the coast with its deep fjords and excellent harbours is an invitation to seamen, and at this period the Scandinavians were better shipwrights and sailors than any in Europe. They were tough and aggressive, well equipped with defensive armour, could propel missiles, both spear and arrow, at long ranges, while in close combat they used long-handled axes, considered the most terrible of weapons. When their homelands became overcrowded and the wanderlust seized them, they put out in their ships and at first made the short voyage across the North Sea. In the year 793 they appeared in the isle of Lindisfarne off the coast of Northumberland, site of the monastery of St Cuthbert and one of the main centres of the English Church. The monks were completely defenceless. They were cut down in an instant by the raiders and the treasures of their monastery plundered. Sea-warriors of this description were called Vikings and the age now beginning is named after them. The raid on Lindisfarne was one of those that marked the opening of the Viking Age.

News of this easily-won wealth doubtless travelled like wildfire all over Scandinavia. In the succeeding years one raid followed another. Given the lie of their land, the Danes and Norwegians naturally sailed westwards to England, Scotland and Ireland, and even all the way

south to France and the Mediterranean. The Swedes went by what was known as the Eastern Way, harrying the countries south and east of the Baltic. Soon the Vikings were no longer content just to raid the coasts for plunder or occupy outlying headlands. They began to ravage inland, mustered great Viking hosts, conquered whole provinces and established independent Viking states. Thus for a considerable period the Danes controlled all central and northeastern England in the area known as the Danelaw, while the Norwegians conquered parts of Ireland and secured a permanent hold on Dublin, which was ruled by Norse kings through the greater part of the tenth and eleventh centuries. Vikings also sailed up the rivers Loire and Seine and harried the country on both banks. Paris was besieged by Vikings for a whole winter, and the defence of the city is well chronicled. Rouen fell into Viking hands and became the capital of a considerable and powerful state, known as Normandy because of its origins. The Normans' leader, Rollo, called Göngu-Hrólfr in the Icelandic sagas, became a count of the king of France in the year 911, and his more famous descendant, William Duke of Normandy, beat England into permanent subjection at Hastings in the year 1066. On the Eastern Way the Slavs called in Swedes to aid them against the Mongol tribes that were invading their territory from the east. The Russian *Nestorian Chronicle* records that the first Russian state was founded by Rurik, a Swedish Viking. Its capital was at Novgorod, known by the Northmen as Hólmgarðr.

The Viking raids caused an enormous upheaval throughout Europe in their day. To the Scandinavian lands they brought wealth and different streams of culture. And yet, with a few exceptions, the Vikings nowhere succeeded in creating an enduring national state of their own. Though some of their states, such as Normandy and Hólmgarðr, became powerful, the small ruling element was gradually absorbed by the native mass, losing both language and ethnic identity. The only places where this did not happen were previously uninhabited lands occupied by the Vikings.

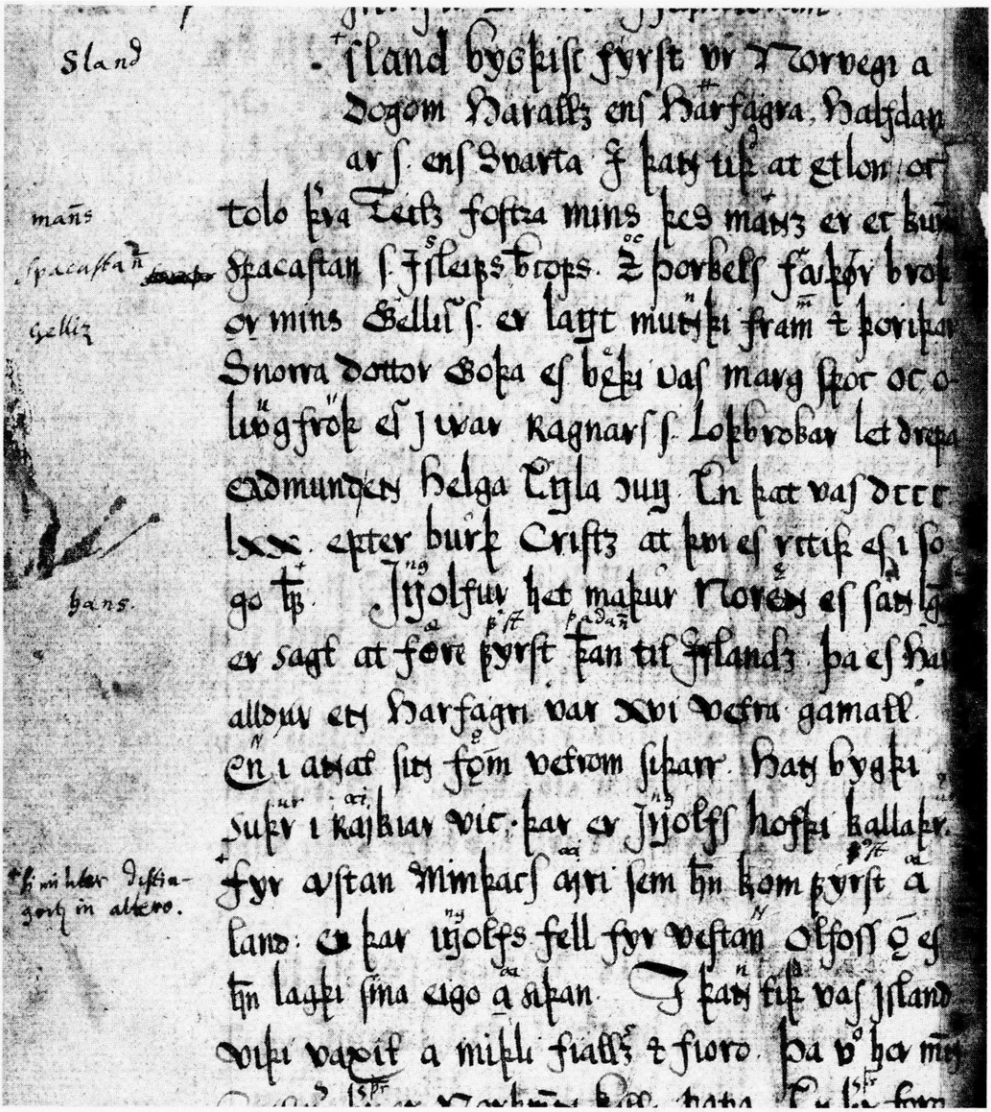
"Iceland was first settled from Norway in the days of Haraldr Fairhaired, son of Hálfdan the Black, at the time . . . when Ívarr, son of Ragnarr Shaggy-breeks, put St Edmund, king of the English, to death. And this was 870 winters after Christ's birth, as is written in his saga. Ingólfr was the name of a Norwegian man who is truly said to have first gone thence to Iceland when Haraldr Fairhaired was sixteen years of age, and a second time a few years later. He settled in the south at

Reykjarvík . . . And wise men have said that in sixty winters Iceland was fully settled and no more after that." So wrote Ari the Wise in his *Íslendingabók* (pp. 120–123 below).

The settlement of Iceland shows better than anything else the great vigour and initiative of the Northmen in the Viking Age. Thousands of settlers crossed the stormy seas in open vessels; men with their wives and children and other kinsfolk, housecarls and thralls. With them they took clothes and provisions, utensils and domestic equipment, both indoor and outdoor, and beside these the necessary livestock: sheep, cattle, horses, goats, pigs and poultry. This extraordinary migration reminds one of the marvellous tales of Noah's Ark, in which all mankind and the whole of animal creation found sanctuary.

The settlement was motivated by the same causes as the Viking raids: overcrowding in the homeland and an urge for novelty and quick profit. During the Age of Settlement the climate of Iceland seems to have been relatively mild. The immigrants enjoyed all the advantages of a land untouched and unspoiled by the hand of man. There was an abundance of fish in the rivers and lakes and coastal waters of the island. The lowlands were covered with rich pasture and birchwood that reached high up the slopes of the mountains. Some of the newcomers described the new country as a fishing-station, while one declared that every blade of grass dripped butter. However, it was soon found that there were two sides to the picture and the Icelandic weather could be rather unreliable. One of the earliest would-be settlers lost all his livestock in the rigours of the first winter, and went back. Before leaving he climbed a high mountain and saw a fjord filled with drift-ice, whereupon he gave the country its chilly name. Unwonted events in Norway stimulated the exodus from the country and speeded up the settlement. Formerly there had been petty kings in every district, but now Haraldr Fairhaired subjugated the land and made himself supreme. Western Norway was a great breeding-ground of Vikings and here it was that Haraldr met the stiffest resistance, for he made every effort to pacify the country and destroy their power. After his victory many of his enemies left Norway, some sailing to Iceland, and others to the islands of the west across the North Sea where they established bases from which to harry their homeland. The king then mounted an expedition against the west Vikings, after which still more of them were driven across to Iceland.

According to the Book of Settlements (p. 125 below), most of the settlers came from western districts of Norway, especially Sogn and



From Ari's Íslendingabók, *"Book of the Icelanders", written in the 1120s or c. 1130. In the opening lines we read:* [I]sland byGþisc fyrst vr Norvegi a dogom Harallz ens Harfagra, Halfdanar s(onar) ens Svarta – *"Iceland was first settled from Norway in the days of Haraldr Fairhaired, son of Hálfdan the Black." Árni Magnússon Institute, Reykjavík: AM 113 b fol. 17th century. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.*

Hordaland. The Icelandic language is closest to the Norwegian dialects spoken in these areas. And when the Icelanders adopted a code of law for their commonwealth they based it on the laws of the Gulaþing, then in force in Hordaland, Sogn and Fjordane. Thus all the evidence on the origins of the Icelanders points in the same direction. But from the start the people that settled the new land had a distinctive culture and customs of their own. This may be due to the particular sample of Norwegians that migrated there, and especially to the slight admixture of Celtic stock among the settlers from the isles of the west. Many of the thralls who later mixed with the freeborn immigrants were also of Celtic origin.

Towards the close of the Age of Settlement the Icelanders combined to establish a common state and general assembly. The country was divided into four Quarters, and each of these into nine *goðorð*, or chieftaincies, except the Northern Quarter, in which there were twelve. The chieftains in charge of the heathen sacrificial rites were called *goðar*, and these were also the leaders of these sub-divisions of the state. They were of the noblest families among the settlers. In early spring a district assembly was held in the territory of every three chieftaincies.

The Alþingi was an assembly of the whole nation, as its name implies. Its sessions lasted two weeks every summer at a time when the sun was highest in the sky and the days longest, and were held in magnificent surroundings a little to the east of the homestead of Reykjavík, at the site since known as Þingvöllur — "the plain of the assembly". Though the Icelandic laws were based on those of the settlers' native districts in Norway, these were considerably supplemented and amended. In their recorded form the laws of the Icelandic commonwealth appear far more complex and advanced than any contemporary legal system in neighbouring countries.

At the Alþingi, as might be supposed, the *goðar* were supreme. They were self-appointed members of the legislature (*lögrétta*), an institution that amended old laws, drafted new ones and gave judgment on points of law. To ensure its efficient and impartial operation, however, every *goði* had two advisers, one sitting behind him and one in front.

The judicial courts of the Alþingi were four in number, one for each Quarter. The *goðar* nominated one man each in every Quarter Court, thus giving them effective control, though the interests of parties to a dispute were safeguarded by their right to object to any member of the court on various grounds of unsuitability. Many features of the Icelan-

dic constitution were unique and it was more democratic in operation than in neighbouring lands. There was no king to oppress subjects with tyrannical commands. Power was equally divided between thirty-nine farmer-chieftains, among whose tasks was the duty of protecting the interests of their people, each in his own district. The legislative and judicial powers were completely separate and allotted to independent bodies. Juries were very much used in the legal process, their members giving their verdict according to conscience. At a fairly early date a Fifth Court was introduced as a kind of supreme court of appeal for the whole country. One of its functions was to decide cases that could not be settled in the Quarter Courts. With this, Iceland possessed a three-stage system of justice, just as in any advanced modern society: the district court of the spring assembly, and the Quarter and Fifth Courts of the Alþingi.

The merits of this original and well-devised system were proved both by its duration and results. The Icelandic commonwealth lasted for nearly three and a half centuries, and under its wing there blossomed a culture whose like was not to be found anywhere else in Northern Europe. In the latter part of the commonwealth period, Icelanders were unequalled in some branches of literature.

In the early period after the settlement the inhabitants possessed a large and effective fleet of ships, and the wanderlust that had driven their forefathers to Iceland was still in their blood. From here they voyaged further westwards in search of new lands. Eiríkr the Red, a man from the west of Iceland, discovered a large country which he named Greenland — "and said that it would urge men to go there if the land had a good name", observes Ari the Wise. Nor was Eiríkr disappointed. During the next few years many emigrated from Iceland to Greenland, establishing what began as a flourishing settlement. From Greenland it was not far to the North American continent, and the seadogs of Greenland soon had a glimpse of still more lands to the southwest. Bjarni Herjólfsson and Leifr the Lucky, son of Eiríkr the Red, are each said to have discovered three lands which were given the names *Vínland* ("Wine-land"), *Markland* ("Forest-land") and *Helluland* ("Flagstone-land"). Helluland and Markland were probably Baffin Island and the Labrador peninsula. Vínland seems to have been south of the Gulf of St Lawrence, in New Brunswick or Maine or Massachusetts. Remains of houses and other traces of Nordic men have been found at the northern tip of Newfoundland, where there was probably a short-term stopping place on the sea voyage between Greenland and

Vínland. Þorfinnr karlsefni tried to settle in Vínland, but was compelled to leave by the hostility of the natives. Voyages from Greenland to Markland, on the other hand, continued until at least about the middle of the fourteenth century.

Greenland followed its mother-country, Iceland, under the rule of Norwegian and later Danish kings. In time their prosperity declined as a result of deterioration of climate and foreign misrule. The number of seaworthy vessels soon dwindled and both countries lacked timber to replace them. The Greenlanders became totally dependent upon the whims of foreign merchants. In 1406 a ship was on its way from Norway to Iceland, but was driven off course by difficult currents and high winds and finally came ashore in Greenland. Four years later it again ventured out to sea and sailed to Norway. Thereafter nothing is heard until modern times of the Greenlandic settlement that was left to suffer the most terrible fate that has befallen any Scandinavian people. When explorers rediscovered the settlement at the beginning of the seventeenth century, they found only the ruins of farms, and poor wooden crosses over the bones of the seamen of old who had discovered America five centuries before the days of Columbus.

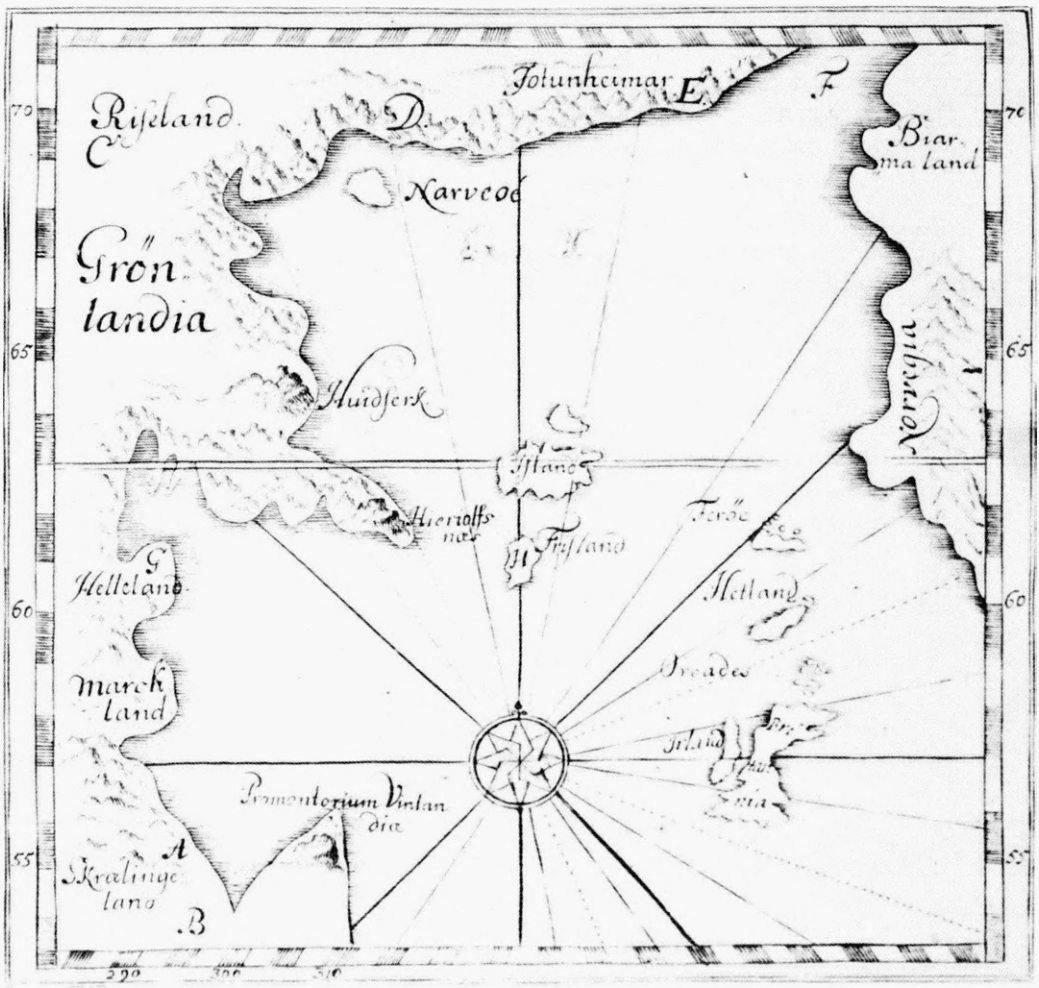
The ancient Icelandic commonwealth lasted longer than is usual for so happy a polity, but in the thirteenth century the inexorable advance of history had uncovered its weaknesses. Under the ancient constitution the Icelanders had no common executive authority. Authority in the country, previously distributed among 39 equal *goðar,* had now become concentrated in the hands of a few men. When these great chieftains were of a quiet and peaceable disposition, like Snorri's foster-father, Jón Loptsson, all was well. But struggles for power between them grew more frequent, and the country was rocked spasmodically by civil conflict. King Hákon of Norway was very ready to concern himself with the quarrels of the Icelanders in order to win control over the country. In the end, exhausted by constant strife and warfare, the Icelandic people chose, as the lesser of two evils, to become the king's vassals. They swore an oath of loyalty and submission to Hákon in the years 1262—1264.

After Iceland passed under the crown of Norway the internal conflicts that had raged intermittently for half a century died down. The population could breathe more freely — for the time being. But as years went by the unhealthy effects of foreign domination became apparent. The economic state of the country deteriorated rapidly and the

Plate 2
Eleventh-century ships of "viking" type, painted above the waterline and with striped sails. From the Bayeux Tapestry, the pictorial record of the Norman invasion of England in 1066.

Plate 3

"When Ingólfr saw Iceland, he threw his highseat pillars overboard to lead him to luck. He vowed he would settle where the pillars came ashore. He landed at the place now called Ingólfshöfði, 'Ingólfr's promontory'." Landnámabók, *ch. 8. Öræfajökull from the sea; Ingólfshöfði is visible on the left of the picture. – Photo: Jón Steindórsson.*



A map made by Sigurður Stefánsson, rector of the school at Skálholt (d. 1595). He must have worked from a world map of the kind published by Mercator in 1569 and supplemented it with information about the western world drawn from old Icelandic sources and influenced further by vague sixteenth-century notions of what lay across the Atlantic. Among the names included are Grönlandia (Greenland) and others ultimately derived from Grænlendinga saga *and* Eiríks saga rauða: *Helleland, Marckland, Skrælingeland and Promontorium Vinlandiæ. The original map has not survived and this illustration is reproduced from* Gronlandia Antiqua, *published by Þormóður Torfason (Torfæus) in 1706.*

creative originality that had characterised the literature of the commonwealth period petered out.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the Icelanders were struggling to regain their independence, it became the habit to blame foreign misrule for all the shortcomings of the past. But now that freedom and independence have been achieved it can be admitted that there were many factors involved and the decline only partly to be attributed to the agency of human powers.

As mentioned above, during the first centuries of Iceland's settlement the climate appears to have been milder than it later became. The land was fertile and untouched, but gradually it was spoiled by the incursions of man and beast. Woodlands receded and pastures were transformed into dust deserts. The climate turned colder in the fourteenth century, and later, colder still. The polar ice repeatedly blocked the coasts, causing disastrous seasons and the death of livestock. Volcanoes emitted ash that poisoned the grazing and killed flocks all over the country, bringing starvation to the people. To all these were added epidemic diseases that harried the land, causing fearful havoc in this remote corner of the inhabited world. The Great Plague of ill fame, which reached Iceland in 1402, is estimated to have killed about half the population. Then, and in another epidemic of the late fifteenth century, whole districts were depopulated, while landed property became concentrated in fewer and fewer hands.

The foreign government cannot however be entirely exonerated from all blame for the economic and cultural decline of the later middle ages and succeeding centuries. There were no forests in Iceland to provide timber suitable for the building of ocean-going ships, and the population was therefore dependent upon other nations for the import of essential goods. The Iceland trade was both neglected and misused for the enrichment of foreign merchants. And it was alien influence, both temporal and spiritual, that caused the Church gradually to lose its close links with the secular powers and become just a small limb of the universal Catholic body under the Papacy. With this the connection between foreign culture and Icelandic lore was also loosened. Many of the later Catholic bishops were rapacious on the Church's behalf and fought with the newly-rich chieftains and secular authorities for landed estates. The bulk of the people, who had previously been freeholders, now became impoverished tenants on the lands of the episcopal sees, the monasteries, or the families of wealthy magnates.

Late in the fourteenth century Norway passed under the Danish

crown, and with it Iceland, which then became a kind of outlying croft in the eyes of the Danish authorities. This change was to the progressive disadvantage of the Icelanders, since their masters were now remoter both geographically and in kinship than before. Luther's Reformation reached Iceland about the middle of the sixteenth century, in effect as a cynical profit-making move on the part of the monarchy. The king now took possession of all the very considerable estates of the monasteries to add to the various other sources of income that had previously come his way.

The Reformation marked an upheaval in Iceland, both politically and culturally. With it a whole era came to an end. The old sagas lived on in copies on paper and gave stimulus to national feeling and new literary works. But when historical writing was revived at the beginning of the seventeenth century it took on new forms which could not compare with the classical literature of Iceland's golden age.

The major periods

The history of early Icelandic literature can be conveniently divided into periods according to the predominant intellectual currents and literary preferences in succeeding ages.

There is first the period of creativity which existed before literacy based on Latin learning became established among the Icelanders. It lasted from the settlement c. AD 870 to the years round 1100. The only literature in a formal sense from this time was in verse. Ancient poetry was remembered and transmitted from generation to generation, and new poems and "occasional" stanzas were constantly made. In the same period recollections of people and events from the Settlement Age and from before and after it were told as anecdotes or at greater length, and stories of ancient heroes were a source of both pastime and knowledge.

Little of the verbal art of this early age was ever recorded. It is true that in mainland Scandinavia verse couplets and longer sequences were inscribed on rune stones, and a few sources say that whole poems or entire narratives were written on rune sticks. We have such a report in *Egils saga* but this thirteenth-century account is not trustworthy evidence of tenth-century practice, and it is altogether more probable that poems were generally known by heart and passed on by word of mouth. None of the preserved poetry refers to the runic recording of verse, and the authors of the twelfth and thirteenth century who made use of old poetry – Snorri Sturluson, for example – never tell us that it was cut in runes. We are on the other hand often told that people learnt poems and knew poems. "There were scalds with King Haraldr [Fairhaired], and people still know their poems and poems on all the kings who have since ruled in Norway," says Snorri in the prologue to *Heimskringla*. We should further note that we have several examples of verse in variants recorded from two or more informants. A good instance is offered by the texts of *Vǫluspá* found whole in the Codex Regius of the *Poetic Edda* and in

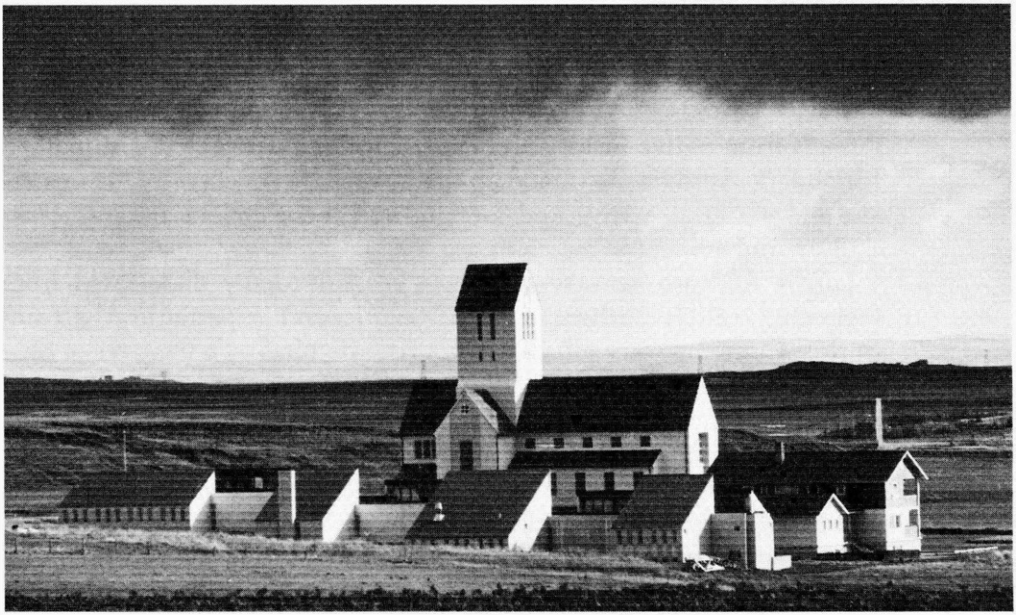
Hauksbók and cited in part in Snorri's *Edda*. It is inconceivable that these three variant forms were all derived from a single runic archetype.

Books came to Iceland with Christianity, Latin books in Latin script. Christianity could not exist without Scripture and all its derivatives. The Icelanders formally accepted the new faith in AD 1000 (or 999), and within a hundred years appear to have made good progress in writing their own vernacular. The second stage in Icelandic literary history can be said to begin about 1100: and the start of subsequent periods generally coincides more or less with the arrival of a new century. At first native composition was strongly influenced by foreign learning. Translations and adaptations were made from Latin, and the native works that were created or copied were either works of scholarship or intended to give practical instruction. These remained the characteristic modes throughout the twelfth century, which is rightly called the "age of learning".

In the decades round 1200 a remarkable development took place. Icelanders began to write sagas: rich and expansive descriptions and accounts of people and events from different places and different times, ranging from the contemporary world to the remotest past, from the author's own valley to far-off foreign lands.

The chief sources of these written sagas were the oral traditions that were zealously cultivated, especially by those who had no book-learning. The first sagas have typical twelfth-century features: dry information of the kind the earliest historians provided, or incredible and didactic elements of the kind typical of hagiography. But gradually these two streams merge into one: sober fact and exaggerated fancy, the real and the imagined, come together in a seemly coherence which is the hallmark of the classical *Íslendinga sögur*, "sagas of Icelanders".

There was no long stay before changing tastes began to tend towards new extremes. Influence from the romantic chivalric literature of western Europe began to make itself felt from about the middle of the thirteenth century onwards, largely through the medium of translations – the first *riddara sögur*, "sagas of chivalry" – which both in Norway and Iceland appear to have been warmly welcomed as having all the spice of novelty. Acquaintance with these stories led people to put a new value on various homely tales of a more fantastic kind which provided popular entertainment but so far only existed in oral forms: now they gradually found written record to make the group of sagas we call *fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, "sagas of ancient times in the north lands" (i. e., they are usually set in a period before or about the time of the settlement of



The Christian faith was adopted by the Alþingi in the year 1000 (or 999). The first Icelandic bishop was consecrated in the middle of the 11th century with his see at Skálholt in the south. Half a century later a second diocese was established at Hólar in the north. These two sees were to be the chief centres of intellectual activity in Iceland for seven hundred years, to the end of the eighteenth century when Reykjavík began to emerge as the urban capital of the country. Virtually no ancient remains are now to be seen at Skálholt but after a period of ruinous decay restoration is under way, with a new church and college built there and plans for further development. Photo: Hjálmar R. Bárðarson.

Iceland); another term used (outside Iceland) to describe them is "mythical-heroic sagas". Icelanders in the fourteenth century were at a vast distance from the Settlement Age (c. 870–930) and the so-called "saga age" (c. 930–1030) which followed it: traditions from the early periods had either dried up or swelled into exaggerated folktales; many of them had already been incorporated in written accounts. On the other hand, literature as such can now be said to lead an independent life: authors borrow more freely than ever before from older or contemporary works, they pick up old motifs from books and repeat them with a new twist or put them in a new context. The three main kinds of

sagas with settings in the past – the sagas of Icelanders, the sagas of ancient times and the sagas of chivalry – now come much closer together than before. In the newest of the sagas of Icelanders we find narrative strands lifted from the two other kinds, but interwoven with threads from native history and experience and associated with named Icelanders. Authors also made up their own sagas of chivalry, using new and old material, native and foreign, and these fictions became especially popular.

In the fifteenth century literature became totally dissociated from Icelandic reality: authors move in exotic and supernatural dream-worlds. Contemporary affairs are not recorded in any narratives of saga kind – we have only deeds and documents. Some sagas of chivalry and other forms of fantasy were put together, and lives of saints were occasionally translated. But in the fifteenth century and down to the Reformation in the middle of the sixteenth original composition was mainly in verse: poems on the saints of the Church, *rímur* – versified narratives, mostly drawn from sagas of chivalry – a genre which was launched in the fourteenth century and really set sail in the fifteenth, and ballads which seem to have been sung as dance measures and which lived long in oral tradition before their recording began in the seventeenth century.

It is customary to divide the earliest Icelandic poetry into two kinds: eddaic and scaldic. In general terms one can see that the division is justified, but the distinctions between them are not always clear and many poems come somewhere between them in subject-matter and form.

Eddaic poetry

The name. Circumstances of preservation

About 1220 Snorri Sturluson wrote a famous handbook of poetics and it was to this that the name *Edda* was first attached: it is called *Snorra Edda*, Snorri's *Edda*; outside Iceland it is sometimes referred to as the *Prose Edda*. The simplex *edda* means "great-grandmother" but scholars have had other ideas as to its significance as the title of Snorri's book. One suggestion is that it is derived from the Latin *edo*, "I edit", "I compose" (cf. Icel. *kredda*, derived from *credo*, "I believe", originally used of the Apostles' Creed). As the name of Snorri's work *Edda* is of venerable age, for it occurs in the Uppsala manuscript, written about 1300 or soon afterwards: "This book is called Edda. Snorri Sturluson composed it."

Sæmundr Sigfússon "the Wise" (1056–1133), priest in Oddi, is famous in Icelandic history and legend, but nothing he wrote has been preserved. Icelanders found it hard to reconcile themselves to this sad fact and in course of time attributed to him a number of works which had nothing to do with him at all. In the first part of the seventeenth century, and probably at an earlier date still, the notion was born that Snorri's *Edda* was only an epitome of a much larger and more notable *Edda* which Sæmundr had written. The idea may have been encouraged from the start by the fact that people knew of a manuscript which was believed to contain some or all of this ancient *Edda* ascribed to him. In 1643 the codex in question came into the hands of Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson, who was quite convinced that this was indeed *Edda Sæmundi multiscii, Sæmundar Edda*. The theory that this was Snorri's precursor and source was strengthened by the fact that the codex contained complete texts of a number of the poems cited or referred to by Snorri. The association with Sæmundr has now been long rejected, and scholars recognise that the poems in Bishop Brynjólfur's manuscript were com-

posed in various periods, most of them long before Sæmundr was born. Nevertheless the name *Sæmundar Edda* has stuck to the poems gathered together in this ancient book, although most people now simply refer to the volume as the *Poetic Edda* or speak of the eddaic poems.

Bishop Brynjólfur presented the codex to King Frederick III of Denmark in 1662, along with some other precious manuscripts, and because of its home in the royal collection it came to be called the Codex Regius. Various imperfections show that it is a copy, not a first recording. Some eddaic poems are also preserved in the fragmentary manuscript AM 748 4to, thought to have been written at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Among the half-dozen mythological poems it contains is one not found in Codex Regius, *Baldrs draumar*.

It is hard to tell now whether Bishop Brynjólfur's openhandedness sprang more from devotion to the monarch or from a desire to make these ancient poetic records known to the world in print. Progress in publication was slow. *Hávamál* and *Völuspá* were printed in 1665. Manuscript copies of the codex had been made in Iceland before it went to Denmark and others were made after its transfer, so the poems became known to some extent in this way. Copyists noticed that poems in similar vein were to be found in other early manuscripts and added these to their transcripts. When scholars came to prepare editions for publication, they did the same, and gradually a more or less generally accepted canon of eddaic verse was established.

When and where eddaic poems were composed

We know nothing of the creators of eddaic poetry, and there has been much discussion – and controversy – about when and where the poets lived. Some of the poems were in all probability recorded already in the twelfth century: the oldest recording we have are the fragments quoted in Snorri's *Edda* from the 1220s. The forward limit is set by the age of the manuscripts that contain the poems, especially the Codex Regius, the biggest of them. It is dated to the later part of the thirteenth century, but it was copied from an exemplar (or more than one) at least some decades older.

Assessment of the limit backward in time has chiefly been attempted by reference to the emergence and development of a language that can properly be called Norse; and naturally, those poems that have identifiable historic characters among their personae can only have been made after their heroes' reputation was established. In the Roman Iron Age

The Tune stone, which originally marked a chieftain's grave, was found built into the churchyard wall at Tune in Østfold, Norway. It is of red granite and has runes on two faces, probably carved in the fifth century. One of the inscriptions contains the alliterative lines transcribed on p. 28. Sketch from Norges Indskrifter med de ældre Runer I.

and Migration Period one language – it has been called proto-Norse – was spoken throughout Scandinavia. Our knowledge of this in its first and second stages depends mainly on runic inscriptions. It underwent substantial changes in the following centuries, most drastically as a result of the so-called syncope – loss of prefixes and of vowels in weak-stressed medial and final syllables. The eddaic poems must, it was thought, have been composed after these major phonological changes had taken place, i. e. not before about AD 800. The age of the poems was then pegged between this date and the date of our written sources, the early thirteenth century, with the tenth and eleventh centuries regarded as the chief period of composition. This was how most scholars viewed the problem in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

More recently, however, there has been a tendency to spread the poems rather more thinly over the whole period available for consideration. Some poems have been counted very ancient, others not much older than the manuscripts containing them. The Eggjum stone, discovered in West Norway in 1917, is dated to c. AD 700 on archaeological grounds, but the inscription is in a language already affected by syncope, and this puts the linguistic *terminus a quo* appreciably farther back in time. It has been suggested that the metrical variety and freedom of the poems counted the most archaic mean that they may have originated in a proto-Norse or still earlier stage of the language and survived the syncope period: the extant forms are merely shorter and more regular than the originals. Obviously over such a vast area as the Norse speech-region changes in language did not occur everywhere at precisely the same rate or with precisely the same result. The early inhabitants of Scandinavia must certainly have had some kinds of poetry, and it is in fact possible to point to fragments in archaic runic inscriptions whose metrical character is still apparent even when translated into a "classical" Icelandic of some eight centuries later. Compare the fifth-century Tune stone inscription from Norway with a reconstruction in thirteenth-century Icelandic:

ek wiwaR	Ek Vír	I, Vír
after woduride	eptir Óðríði	in memory of Óðríðr,
wita(n)da halaiban	vitandhleifa	giver of bread,
worahto r(unoR).	orta rúnar.	wrought runes.

It is probable that the subject-matter of some of the eddaic poems whose heroes are of continental Germanic stock came to Scandinavia in the form of lays that were then transposed, without need for much

translation, into Norse verse. Alliteration and accentuation in cognate words could be retained to some extent, and the Norse "re-creation" might be influenced by the diction and syntax of the continental Germanic original. In the case of poems like *Hlöðskviða* (p. 73) and *Hamðismál* (p. 71), both with very archaic elements in them, it may be – and perhaps always will be – a matter of opinion whether they are developments or reflections of lays composed in a primitive form of Norse, perhaps going back to the Migration Age itself, or whether they represent original Norse compositions from the eighth century or later.

The scholars' tendency to make some poems as old as possible is matched by a tendency to make others – those with no evident marks of antiquity – as close to the manuscript dates as possible. Literary historians often distinguish the "younger" poems of the *Edda* as a group, and propound a variety of reasons for including individual lays in this category. A full discussion of the question would take us too far afield, and we may be content with an injunction to tread warily and not be too easily persuaded that we know how "young" an eddaic poem is. We should however make some general observations on the methods by which people try to date this poetry.

(1) In approaching the poems scholars try to establish connections between them and dateable pieces of literature, especially scaldic verse attributed to known poets. Demonstrable verbal similarities must, however, be treated with caution. A vast amount of early poetry has been lost and it may well be that what appears a possible or probable connection would be judged differently if we had more sources preserved. In other cases the likeness may depend on the formulaic character of the diction – it may be an expression that was common property, used again and again. But direct literary connection seems sometimes indubitable: the influence of *Völuspá* on Arnórr jarlaskáld's *Þorfinnsdrápa* is an example.

(2) Most scholars regard eddaic poetry as West Nordic in origin – i. e. from Norway and the Norwegian Atlantic settlements, preeminently Iceland. No whole poems have been preserved outside Iceland. The antiquity of the oldest poems means that they must have been brought to Iceland from Norway. When sources begin to tell us more about Norwegian and Icelandic history, we find no references to continuing composition of eddaic kinds of poetry in Norway, though there are one or two Norwegian allusions and runic quotations which point towards some knowledge of eddaic poetry in Norway in the twelfth and thirteenth century. In Iceland, on the other hand, we learn that all

kinds of verse-making were practised. That being so, it seems natural to conclude that all the "younger" eddaic poems were most probably made by Icelanders; and, in the circumstances, theories that have been advanced of continental or East Nordic (Danish) provenance are superfluous.

(3) The antiquity of many of the mythological poems may be suggested by the fact that Snorri Sturluson accepted them as authentic sources of pre-Christian belief, and even used them to provide speaking parts for pagan gods in his *Edda*. It is hard, for example, to credit the notion entertained by numerous scholars that *Völuspá hin skamma* should have been composed in or shortly before Snorri's time, since he uses it as a source about the origin of the world.

(4) Some critics have maintained that if Snorri does not cite a given work it is because it was composed in or after his day, but clearly little significance can be attached to such an argument, for we are in no position to know what part chance played in Snorri's selection of sources. But "not in Snorri" is worth noting if there is other evidence to suggest late composition.

(5) Next to evidence of direct literary relationship the most valuable indicators of date are to be found in the poems' linguistic and formal features. Later poets could imitate their predecessors in individual cases but when a poem shows many archaic or many novel elements, we have a firm pointer to its age. Language and metre, for example, make it unlikely that poems such as *Lokasenna* and *Þrymskviða* (p. 39) were composed about 1200 or even later, as some scholars believe.

German and English heroic poetry

Ancient sources tell us that Germanic peoples made poetry. In his *Germania* (c. AD 100) Tacitus says that poems and songs (*carmina*) are the only records and annals of the Germani. Nothing of this antique composition is preserved and how far it resembled later Germanic verse is unknown. But the earliest extant poetry in Old High German and Anglo-Saxon is evidently closely related to the oldest of the eddaic poems: it was probably composed in much the same period, though in a more archaic style than the Norse examples. The diction has much in common and the metre has essentially the same structure. It is distinguished not by the regular rhythm and end-rhyme which later made their entrance under the influence of Latin poetry. In place of rhyme we have

alliteration and in place of regular rhythm there is an irregular stress falling on the most important words in each line.

We now know only one Old High German heroic poem in this metre, the *Hildebrandslied*, set down about AD 800 by a pair of monks writing on the cover of a Latin manuscript. The end is missing. The lay tells of Hildebrand who lived for many years as an exile among the Huns; and when at last he was able to return, leading a host from the land of the Huns, he found himself tragically forced to fight in single combat against his own son, Hadubrand. The same story is reflected in Book VII of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* about AD 1200, this time in Latin hexameters; and it is found in one of the "sagas of ancient times", *Ásmundar saga kappabana* – we can see from these Nordic sources that the German poem had ended with the death of Hadubrand, Hildebrand's son.

We may put a few lines side by side with Jón Helgason's translation:

Do lętton se ærist asckim scritan,
scarpen scurim, dat in dem sciltim stont.
Do stoptun to samane, staim bort chludun,
heuwun harmlicco huittę scilti,
unti im iro lintun luttilo wurtun . . .

(Then first they launched their spears, their sharp weapons, so that the shields were pierced. Then they strode together, they clove the [painted?] bucklers, shrewdly smiting at the white targes until their linden shields were of no avail.)

Þá börðust þeir fyrst
fleygum öskum,
skörpum skúrum,
svo að í skjöldum stóð.
Gengust að sterkir,
steinborð klufu,
hjuggu harðlega
hvíta skjöldu,
unz lindir þeim
litlar gerðust.

The most archaic of the English poems, corresponding to the *Hildebrandslied* and the oldest heroic lays of the *Edda*, is the *Fight at Finnsburg*. Only a fragment of it is preserved and we cannot tell what the whole poem was like. The theme is battle between Hnæf, prince of the Danes, and King Finn in Frisia, probably his brother-in-law. Other Anglo-Saxon poems are not entirely comparable with Norse examples. The longest and most remarkable is *Beowulf*, an epic of over 3000 long lines, extant in a manuscript from c. 1000 but thought to be much older in origin, perhaps even from the eighth century. It is by no means a "pure" example of Germanic heroic poetry, in either matter or style, for influence from classical literature and Christianity is pervasive. The poem was doubtless a piece of literary composition from the start and never led any kind of oral existence.

Beowulf is the outstanding hero among the Geatas (Icelandic *Gautar*), and the epic tells of two of his exploits, but with much tribal history interwoven in the narrative. As a young man he kills the monstrous Grendel and his dam, who had been terrorising the stately homestead of King Hroðgar at Lejre in Denmark. Beowulf then came to be king over the Geatas who prospered under his rule for fifty years. The poet moves swiftly over this intervening period to tell of Beowulf's fight against a dragon who ravages his country. The dragon is destroyed but Beowulf is overcome by its venom and dies.

Two other Anglo-Saxon poems deserve mention here. *Deor* is the lament of an old wandering minstrel who comforts himself in his present distress by recalling men and women of ancient times who had also suffered but seen an end to their troubles: "That was surmounted; so can this be." Some of them are characters we meet in eddaic poems as well – Weland (Völundr) and Eormanric (Jörmunrek(k)r), for example – and the poet of *Deor* knew legends about them similar to those attested in the Norse sources. Another wandering poet is the central figure in *Widsið*, "the far traveller"; he tells of his visits to various kings who lived in the Migration Age (the Icelandic version is by Stefán Einarsson):

Ond ic wæs mid Eormanrice ealle þrage,
þær me Gotena cyning gode dohte;
se me beag forgeaf, burgwarena fruma,
on þam siex hund wæs smætes goldes
gescyred sceatta . . .

(And I was with Ermanaric all the time:
there the king of the Goths was
bounteous unto me. Lord of cities
and their folk, he gave me an armlet,
in which there was reckoned of refined gold
six hundred pieces.)

Enn var eg með Jörmunrekki
öllum stundum,
þar mig Gotna konungur
góðu sæmdi,
sá mér baug of gaf
borgverja drottinn,
er sex hundruð stóð
í smeittu gulli
skírra skattpeninga . . .

Poetry underwent different developments in Germany and England. The inherited Germanic metre went out of fashion among the Germans in the ninth century, and what heroic poetry they composed afterwards was in metres without alliteration and with end-rhyme on Latin models. The manner is very different from the terse style of the ancient *Hildebrandslied*. The *Nibelungenlied* is the most famous of the German epics,

with material related to that of the eddaic poems. Among the Anglo-Saxons on the other hand alliterative verse remained in fashion in some parts of England until the fifteenth century, though the poets had long since ceased to compose on the ancient Germanic heroes.

Metres

The verse measure which can be counted common to ancient German, Anglo-Saxon and Norse-Icelandic poetry corresponds most closely to the metres called *málaháttr* and *fornyrðislag* by Snorri in his *Edda*. He says the former has five syllables to the line, the latter four. The original Germanic metre was not strictly syllable-counting in this way, but still followed rules that were distinct from those of verse in the classical and modern languages of Europe. The metre can be said, on the other hand, to have lived to the present day in Iceland, though obviously affected in various ways by developments in pronunciation.

Icelandic scholars have made few contributions to the study of Germanic prosody: a regrettable neglect for, with their unbroken tradition of composing in the inherited alliterative metres, Icelanders might well have valuable observations to offer on how one should recite and listen to the ancient poems. The chief metrists have been German, and two of them, the one succeeding the other as the uncrowned but not the uncontested king of the metrical castle, have dominated the discussion.

Eduard Sievers was the first of them. He published his chief book on the subject, *Altgermanische Metrik,* in 1893. Under the influence of Snorri, Sievers posited a system of regular Norse metres, each with a fixed number of syllables to the line: *dróttkvætt* forms (cf. p. 84) with six syllables, *fornyrðislag* forms with four. (These regular forms are, however, later developments which do not give a true idea of the original Germanic verse measure.) To cover all Germanic verse he proposed an overall scheme of analysis based on five different types of stress distribution: A $\overset{/}{-}$ x | $\overset{/}{-}$ x *ár var alda*, B x $\overset{/}{-}$ | x $\overset{/}{-}$ *ok miðjan dag*, and so on. Various departures from the norm were taken into account, but even with a range of accepted licences it still proved impossible to cajole all the preserved lines of verse in the ancient Germanic languages to fit into his patterns. So the lines had to be altered to suit the system: offending extra syllables were edited out of existence or word forms and word order changed to "improve" the metre. This method was applied by Finnur Jónsson in the first ever popular Icelandic edition of the *Poetic*

Edda, published in Reykjavík in 1905. Like other scholars of the time, Finnur also believed he could identify "interpolations" in the preserved texts, and he drew attention to these "accretions" by printing them in smaller type than the "pristine" stanzas. It was regrettable that the eddaic poems first became generally known to twentieth-century Icelanders in this doctored form.

Sievers's domination of the realm of Germanic metrics was most effectively challenged by Andreas Heusler, especially with the first volume of his *Deutsche Versgeschichte*, published in 1925. Essentially his view was that each verse line is made up of two "bars" of equal length, each corresponding to four minims in music. The main stress always falls on the syllable representing the first "note" in each bar, but succeeding syllables may have a secondary stress. If there are many syllables in a bar, the delivery must be correspondingly quick, if there are few, correspondingly slow, and pauses must also be counted in order to give the bar its right length. Syllables that come before the first stressed "note" in a bar do not belong to the bar but are extra-metrical (anacrusis, *Auftakte*). If they belong anywhere, it is rather with the close of the preceding line.

Heusler's analysis is preferable to Sievers's for two main reasons. He takes the poems as he finds them and does not need to emend on metrical grounds. And he does not start from regularised *dróttkvætt* or eddaic metres but from the more ancient remnants of Old English, Old Saxon and Old High German verse.

Heusler's theories were accepted by many scholars but now they seem to be almost as old-fashioned as those of Sievers. It has been observed, for example, that following Heusler's rules we cannot read a short line – including many in the eddaic poems – without a quite unnatural drawl or pause; nor does it help to shorten the units of the "bar", substituting crotchets for minims, because then the long lines of continental Germanic verse become a mere gabble. Contemporary metrists appear to have given up "bars" and musical notation altogether.

One element in the older theories still seems fully accepted. That is the notion that every line contains two stresses or lifts (*Hebungen*). The reading or delivery of eddaic verse has thus usually been guided by this perception of two heavily stressed syllables in each line, accompanied by an indefinite number of lightly stressed syllables. The heavy syllables are emphasized, the light ones danced over.

But this general theory of a pair of lifts in every line seems to need revision too. Consider the following points:

(1) Introductory extra-metrical syllables often become a real embarrassment. It is true that in eddaic poetry we never find more than four, but in continental Germanic verse there may be as many as fourteen! Is it possible to have so many syllables without a noticeable stress somewhere?

(2) Reading the poetry nowadays an Icelander often cannot avoid including a third stress in a given line, a stress of such weight that in a modern poem it would have to be part of the metrical scheme.

(3) The notion of two stresses stems from the alliterating syllables which were clearly always heavily stressed. Lines (half-lines, the English and Germans would say) are connected by alliteration to form pairs (the English and German long line) and thus create the basic unit of the metrical structure. In the a-line (or half-line) two syllables may alliterate with one syllable in the b-line (or half-line). But in the b-line readers always find a second non-alliterating syllable to put stress on, matching the second stressed syllable (often alliterating) of the a-line. Here we should pause for thought, not least with the most archaic poetry in mind. It is reasonable to believe that the oldest metrical structure depended on three equal units that were delimited by three alliterating syllables. This is the sort of arrangement one finds in the inscription that was on the Gallehus horn from c. AD 400: ek hlewagastiR / holtijaR / horna tawido (in Old Icelandic Ek Hlégestr hyltir horn táða). In the oldest poems, *Hildebrandslied* for example, there is an evident tendency to have the a-line longer than the b-line. Another feature which must be of significance for the original nature of the metre is that a-lines have comparatively more weak-stressed syllables *between* the lifts, while in the b-lines there are comparatively more weak-stressed syllables *before* the first lift (*Auftakte*). If we take a- and b-lines together, however, we can say that the original metre had weak-stressed syllables equally distributed between the three lifts that could carry the alliteration. This rule or tendency may be clearly seen in the oldest of the eddaic poems, *Atlakviða* and *Hamðismál* for example: "Betr hefðir þú / bróðir at þú í / brynju fœrir"; "hjálm ok skjöld / hvítastan kominn ór / höll Kjárs"; "blóðugt þat á / bjóð lögðu ok / báru fyr Gunnar"; bróðir okkarr inn / böðfrœkni er vit á / braut vágum", and so on.

An alliterating triad of this nature must mean that originally the b-line did not match the a-line in the number or weight of its stressed syllables. An equivalence between the a- and b-lines was gradually

achieved, but it long continued to be possible to have the two lines of unequal length and with an indefinite number of heavier and lighter syllables. The weight depended on sentence stress, the relative value of words in their context. Each line has a minimum of two weighty syllables, but more than two are also possible, especially in a-lines, as the above has shown.

Most of the eddaic poems are in these Germanic metres but some are in the measure called *ljóðaháttr*. Sometimes there is a mixture of modes. The unit in *ljóðaháttr* is a pair of lines each with the minimum of two lifts and alliteration of the antique Germanic kind followed by a third line which has its own internal alliteration. Doubtless what happened was that in an original "quatrain" composed of a-line, b-line, a-line, b-line, the second pair was compressed to provide this third or "full" line of the *ljóðaháttr* unit. We do not know *ljóðaháttr* outside Scandinavia, but it is an extraordinarily supple metre and makes an archaic impression. One is strongly tempted to regard it as an ancient Germanic form which survived only in the North, all Continental and English examples lost for ever.

Eddaic poems have these metres in common but in subject-matter divide into two main groups. The scribe or editor of the Codex Regius collection understood this division and distributed his texts accordingly. The first part contains poems about the gods, the second poems about heroes of the Germanic and Hunnish peoples. Poems of eddaic kind found in other manuscript sources also belong to these mythological and heroic groupings.

Poems about the gods

These are not devotional poems comparable to Christian hymns or liturgical composition but rather didactic and dramatic works of mythological or cosmological import. There seems no depth of engagement on the part of the poets and people have consequently wondered whether they can really be the work of zealous pagans. But of course we must be careful not to apply Christian standards to pre-Christian religion. We are reminded in some ways of the Homeric poems where the gods appear very much like human beings, on a grander scale but nonetheless subject to human frailties. But the sparse information we glean from the eddaic poems about the characters of the gods cannot compare with the abundant mythical material in Greek sources; and we

A little image (6.7 cm high), usually taken to represent the god Þórr, found in Eyjafjörður early in the nineteenth century. Photo: Gísli Gestsson.

learn little from them of the real beliefs and practices of heathen Scandinavians.

Two poems are collections of mythical lore presented as part of a dramatic set-piece. In *Vafþrúðnismál* the giant Vafþrúðnir contends in learning with Óðinn, answering his questions about the creation of the earth and the destiny of the universe to doomsday and beyond. Óðinn had many names and one of them was Grímnir – the masked or disguised one. In *Grímnismál* Óðinn visits his foster-son, King Geirröðr, who does not recognise him and has him tied up between two fires to torture the truth out of him. Grímnir then describes many things and places in the world of the gods and ends by reciting some of his own names. Geirröðr recognises him now, but too late to escape his doom: he stumbles and falls on his own sword and is killed. With *Völuspá* these two poems are Snorri's chief sources in *Gylfaginning*, the first book of his *Edda*, where he re-tells old myths.

Other poems tell stories about the gods. *Skírnismál* tells how Freyr sat on Óðinn's seat and from there saw into the world of the giants. The sight of a beautiful giant girl, Gerðr Gymisdóttir, so moved him that finally he sent his servant Skírnir to woo her on his behalf. Skírnir offered her treasure after treasure but to no avail. Then he began to utter terrible threats, and at last Gerðr promises to give herself to Freyr nine nights later in the grove called Barri.

Þórr is a protagonist in *Hárbarðsljóð*. He meets Óðinn who is disguised as a ferryman and Þórr comes off worse in the ensuing battle of words and wits. He is not the loser however in an exchange with the impertinent dwarf called Alvíss, who in the poem *Alvíssmál* answers Þórr's questions about the names of things, cosmic and otherwise, among the different classes of beings – of the sky, for instance:

Himinn heitir með mönnum,	Men call it "heaven",
en hlýrnir með goðum,	Gods "the warmer",
kalla vindófni vanir,	Vanir "the wind-weaver",
uppheim jötnar,	giants "the up-world",
álfar fagraræfr,	elves "the fair roof",
dvergar drjúpan sal.	dwarves "the dripping hall".

But Þórr spins out his questioning and Alvíss is caught by the rays of the rising sun and turned to stone.

In *Hymiskviða* Þórr goes to the giant Hymir to fetch a great cauldron suitable for beer-brewing for the Æsir. More myths and tales are woven into the narrative, including the story of Þórr's fishing for the World Serpent. *Hymiskviða* is unique among the poems of the *Edda*. The style has scaldic elements, especially kennings, and this doubtless means it is not a very ancient poem. The conflation of a number of tales – probably the poet's own work, at least in part – points to the same conclusion. Nevertheless, there seems no reason why it should not be assigned to a pre-Christian date, say the late tenth century.

Lokasenna and *Þrymskviða* are both comic in spirit but while the first is a piece of scathing mockery, the second has a tone of lighthearted raillery. *Lokasenna* tells of a great feast in the midst of which Loki Laufeyjarson – who according to Snorri "has done most damage among the gods" – steps up and begins to hurl scurrilous accusations at the assembled Æsir. One after another get their share of insulting home truths, but when Þórr arrives with his hammer Mjöllnir raised and threatens to break every bone in his body, Loki gives in and leaves. *Þrymskviða*, or "the hammer-fetching", as it is called in some later manuscripts, tells of the theft of Þórr's hammer by Þrymr, "lord of giants", and of its retrieval by Þórr dressed up as Freyja. It is a simple unified poem, light and amusing throughout. The three main characters, Þórr, Þrymr and Loki – here working for and not against the gods – are full of life, each with his individual features.

Some scholars have argued that both these poems are late compositions, even the work of thirteenth-century poets. They point to the satirical treatment of the gods. But this is to think that heathens regarded their gods in the same way as Christians regard their Trinity. A much more fitting approach is to consider what genuine religious sentiment of the pagan period may have inspired these poems. And the language and metre, especially those of *Þrymskviða,* also suggest that they were composed in pre-Christian times.

Rígsþula is in the Codex Wormianus, written towards 1400, of Snorri's *Edda*. The end is missing. It is counted among the mythological poems: in the first stanza Rígr is called *áss kunnigr*, "knowing god" (or *áskunnigr*, "of Æsir origin"), and in the prose introduction he is identified as the god Heimdallr. The name Rígr is derived from Celtic (Irish) *rí* (gen. *ríg*), "king". The scenes of the poem belong to the world of men. Rígr comes to three homes, of Ái and Edda (Great-grandfather and Great-

grandmother), Afi and Amma (Grandfather and Grandmother), and Faðir and Móðir (Father and Mother), and in each the woman bears him a son. Edda's son is called Þræll (Slave) and thralls are his descendants. Amma's son is called Karl (Yeoman) and free men descend from him. Móðir's son was Jarl, progenitor of earls. Jarl's youngest son is called Konr ungr, i. e. *konungr*, "king", the star of the family. In this way the poem accounts for the advance of the generations of mankind and the origin of kingly state.

Hyndluljóð is found in Flateyjarbók (c. 1390). Freyja wakes the witchwoman Hyndla and gets her to recite the pedigree of a favourite of hers called Óttarr Innsteinsson in order to help him gain his patrimony. The poem is chiefly made up of unconnected lists of names of members of Óttarr's kin, though the preserved text is probably corrupt in many places. In the middle come genealogies of gods and giants, with echoes from *Völuspá* among them. Snorri cites one of these stanzas and says it comes from *Völuspá hin skamma*, "the short *Völuspá*". The general view is that there was once such a poem and that it has been incorporated in *Hyndluljóð*.

Völuspá is placed at the beginning of Codex Regius, naturally enough because it surveys the whole history of the universe and of the gods. As mentioned earlier, there is another text in Hauksbók and Snorri quotes a good many stanzas from yet another version. Of these three versions, independently recorded in whole or in part, that in Codex Regius appears to be more complete and generally superior to that in Hauksbók, though the latter is alone in having some apparently genuine stanzas and lines.

Völuspá doubtless had its obscurities from the start, for the poet moves rapidly over great events, pointing up individual scenes but leaving it to his audience's general knowledge to make the connections between them. That it suffered in the course of oral transmission is self-evident, with stanzas lost, transposed or muddled. So the structure of the poem and its message are now in many ways problematic. All the same, individual stanzas convey a dazzling impression of poetic vision and prophetic inspiration.

Óðinn, the old anxious one among the gods, fears *ragnarök*, the doom of the divine powers which he knows is in prospect. To gain wisdom and to prepare himself for what is in store he goes to the *völva*, a sibyl who

can foretell the future, and she then speaks the poem for gods and men to hear:

Hljóðs bið ek allar	Silence I ask from all
helgar kindir,	the holy offspring,
meiri ok minni	sons of Heimdallr
mögu Heimdallar.	greater and lesser.
Vildu at ek Valföðr	Do you wish Valföðr,
vel fyr telja	that I clearly rehearse
forn spjöll fira	of living beings those ancient tales
þau er fremst um man?	which I remember from farthest back?

To explain what is to be, the sibyl first tells the story of the world from the beginning of time. In ancient days the sons of Borr – Óðinn and his brothers – raised up lands from the sea. The gods were content at work and play, creating the first human beings, Askr and Embla, from dead logs:

Sól skein sunnan	The sun shone from the south
á salar steina,	on the stones of earth;
þá var grund gróin	then the ground was grown
grœnum lauki.	with green shoots.

But gradually the sky darkens. The Æsir kill a woman called Gullveig, who seems to be a symbol of avarice – they burn her body thrice but she is still alive. The Æsir go to war with the Vanir, a divine tribe of whom we know little save that Njörðr and his offspring Freyr and Freyja belonged to it. The war ends with the destruction of the Æsir's defensive wall and the Vanir roam at liberty with fire and sword (st. 24). There is then a break in the narrative thread and probably some loss of text. The matter can be supplied from Snorri's *Edda*. A builder of giant race offers to build up the ramparts of the gods and, persuaded by the malicious Loki, the gods promise him Freyja and the sun and moon in payment. When the giant had finished or nearly finished his building the gods realised their criminal folly and Þórr put an end to the giant's labouring with a stroke of his hammer. The poet lays great stress on these events and is clearly passing moral judgment on the gods' oath-breaking – and not long now before still greater tragedies:

Á gengusk eiðar,	Oaths were broken,
orð ok sœri,	words and sworn pledges,
mál öll meginlig	all the forceful vows
er á meðal fóru.	that passed between them.

But Óðinn does not give up, and one of his expedients is to find and fix the sibyl in order to hear from her what the future holds: their encounter is described at just this point in the poem:

Ein sat hon úti	Alone she sat, out in the open,
þá er inn aldni kom	when the ancient
yggjungr ása	Yggjungr of the gods [Óðinn] came
ok í augu leit:	and peered into her eyes:
Hvers fregnið mik,	What do you ask me?
hví freistið mín?	Why do you test me?

The sibyl continues to describe what has happened. Höðr kills Baldr with the mistletoe twig – Snorri makes it plain that Loki is responsible but this is not explicit in the poem, where however the very next scene shows Loki in fetters "below Hveralundr":

Þar sitr Sigyn,	There sits Sigyn,
þeygi um sínum	but not very happy,
ver vel glýjuð.	over her husband.
Vituð ér enn – eða hvat?	Do you know yet – or what?

The sibyl has seen three halls in the world of the giants and the world of the dead. The most terrifying is on "Corpse strand":

Fellu eitrdropar	Venom drops fell
inn um ljóra,	in through the roof-openings;
sá er undinn salr	that hall is plaited
orma hryggjum.	with serpents' spines.
Sá hon þar vaða	There she saw wading
þunga strauma	heavy currents
menn meinsvara	perjurers
ok morðvarga	and murderers
ok þann er annars glepr	and the man who seduces
eyrarúnu.	another's beloved.

Three cocks crow, one among the giants, one among the Æsir, one in "the halls of Hel", and it is more than daybreak they herald. And now the poem begins to describe the insistent present: the hound Garmr, "the bayer", begins to howl before Gnipahellir, the sibyl's real foretelling of the future starts, the universal doom is at hand:

Brœðr munu berjask	Brothers will fight
ok at bönum verðask,	and be each other's slayer;
munu systrungar	blood-kin will
sifjum spilla.	commit incest.

Hart er í heimi,	It is harsh in the world,
hórdómr mikill,	great whoring,
skeggöld, skálmöld,	an axe-age and cutlass-age,
skildir eru klofnir,	shields are cloven
vindöld, vargöld,	– a wind-age and wolf-age
áðr veröld steypisk . . .	before man-age crashes.

The signs and wonders that presage the last great battle are described with powerful imagery, over and over we hear the ominous refrain:

Geyr nú Garmr mjök	Now Garmr bays loud
fyr Gnipahelli,	in front of Gnipahellir;
festr mun slitna,	tethers will snap
en freki renna.	and the wolf run.

Finally the catastrophe comes. The giants attack the Æsir in three divisions. Hrymr and Loki come from the east, Surtr, with fire his armament, comes from the south; most of the Æsir are killed; the earth sinks into the sea. But those of the gods who had died as innocents – Höðr and Baldr are named – survive the holocaust, and the earth rises once more, fresh and green, from the ocean:

Falla forsar,	Waterfalls cascade,
flýgr örn yfir,	the eagle flies above,
sá er á fjalli	the one who catches
fiska veiðir.	fish on the fell.

Snorri accepted *Völuspá* as a valid source of information about the old faith in the Æsir, but modern scholars have long since recognised that much in the poem must be of Christian origin. The idea that the final doom is a punishment for the gods' oath-breaking and for the moral decay of gods and men alike is not known in any other reliable pre-Christian Nordic source. The description of the torments of wrongdoers and of the terrible times that precede *ragnarök* are suspiciously consonant with Christian eschatology; and the paradise enjoyed by the saved after the universal conflagration is reminiscent of Christian thinking. Compare for example the new Jerusalem of the *Book of Revelation*: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . ." and so on. *Völuspá* is the revelation experienced by the sibyl, and is more of a piece with visionary literature of the Christian middle ages than with anything we know from Nordic paganism. Such visionary literature was of course well known later in Iceland, as elsewhere. In *Duggals leizla*, for

example, we have an early translation of the *Visio Tnugdali*. Reports of people who fell into a trance-like state and woke up after visiting other worlds were common enough. The vision of Rannveig, who lived in east Iceland, is told in *Guðmundar saga Arasonar*. She had been the concubine of two priests and in her transported state she saw the torments prepared for her if she did not mend her ways. Parallels like these have sometimes led people to believe that *Völuspá* is an entirely Christian poem, in subject-matter and vocabulary, and not composed until Christian faith and Christian literature were firmly established in Iceland. But as we have seen, *Völuspá* must have been composed long before the time of Snorri Sturluson and if, as seems wholly probable, Arnórr jarlaskáld's *Þorfinnsdrápa* was influenced by it (cf. p. 29), it cannot have been made later than the first part of the eleventh century. It is then not a matter of great significance whether it was composed by a pagan of mixed beliefs late in the tenth century or a half-heathen Christian early in the eleventh. The poem was created in the twilit period of the conversion, its nature determined by the fact that the poet's mental furniture was fundamentally heathen even though he was also a seer and a preacher who got some of his ideas from the new religion.

Hávamál are the sayings of Óðinn, "the high one". This is a collection of at least six originally separate poems that have been combined to make one sequence. The man responsible for linking them thought of them all as uttered by Óðinn, and some stanzas clearly announce that it is his voice we hear. The first poem is often referred to as the *Gestaþáttr*, "Guests' Section", because it begins with advice to a wayfarer who lodges among strangers. This first poem reaches a natural end with the famous stanzas on those precious things that are alone immortal:

Deyr fé,	Cattle die,
deyja frændr,	kinsmen die,
deyr sjálfr it sama,	one dies oneself likewise,
en orðstírr	but fame
deyr aldregi,	never dies
hveim er sér góðan getr.	for him who gets good fame.
Deyr fé,	Cattle die,
deyja frændr,	kinsmen die,
deyr sjálfr it sama.	one dies oneself likewise.

Ek veit einn	I know one thing
at aldri deyr:	which never dies:
dómr um dauðan hvern.	the judgment on each dead man.

In the second and third poem Óðinn tells of two of his adventures with women, Billingr's daughter and Gunnlöð: the first tricked him, the second he deceived. The fourth poem, *Loddfáfnismál*, is like the first in being a sequence of stanzas giving advice. The name is doubtfully appropriate because Loddfáfnir is not the one who offers counsel but the one who receives it. The fifth poem (st. 138–145) is called *Rúnatal*. It tells a remarkable tale of how Óðinn suffered various torments, hanging nine nights on "the windswept tree" and winning magic knowledge in consequence. In the sixth poem, *Ljóðatal*, Óðinn describes what magic he can work by chanting eighteen mighty spells. The last stanza of all bids farewell to the auditor.

It is the first part that people usually think of when they hear the name *Hávamál*. The *ljóðaháttr* metre suits the subject-matter to perfection, and the last line of each stanza often becomes – of its own accord, as it were – a chiselled aphorism. It is difficult for us to decide whether the poet in fact sometimes availed himself of ancient proverbs or whether these immortal sayings were forged in his own fancy.

A weary traveller has come off mountain paths to seek rest in human habitation: but one must be cautious –

Gáttir allar	All doorways
áðr gangi fram	before stepping in
um skoðask skyli,	are to be looked at all round,
um skyggnask skyli,	looked round keenly,
því at óvíst er at vita	for it is a problem to know
hvar óvinir	where enemies
sitja á fleti fyrir.	are sitting in the room before you.

The lessons inculcated are so manifold that it is hard to find any precise organisation in the poem. Clearly however the poet or the collector tried to some extent to group the stanzas according to subject-matter: the order has survived best at the beginning but, as one might expect, the sequence of the later stanzas is more haphazard. Immediately after the guest's arrival the poem speaks of what a man most needs – an alert common sense. And from that it is only a short step to recall what he is best without:

Byrði betri	Burden better
berr-at maðr brautu at	bears none abroad with him

en sé mannvit mikit;	than a cool discretion;
vegnest verra	picnic poorer
vegr-a hann velli at	packs no departing one
en sé ofdrykkja öls.	than a big load of beer.

(Peter Foote and David M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement*, London 1970 [and reprinted], p. 326.)

Over-eating often goes with over-drinking: a greedy fool brings "lifelong sorrow" on himself:

Hjarðir þat vitu	Flocks know
nær þær heim skulu	when it is time to go home
ok ganga þá af grasi,	and then leave the grass,
en ósviðr maðr	but a foolish man
kann ævagi	never has
síns um mál maga.	the measure of his belly.

One can say that a substantial part of the *Gestaþáttr* concerns such topics, a hymn of praise to good sense and moderation. Even a man's wisdom should not be in excess:

Meðalsnotr	Everyone should be
skyli manna hverr,	moderately knowing
æva til snotr sé,	– never be too knowing,
því at snotrs manns hjarta	for the knowing man's heart
verðr sjaldan glatt,	is seldom glad
ef sá er alsnotr er á.	– not if he knows it all.

As the poem proceeds, the setting expands. The structure falls to pieces – and it has certainly been mishandled in transmission – as the poet seizes upon various of life's problems and gives warning and guidance. His injunctions have an unconfined, liberal air. Don't hoard unused the wealth you have won or it may fall into the wrong hands. "Friends should gladden each other with weapons and clothes." It has often been remarked that it is a farming society the poet is describing: men own cows and goats, ride horses, drive flocks:

Bú er betra	A homestead is better,
þótt lítit sé,	though it be small
halr er heima hverr,	– everyone is a hero at home;
þótt tvær geitr eigi	though one owns two goats
ok taugreptan sal,	and a rope-raftered croft,
þat er þó betra en bœn.	that is still better than begging.

This need surprise no one, of course, in an ancient poem made in a farming society. Indeed, it is more surprising how small a part is played by the husbandman's point of view, whether a cotter or the master of great estates. The farmer is on his farm: but in *Hávamál* men are always on the move, attending the assembly, visiting friends, sitting merry over drink. Two pillars of the Norwegian farming society, the kin and the king, leave almost no mark in the poem, while in contrast the poet never tires of praising friendship:

Ungr var ek forðum,	Once I was young,
fór ek einn saman,	I travelled alone,
þá varð ek villr vega.	then I lost my way.
Auðigr þóttumk	Rich I thought myself
er ek annan fann,	when I met someone else
maðr er manns gaman.	– man is man's delight.

On Viking forays men were far from families and homes, the bonds of kin were loosened, the bonds of friendship correspondingly strengthened – men swore bloodbrotherhood and vowed to avenge a fallen comrade. The individual emerges independent of family and king, using his weapons to win riches and glory, acquiring breadth and variety of vision, wisdom and a sense of proportion. Because of this some scholars have stressed the nature of *Hávamál* as the creation of a Viking world rather than of the fields and meadows of a Norwegian farming community. But it must be noted that there is not a single direct reference to seafaring anywhere in the poem, men are never pictured on longships, and the only nautical allusion is in the phrase, "short are ship's yards" (*skammar eru skips rár*). If this poet was a Viking, he had given up the sea for good – but not his weapons:

því at óvíst er at vita	for it is a problem to know
nær verðr á vegum úti	when out on one's way
geirs um þörf guma.	a man will have need of a spear.

Heroic poems

As mentioned earlier, the latter part of the Codex Regius contains poems about heroes who lived on the European mainland in the so-called Migration Age. Some of the heroes are in fact unknown to history and hard to locate on any map but others are famous men who figure in the pages of reliable chroniclers – Ermanaric, king of the Ostrogoths

(Jörmunrekr), Gundaharius, king of the Burgundians (Gunnarr), and Attila, king of the Huns (Atli). They and their peoples lived in central Europe, some as far west as the Rhine, some as far east as the Black Sea. These poems belong to the kind of verse that was common to all the Germanic speech-regions in the first centuries of our era, and we spoke earlier of the two examples most nearly related to the eddaic lays, the Old High German *Hildebrandslied* and the Old English *Finnsburg* fragment. These Germanic lays differ from the heroic poetry of most other nations in never developing into a broad stream of epic narrative, like the Homeric poems, for example, or the French *chansons de geste*. They are terse and intense, presenting individual events in a few graphic scenes. Narrative and direct speech are mingled, and there is immense force in the measured words of the protagonists. Some younger poems of the *Edda* on the other hand are monologues. When the Icelanders had acquired the art of writing, they did not settle down to compose vast verse epics, as their contemporaries in France and Germany did. Instead, they made prose their medium and set down stories from their own early past, the "sagas of Icelanders" – they are our heroic epics.

In the Codex Regius most of the older heroic lays appear as a mixture of verse and prose. The latter is used for various narrative parts and without these prose links the progress of a poem would often be hard to comprehend. It is extremely difficult to say how this combination of verse and prose came about. Some scholars maintain that Germanic hero tales were originally told only in verse: hero tale and heroic lay were synonymous. In that case the prose parts in the *Edda* represent remnants of lost verse, and in some cases they may indeed do so. The oral preservation of the heroic stories must have been decisively aided by their verse-form: poems could be and doubtless were transmitted from people to people and from one generation to another without suffering much change. The most ancient poems in the *Edda* also show various signs of abridgment and alteration – some of which of course may be due to editing or error in the written stage. On the other hand, it seems an inescapable conclusion that stories told in prose must always have existed alongside stories told in verse. Many of the heroic lays are shaped in such a way that it is evident the poets assumed more knowledge of the subject-matter on the audience's part than the poems themselves encompass: a whole legend is there as the backdrop to the verse. Many kinds of report and story from the past must have been current, and inevitably the concentrate of the poetry must have been thinned out, as it were, and the verse-form dissolved into prose. People

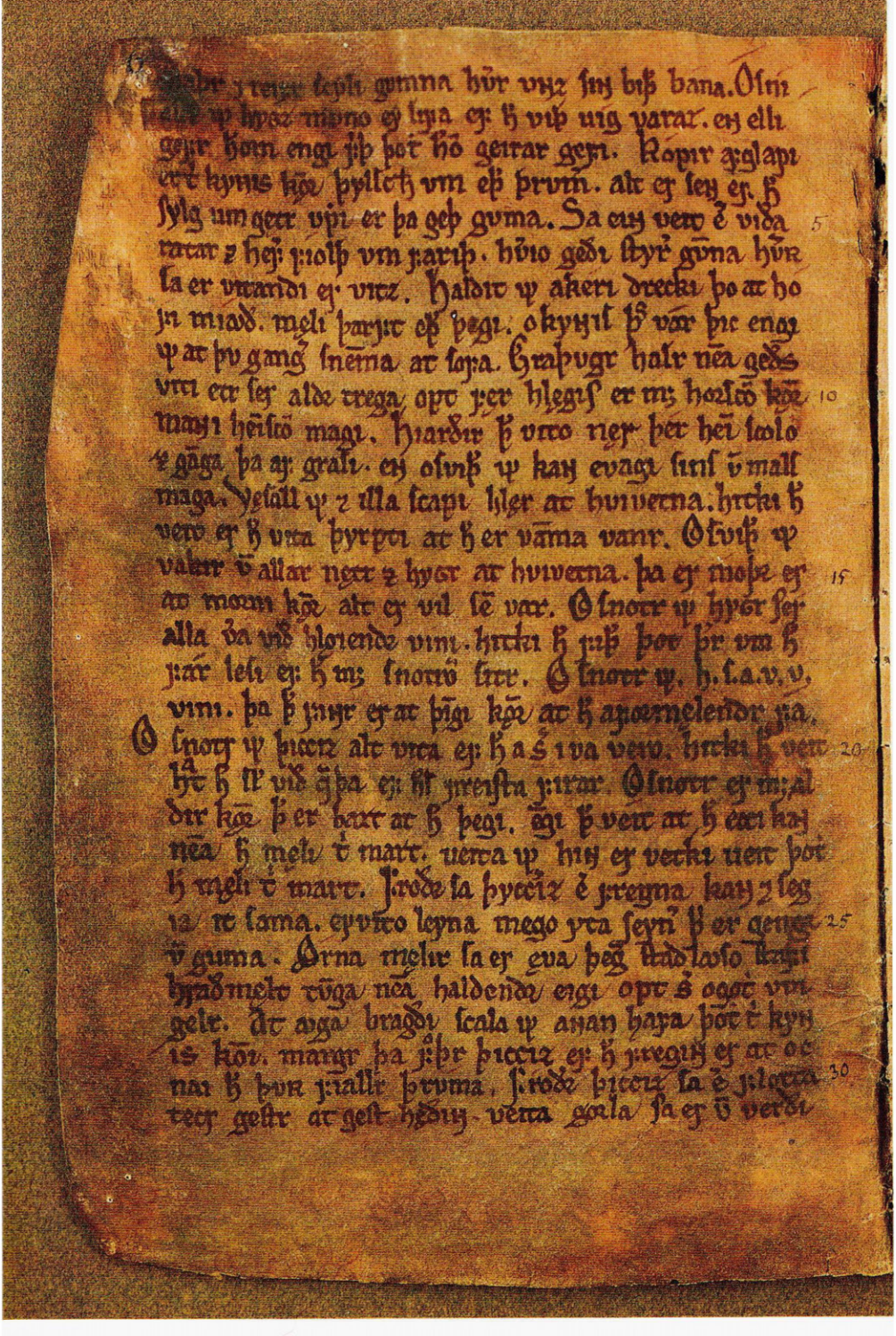


Plate 4
Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda, 13th century. From Hávamál. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.

Plate 5

Þórr fishes up the World Serpent; the giant Hymir is in the bows. "No one has ever seen horrible sights who was not able to see Þórr glaring with piercing eyes at the serpent and the serpent staring back and breathing out venom. The giant was terrified and cut Þórr's line at the gunwale and the serpent sank in the sea and Þórr hurled his hammer after it." Snorri's Edda. *From a manuscript of the* Edda *written and illustrated in the eighteenth century by Jakob Sigurðsson, a farmer in eastern Iceland; now the property of Ken Melsted of Wynyard, Saskatchewan. – Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.*

often knew the story-line of the poems even if they did not know the verse itself by heart, or only knew some fragments of it. They could tell the tale with the aid of the stanzas they remembered.

Intermingling of verse and prose in the *Edda* may thus have varying causes: (1) It is conceivable that there was combination of verse and prose from the beginning: some parts of a legend were told in firmly shaped stanzas, some in less well-defined prose, and they were passed on in this form until they were written down. Recorders (if there were more than one) of the poems in the *Edda* were chiefly intent on the poetry and included the prose links in summary form. (2) A recorder knew the substance of the poems, the legends on which they were based, but the lays themselves came to him decayed and mangled. He wrote down the verse he knew and bridged the gaps with his own prose passages. (3) Finally, it is possible that all the matter of the stories was carried in verse-form: the recorder knew complete lays but contented himself with abridging and re-telling parts of them in laconic prose. One may even suspect that some of the prose passages in the Codex Regius précis and modify texts recorded in the original recension of the eddaic collection. – This third explanation finds support in the fact that extant stanzas tend to be those containing direct speech, while prose is more often used for narrative parts. People who wrote down the poems thought it less fitting to tamper with the words uttered by the heroic actors in the drama.

The heroic lays are almost all concerned with members of two family groups and their kinsmen by marriage: on the one hand, Helgi Hundingsbani and Helgi Hjörvarðsson, and on the other, the Völsungs and the Niflungs (or Gjúkungs, as they are also called). The poems concerning the latter are much more numerous and varied than those on the Helgi pair, but in the *Edda* the groups are linked by making Helgi Hundingsbani a half-brother of Sigurðr the dragon-slayer, the most famous of the Völsungs. Two poems that belong to neither group are *Völundarkviða*, which is in the "mythological" part of the *Edda*, probably because Völundr was reckoned to be of elvish origin, and *Hlöðskviða*, which is preserved in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*.

An unbroken sequence in the codex concerns *Helgi Hjörvarðsson*. It is a mixture of verse and prose, the dialogue all in the former, the narrative mostly in the latter. The essential story is one of bitter tragedy but here it has been mollified to some extent to suit the taste of a later age. The simple diction and some "poetic" place-names – *Rogheimr* (whatever

that means) and *Röðulsfjöll*, "aureole mountains" – also suggest that it is not one of the most ancient lays.

Helgi fell in love with Sváva Eylimadóttir, who could speed through air and over sea. On the eve of Yule-tide Helgi's brother Heðinn met a witchwoman riding a wolf with snakes for reins. She offered him her favours but he refused: "You will pay for that at the ceremonial cup," she said. That evening Heðinn put his hand on the sacrificial boar and made his vow: to have Sváva, his brother Helgi's wife. The curse of the witchwoman was fulfilled – but we are to understand that she was Helgi's "fetch" who has now left him because of his impending death. Heðinn straightway repents of his vow, goes to Helgi and tells him what has happened:

Ek hefi körna	I have chosen
ina konungbornu	the royal-born
brúði þína	bride of yours
at bragarfulli.	by oath at the sacred cup.

Helgi told him not to reproach himself: he had been challenged to battle by a certain king; they would fight when three nights have passed and he would not return from that encounter:

Þá má at góðu	Then such a thing – if it is to be –
gerask slíkt ef skal.	may be brought to a good end.

Helgi was indeed mortally wounded in the battle. He sent word to Sváva and told her to hurry to him. When she came, he told her this would be their last meeting and said she should give her love to Heðinn. She said:

Mælt hafða ek þat	In the world of love,
í munarheimi	when Helgi
þá er mér Helgi	chose bracelets for me,
hringa valði,	I had declared that,
myndig-a ek lostig	after the king was dead,
at liðinn fylki	I would not willingly
jöfur ókunnan	enfold a strange prince
armi verja.	in my arms.

The poem ends with Heðinn bidding Sváva kiss him and vowing not to come back until he has avenged Helgi.

It has been argued that in the original story the curse of the "fetch" was probably fulfilled in a more dreadful fashion: Heðinn was himself the slayer of his brother Helgi. The poet of the present Helgi lay comes

however to a gentler conclusion. The end of the poem shows similar restraint on his part. He leaves it to the audience to supply the outcome without explicitly saying that Sváva found consolation in a new husband's arms.

It is customary to speak of two separate lays of Helgi Hundingsbani, marked I and II according to their order in the Codex Regius. The first of the two is clearly a unified poem, with no prose inserts, comparatively well preserved and evidently one of the younger among the heroic poems. But the second sequence, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, is probably made up of remnants of at least two poems and possibly more. Like *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, it is a mixture of verse and prose, with most of the verse devoted to the direct speech of the characters. The opening part tells how Helgi killed Hundingr and so got his cognomen. Sigrún is described as the valkyrie Sváva reborn. She comes to Helgi and confesses she helped him in the battle:

Leit ek þik um sinn fyrr	I saw you once before
á langskipum,	on longships
þá er þú byggðir	when you filled your place
blóðga stafna,	between blood-stained stem-posts
ok úrsvalar	and the bitter-chill
unnir léku.	waves were sporting.

A prose passage relates that at a meeting of kings Sigrún was promised in marriage to Höðbroddr Granmarsson. When she heard that, she sped through air and over sea to find Helgi: he has then slain all the sons of Hundingr and sits resting beneath Arasteinn. The sequence of stanzas that follows is then said to be called the "ancient lay of the Völsungs", *Völsungakviða hin forna*:

Sótti Sigrún	Sigrún went
sikling glaðan,	to the cheerful prince,
heim nam hon Helga	she reached out
hönd at sœkja,	for Helgi's hand,
kyssti ok kvaddi	kissed and greeted
konung und hjálmi,	the helmeted king
þá varð hilmi	– then the king's heart
hugr á vífi.	inclined to the lady.

The stage is now set, the tragedy can be acted out. Helgi gathers a great host and goes to fight the sons of Granmarr – Sigrún's father, Högni, and her brothers, Helgi and Dagr, are naturally on their side. All

these princes fall in the battle, except Dagr: his life was spared and he swore oaths of peace to the Völsungs. In company with other valkyries, Sigrún sweeps through the air over the battling warriors, and uses her supernatural powers to help Helgi. She finds Höðbroddr, her suitor, dying on the battlefield and exults over his fate – she will never yield to his embrace now – but she weeps when Helgi tells her of the death of her father and brother:

Lifna mynda ek nú kjósa	I would now choose that those who are dead
er liðnir eru,	should come to life,
ok knætta ek þér þó í faðmi felask.	but only if I could still bury myself in your embrace.

Dagr Högnason broke the sworn truce and stabbed Helgi through with a spear which Óðinn lent him. When he tells his sister what has happened, she calls down mighty curses on him; but in a moment she melts as she remembers her superlative husband:

Svá bar Helgi	Helgi surpassed princes
af hildingum	in the same way
sem ítrskapaðr	as the glorious form of
askr af þyrni,	the ash-tree surpasses the thorn-bush,
eða sá dýrkálfr	or as the young hart,
döggu slunginn	flecked with dew
er öfri ferr	who moves taller
öllum dýrum	than all other deer,
ok horn glóa	with antlers gleaming
við himin sjálfan.	against the very sky.

The poet knows that this valkyrie is torn by devastating emotions and it is not fitting to find commonplace words for her to utter. When she goes to be with Helgi in his burial mound – he has leave to return from Valhöll for one night – she greets him with:

Nú em ek svá fegin	Now I rejoice
fundi okkrum	at our meeting
sem átfrekir	as ravening
Óðins haukar	hawks of Óðinn rejoice
er val vitu,	when they snuff slaughter,
varmar bráðir,	warm carrion,
eða dögglitir	or when, dew-coated,
dagsbrún sjá.	they see the daybreak.

But Helgi is covered with blood, his hair heavy with rime. "How,

prince, can I improve your lot?" she asks, and he answers, "You alone are the cause, Sigrún from Sefafjöll":

Grætr þú gullvarið	Gold-adorned one,
grimmum tárum,	sun-bright southern one,
sólbjört, suðrœn,	you weep bitter tears
áðr þú sofa gangir.	before you go to sleep.
Hvert fellr blóðugt	Each tear drops bloody
á brjóst grami,	on the breast of the prince,
úrsvalt, innfjálgt,	each drop bitter-chill but scalding within,
ekka þrungit.	fraught with grief.

Sigrún sleeps in his dead arms that night – "bright in the burial mound" – now nothing is impossible and their pain departs. But at dawn Helgi must return to Valhöll:

Mál er mér at ríða	Now is the hour to ride
roðnar brautir,	on the reddened roads,
láta fölvan jó	to let the pale steed
flugstíg troða;	tread the airy paths;
skal ek fyr vestan	I must be west of
vindhjálms brúar	the wind-casque's bridge
áðr Salgofnir	before Salgofnir
sigrþjóð veki.	rouses the victory-people.

This was but a moment's relief for Sigrún's suffering. Next evening she sends her handmaid to keep watch at the mound. But now Helgi's pains are remedied and the human world must remain unvisited by him:

Kominn væri nú	He would have come now,
ef koma hygði	if the son of Sigmundr
Sigmundar burr	had it in mind to come
frá sölum Óðins;	from Óðinn's halls;
kveð ek grams þinig	I say that hopes of your
grænask vánir,	king's coming are few
er á asklimum	now eagles rest
ernir sitja	on ash-boughs,
ok drífr drótt öll	and all men flock
draumþinga til.	to their dream-assemblies.

The "ancient lay of the Völsungs" seems to mark a turning-point between the older and younger heroic poems that are now to be discussed. It unites the sheer force of the earlier poems and the softer

sentiment of the later. The hardness comes close to savagery when Sigrún rejoices over Höðbroddr's death and invites wolves to devour his corpse; and at the other end of the scale we have an apotheosis of romantic feeling when Sigrún defies death and folds her chill, gore-drenched husband in her arms. But we accept both emotions because we feel that they are not primitive and barbaric relics but creations of a skilled poet who is capable of both mellowing the harsh and putting steel into the gentle. Because of this the "ancient lay of the Völsungs" means more to us nowadays than any other heroic poem in the *Edda*.

As we noted, the "first lay of Helgi Hundingsbani" is so called because of its precedence in the manuscript, but a more appropriate name for it would probably be the "younger lay of the Völsungs". The editor of the poems in the Codex Regius evidently knew it was a later composition but probably chose to put it first because in some respects it provides a more complete account; and he also used material from it in the prose passages which supplement the "ancient lay" that follows.

The "younger lay of the Völsungs" is in the van of the newer fashion which expected poets to treat only single events or single parts of the legends known from older lays. The poets see the stories from a new angle or build new lays from ancient fragments, with characterisation, setting and style modified to suit novel standards of taste.

Helgakviða Hundingsbana I has no prose passages at all. It begins with Helgi's birth and ends with his victory over the sons of Granmarr. Sigrún's father Högni is referred to in connection with the battle, but nothing at all is made of the tragedy of the encounter as it is in the "ancient lay". Instead we have pomp and circumstance in names and diction, ringing and rhetorical:

Ár var alda	It was in days of yore
þat er arar gullu,	when eagles screamed,
hnigu heilög vötn	sacred waters fell
af Himinfjöllum,	from Himinfjöll
þá hafði Helga	– and Borghildr
inn hugumstóra	had given birth
Borghildr borit	in Brálundr to Helgi
í Brálundi.	the great-hearted.

In some respects the "younger lay" is akin to scaldic poetry: many kennings, great battles and the clash of weapons, grand descriptions of seafaring:

Svá var at heyra	When Kólga's sisters [waves]
er saman kómu	and the long keels
Kólgu systir	came together,
ok kilir langir	it sounded
sem björg eða brim	as if crags or surf
brotna myndi.	would smash.

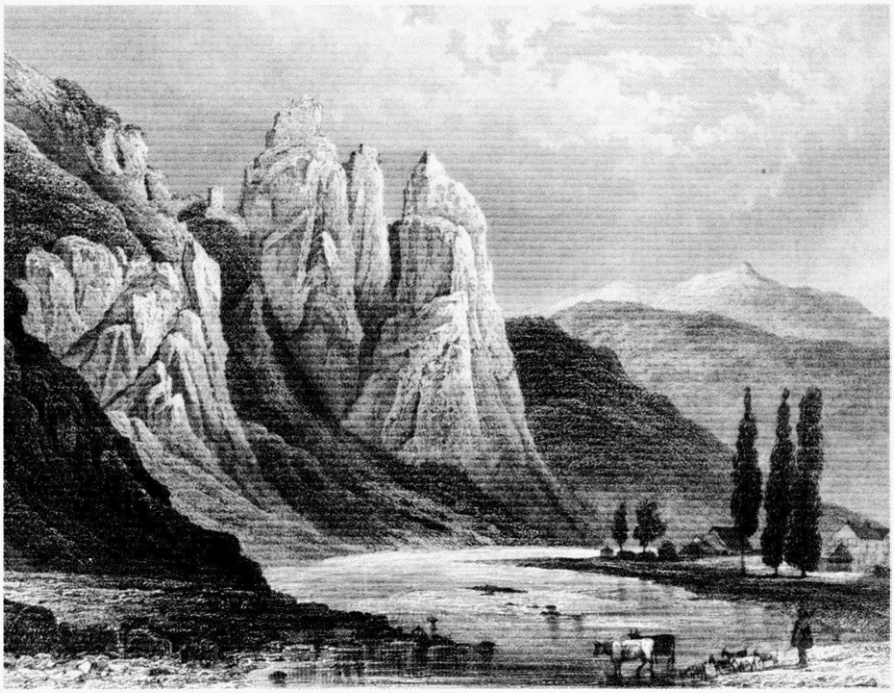
One or two scaldic poems of the eleventh and twelfth centuries show particularly close relations with *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*. Gísl Illugason echoes the poem in his elegy on King Magnús Bareleg (killed in 1103). It is more difficult to judge the connection between it and verse by Arnórr jarlaskáld from about the middle of the eleventh century. Alexander Bugge went so far as to suggest that Arnórr composed the "younger lay" himself – not an absurd attribution by any means.

Snorri's *Edda* and, at greater length, *Völsunga saga* give prose accounts of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, Brynhildr, Gunnarr and Högni, Guðrún, Atli and Jörmunrekr. In the *Poetic Edda* their stories are told in numerous lays, of varying age and character, which along with other poems now lost were the sources used by Snorri and the author of the saga.

Sigurðr was son of Sigmundr, son of Völsungr. As an introductory prose passage in the Codex Regius says, "in accounts of ancient lore it is universally agreed that he was the superior of all men and the noblest of warrior kings." This is followed by *Grípisspá*, a younger sequence of stanzas in which Sigurðr's whole career is surveyed. After this comes a long section where prose and verse are intermingled but where no titles appear. It is however customary to divide this matter among three poems.

Reginsmál tells of Sigurðr's youth, how he was fostered by Reginn who forged the sword Gramr for him: "it was so sharp that he held it down in the Rhine and let a tuft of wool float downstream against it and the sword sliced through the tuft just as it sliced through the water; with that sword Sigurðr split Reginn's anvil in twain."

The story is continued in *Fáfnismál*. Fáfnir was Reginn's brother, who lived in dragon shape on Gnitaheiðr, sitting on a hoard of gold which properly belonged to both brothers. He had a "helmet of terror" which filled all living creatures with dread. Reginn urged Sigurðr to kill Fáfnir, and he did so by sitting in a pit he dug on the dragon's track and stabbing him to the heart with Gramr as he crawled to his watering place. Afterwards he roasted Fáfnir's heart over a fire and when he thought it was done he tried it with his finger – it got burnt and he stuck



On the Rhine. Snorri's Edda *says: "King Atli invited Gunnarr and Högni to come on a visit, and they went. But before they left home, they hid the gold, the inheritance left by Fáfnir, in the Rhine, and it has never been found since." The etching is from* Die Fahrt auf dem Rhein von Mainz bis Köln.

it in his mouth to ease the pain. And when Fáfnir's heart's blood touched his tongue, he could understand what some birds were saying as they twittered in the tree above him:

Þar sitr Sigurðr	There Sigurðr sits,
sveita stokkinn,	spattered with blood,
Fáfnis hjarta	roasting Fáfnir's heart
við funa steikir;	at the fire.
spakr þœtti mér	The spoiler of rings
spillir bauga,	would seem sensible to me
ef hann fjörsega	if he ate
frænan æti.	the gleaming life-muscle.
Þar liggr Reginn,	There Reginn lies,
ræðr um við sik,	ponders within himself,

vill tæla mög	wants to trick the man
þann er trúir honum,	who trusts him,
berr af reiði	gathers together
röng orð saman,	false words in anger,
vill bölvasmiðr	the forger of evils
bróður hefna.	wants to avenge his brother.

So Sigurðr cut off Reginn's head and ate Fáfnir's heart and drank the blood that flowed from both the brothers.

Reginsmál and *Fáfnismál* are entirely comparable and it is proper to consider them together. There is no division between them in the manuscript, as we saw, but there are differences in matter and form, and probably both represent re-workings of older lays and fragments of lays. They also contain an unusually large number of prose passages dispersed among the stanzas, and these passages are indispensable for an understanding of the narrative. The poems have some affinity with mythological poems, and gods play a part in the action: going under the name of Hnikarr, Óðinn gives Sigurðr good advice; and in his death-throes Fáfnir, who at one point is called "the ancient giant", engages in a dialogue with Sigurðr and answers questions put by him – a situation reminiscent of some of the didactic poems of the mythological group, parts of *Hávamál*, for instance, and *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*.

Sigurðr loads Fáfnir's treasure on his horse, Grani, and rides up onto Hindarfjall. There he finds a valkyrie asleep in full armour. He uses Gramr to slit her chain-mail corselet. She wakes and tells him her name is Sigrdrífa, and some sources assume that she was really Brynhildr Buðladóttir. Now a new poem is reckoned to start, called *Sigrdrífumál* in later copies of the text. Most of the following stanzas contain Sigrdrífa's instructions to Sigurðr about runes he should know and various other pieces of good counsel – this is like parts of *Hávamál*. The most beautiful and best-known passages come at the start, when Sigrdrífa wakes from sleep:

Heill dagr!	Hail, day!
Heilir dags synir!	Hail, sons of day!
Heil nótt ok nipt!	Hail, night and daughter!
Óreiðum augum	Look on us two
lítið okkr þinig	with eyes not angry
ok gefið sitjöndum sigr.	and to us who sit here give triumph.

Heilir æsir!	Hail, gods!
Heilar ásynjur!	Hail, goddesses!
Heil sjá in fjölnýta fold!	Hail, this abundant earth!
Mál ok mannvit	Give words and wisdom
gefið okkr mærum tveim	to us two in our glory
ok læknishendr meðan lifum.	and hands of healing while we live.

A large lacuna in the Codex Regius begins towards the end of *Sigrdrífumál.* In all probability eight leaves have been lost, containing well over 200 stanzas of verse. There is no way of retrieving this lost poetry, for all the derivative copies of the codex suffer from the same loss, though possibly the end of *Sigrdrífumál* itself can be salvaged. There are paper copies containing eight and a half stanzas that purport to end the poem, and it is probable enough that they are ultimately derived from the codex when it was less defective than it is now. We may have lost the rest of the poetry but we can nevertheless get some idea of its contents from the prose narrative in *Völsunga saga,* which also cites a few stanzas or parts of stanzas that doubtless come from the lost poems of the lacuna. The text after the lacuna contains among others a poem called *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma,* the "short lay of Sigurðr" – in spite of the fact that it has all of 71 stanzas. This must imply however that an even longer lay of Sigurðr had been among the matter on the missing leaves. For the rest it is wisest to go cautiously in speculating on the poems that once filled the lacuna: though we may well believe that not a little fine and impressive poetry perished with those eight leaves. All the same, if we judge by the preserved poems to do with Sigurðr, we can be reasonably confident that none of the lost poems on his legend would stand comparison, any better than the extant ones do, with the "first fruits" of heroic poetry, *Hlöðskviða, Atlakviða* and *Hamðismál* – indeed, we may doubt whether any poetry was ever made that was truly worthy of "the noblest warrior king" of ancient Germanic legend.

The narrative in the lost lays must have told how Sigurðr rode from Hindarfjall and came to King Gjúki. His queen was Grímhildr, their sons Gunnarr, Högni and Guttormr, their daughter Guðrún. Sigurðr stays there a long time and marries Guðrún; he and Gunnarr and Högni swear bloodbrotherhood. They go to win the hand of Brynhildr Buðladóttir for Gunnarr. She lives on Hindarfjall with a wall of flickering fire around her hall: she has vowed to marry only the man who dares to ride to her through the flames. Gunnarr's horse draws back from the fire, but then he and Sigurðr exchange appearances, and Sigurðr in Gunnarr's

guise charges Grani through the blaze. He shares Brynhildr's bed but puts his drawn sword, Gramr, between them. Next morning Sigurðr rides back to his companions, assumes his own appearance and Gunnarr his. Gunnarr and Brynhildr are married.

One day Guðrún and Brynhildr went down to the river Rhine to wash their hair. Brynhildr would not let the water that came from Guðrún's washing touch her own head, because she claimed she had the braver husband. Guðrún insisted that she was married to a man bolder than all others, "for he killed Fáfnir and Reginn and won the inheritance of them both". "It was a deed of greater worth when Gunnarr rode through the flickering fire and Sigurðr did not dare." Then Guðrún laughed and said, "Do you think Gunnarr rode through the flickering fire? I think the man who joined you in your bed was the man who gave me this gold bracelet: but the bracelet you wear on your arm and received at your betrothal, its name is the gift of Andvari, and I fancy it was not Gunnarr who fetched it from Gnitaheiðr." Then Brynhildr said nothing and went home. After that she urged Gunnarr and Högni to kill Sigurðr, claiming that Sigurðr had betrayed Gunnarr and violated her on Hindarfjall. But they are Sigurðr's sworn brothers and must consequently work on Guttormr to attack Sigurðr. He stabbed Sigurðr asleep in his bed, but Sigurðr threw Gramr after him and cut him in two. At first Brynhildr rejoices in Sigurðr's death but next morning she is grief-stricken and kills herself. She and Sigurðr are burnt on the same funeral pyre.

One of the oldest of the extant Sigurðr poems is the so-called *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu*, "fragment of a Sigurðr lay", the nineteen stanzas that come first after the lacuna in the Codex Regius. The opening is missing and we come in at the point where Gunnarr is urging Högni to kill Sigurðr. Högni is reluctant and blames Brynhildr's wiles; then they incite Guttormr to do the murder. There are large leaps in the sequence: either the poet assumed general knowledge of the action on the part of the audience or, as seems more likely, the extant stanzas are no more than remnants of the original text. Sigurðr's death is described in two lines but from them we learn that he was killed not in bed but in the open air – a variant that is probably of great antiquity:

Soltinn varð Sigurðr	Sigurðr was done to death
sunnan Rínar.	south of the Rhine.

Although the poem is no more than fragments of a fragment, it contains some memorable scenes:

Sundr höfum Sigurð	We have hewn Sigurðr asunder
sverði höggvinn,	with the sword;
gnapir æ grár jór	the gray steed ever droops his head
yfir gram dauðum.	over the dead king.

In the extant stanzas Brynhildr is at the centre of the poet's attention, whatever the balance may have been in the original poem. Her change of mood is given a wild grandeur. When she hears of Sigurðr's death, she laughs so that the "whole house rang", but that night she has dreadful dreams, and in the morning she sheds tears of grief for what she herself had wanted to come about. She reproaches Gunnarr as an oath-breaker – now she tells him that Sigurðr had kept complete faith with him:

Benvönd of lét	The many-splendoured king
brugðinn gulli	put between us
margdýrr konungr	a wound-wand [sword]
á meðal okkar;	mounted with gold;
eldi váru eggjar	on the outside its edges
útan görvar,	were made with fire,
en eitrdropum	on the inside brightened
innan fáðar.	with drops of venom.

This "ancient lay of Sigurðr", in fuller form than we have it, inspired numerous subsequent compositions on Sigurðr, Brynhildr and Guðrún. The new poems in their turn contributed to the subject-matter and ideas of poets of succeeding generations, age after age, and it may be that some of the texts on the lost leaves of the Codex Regius were among the sources used by the poets of the late lays we still possess. Following a new literary fashion the poets now select isolated moments or individual actors from the Sigurðr drama and treat them in detail, concentrating chiefly on the emotions and temperament of the characters, especially the women. Instead of the superb and savage force of the older poems, we find profound and sometimes transcendingly beautiful insights into the depths of human personality, whether the poet is conveying joy or grief, cruelty or tenderness.

Although none of the poems of this kind can be notably antique, the "ancient lay of Guðrún", *Guðrúnarkviða hin forna*, must be among the oldest of them and get its name from that fact. It is sometimes called the "second lay of Guðrún" because another Guðrún poem precedes it in the Codex Regius. It starts as a monologue by Guðrún but ends as a

dialogue, first between her and Grímhildr and then between her and Atli. She tells her life-story from when she was young, "bright in bower", and at home with her mother. At first she is gentle, full of love for Sigurðr, but then devastated by sorrow at his death:

Úlfar þóttumk	Wolves seemed to me
öllu betri,	preferable to anything,
ef þeir léti mik	if only they had let me
lífi týna	lose my life
eða brenndi mik	or burnt me
sem birkinn við.	like barked timber.

She spent seven seasons with Þóra Hákonardóttir in Denmark and her grief was assuaged:

Hon mér at gamni	For my delight
gullbókaði	she embroidered in gold thread
sali suðrœna	southern halls
ok svani danska.	and Danish swans.

But in the latter part of the poem she becomes hard and merciless, "full of malevolence", as she says herself, once Grímhildr has given her a magic potion and married her to Atli Buðlason. Here the poet combines two descriptions of Guðrún: the gentle maid at home in the courts of Gjúki is drawn from one range of older poetry, the ferocious woman from another, exemplified in *Atlakviða*, which we shall discuss below.

The poet of this "ancient lay of Guðrún" was familiar with the *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu*, in which the description of Grani drooping his head over his dead master evidently particularly appealed to him. He expands this, as he does other details from the older poem, and makes a new scene out of it. Guðrún goes to Grani and speaks to him, and the horse then lowers his head and strikes it on the ground. Later, another poet who knew both these lays was impelled to concentrate attention on the "ancient" lay's description of Guðrún in her widow's grief:

Gerðig-a ek hjúfra	I did not sob
né höndum slá,	or beat with my hands
né kveina um	or wail
sem konur aðrar . . .	like other women . . .

On this theme he made the poem usually known as *Guðrúnarkviða I*, the first of the three Guðrún poems in the Codex Regius. Other women attempt to relieve her sorrow by telling her of their misfortunes, but all to no avail, and each time the poet repeats his theme like a refrain:

Þeygi Guðrún	Yet Guðrún
gráta mátti,	could not weep,
svá var hon móðug	so overcome she was
at mög dauðan	after the man's death
ok harðhuguð	and bitter
um hrör fylkis.	over the prince's corpse.

Finally, Gullrönd Gjúkadóttir draws back the pall covering the dead Sigurðr and tells Guðrún to embrace him as if he were alive:

Þá hné Guðrún	Then Guðrún sank down,
höll við bólstri,	leaning over the bolster,
haddr losnaði,	her locks loosened,
hlýr roðnaði,	her cheeks grew red,
en regns dropi	the raindrop-tear
rann niðr um kné.	ran down over her knees.

At the end of *Guðrúnarkviða I* Brynhildr is introduced: she is called *þjóðleið* – someone detested by all – and described in hideous fashion:

Brann Brynhildi	Fire burnt
Buðla dóttur	from the eyes of Brynhildr,
eldr ór augum,	daughter of Buðli;
eitri fnæsti . . .	she snorted venom . . .

As an extension of this we find yet another poet who makes a lay with Brynhildr as the main character. In the Codex Regius it is called *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma*, but *Brynhildarkviða* would be a more accurate name. Like Guðrún, Brynhildr grew up in innocence but is transformed when she sees through the machinations of Gunnarr and her brothers-in-law and is filled with love for Sigurðr. She herself is guiltless but fate has treated her harshly:

Ljótar nornir	Hideous Norns
skópu oss langa þrá.	shaped long yearning for us . . .

Guðrún's development is described in a comparable way in the "ancient lay of Guðrún" and echoes from this are heard in the Brynhildr poem: in both Guðrún is described as wailing so bitterly that "the geese in the enclosure shrieked in response". Although both women are changed for the worse by cruel destiny, they are governed by different passions. Brynhildr is consumed with jealousy and walks "full of evil over frozen ground and ice" when Sigurðr goes to bed with Guðrún, his wife:

Vön geng ek vilja	I lack both
vers ok beggja,	joy and husband:
verð ek mik gœla	I must make myself merry
af grimmum hug.	when my heart is bitter.

In the "ancient lay of Sigurðr" (*Brot*) Brynhildr laughed when Sigurðr was slain but in this poem it is Guðrún's grief that makes her exultant:

er hon til hvílu	when she could hear
heyra knátti	the piercing lament
gjallan grát	from the bed
Gjúka dóttur.	of Gjúki's daughter.

Brynhildr is great-hearted, consistent and unblemished. And when she makes ready to join Sigurðr on the funeral pyre, she arranges their couching with full propriety:

Liggi okkar enn í milli	Let once more the ring-adorned metal,
málmr hringvariðr,	the edge-keen iron,
egghvasst járn	lie between us,
svá endr lagit . . .	as it was laid last time . . .

It remains to mention a number of heroic poems related in both subject-matter and treatment to these just discussed. *Helreið Brynhildar*, "Brynhildr's ride to Hel", is a short poem which tells how Brynhildr, as she drives on her road to the realm of the dead, meets an uncomplimentary giantess or witchwoman and in their exchange tells her something of her past. Another short poem is *Guðrúnarkviða III*. Herkja, Atli's handmaid and sometime concubine, tells him the rumour that Þjóðrekr and Guðrún had slept under one coverlet. Guðrún proves her innocence by ordeal, picking precious stones from the bottom of a cauldron of boiling water. But when Herkja is to demonstrate the truth of her accusations by the same ordeal, her hands are scalded and they sink her deep in a foul bog. It is thought that this poem is derived from German sources, and the people named have genuine antecedents in the historical Attila's entourage. Herkja appears to reflect the name of Kreka, who was in fact Attila's wife, and while Theodoric was never among Attila's allies, his father had been: altogether the degree of corruption is no more than one might expect over six or seven centuries. The last poem to note is "the lament of Oddrún" (*Oddrúnargrátr*). It tells of the sad, illicit love affair between Gunnarr and Oddrún Buðladóttir, sister of Atli and Brynhildr, an extension of a story referred to in *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma*. The poet of *Oddrúnargrátr* on the other hand uses material from *Atlakviða*

and in the Codex Regius the "lament" is given a place between the Sigurðr lays and the Atli lays.

We have now reviewed a good number of poems, from the "ancient lay of Guðrún" to the "lament of Oddrún", which have much in common in subject-matter and/or treatment. *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* may be added to the group. These poems are not so very old. In one way or another the poets all build on earlier lays, seeing particular events or characters in a new light, or extending the legend in this or that direction. It seems that we are here dealing with a rather coherent movement. The question is: what caused the emergence of this movement? It would be interesting to investigate the possibility that the collecting and recording of older heroic poems had created a new interest in this ancient poetic genre and provided inspiration for new eddaic poems, which would entail a complete knowledge of the contents of the older poems.

These new poems lack some of the power of the older ones – they seem milder, more human and nearer to modern man in time. In looking for an explanation of the changed attitude to the subject-matter evident in the younger poems, one must naturally consider the influence of Christianity and its message of mercy and love. When the younger poems were composed, Christianity had become well established in Iceland and dominated the spiritual life of the nation.

We now reach the third and last group of heroic poems, those we can associate with Atli the Hun and Jörmunrekr the Goth. The whole story is as follows:

After the death of Sigurðr Guðrún was married to Atli, Brynhildr's brother. Atli invited Gunnarr and Högni, his brothers-in-law, to visit him, but they were suspicious and before leaving they hid their gold, once the treasure of Fáfnir, in the river Rhine. Atli had assembled a band of warriors and he attacked the brothers on their arrival and took them prisoner. Atli had the heart cut out of the living Högni and Gunnarr put in a snake-pen with his hands bound. A harp was secretly brought to him, and he played it with his toes, putting all the snakes to sleep except one adder which struck him dead. Guðrún took fearful vengeance on Atli. She killed their two young sons and had table-vessels made from their skulls; their blood she mixed with mead to serve at the funeral feast for her brothers; and their hearts she roasted and gave to Atli to eat. Then with vile words she proclaimed to her husband what

Plate 6
Egill Skallagrímsson. Illustration in a 17th century manuscript. See p. 99. Photo: Arne Mann Nielsen.

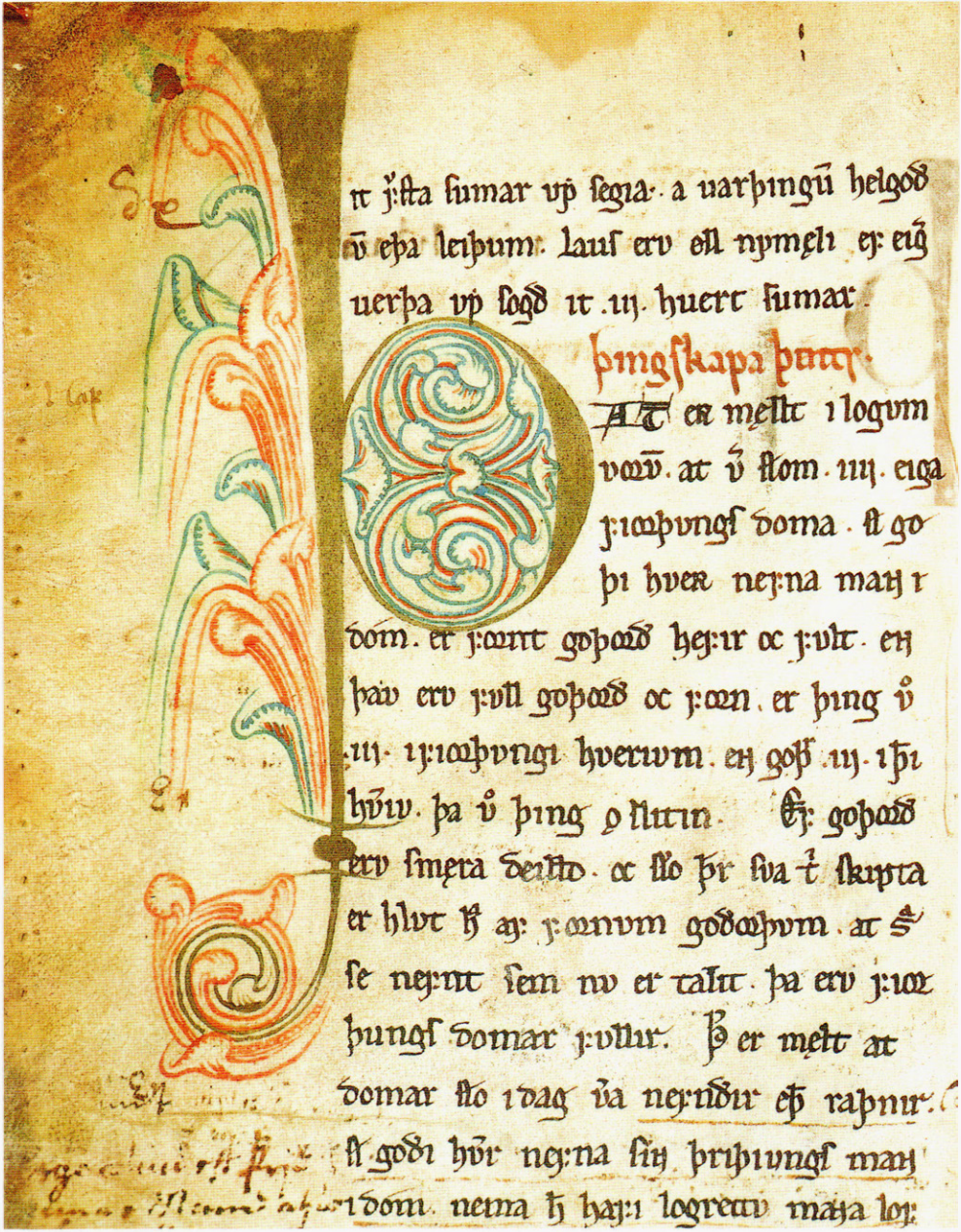


Plate 7

The name which covers all the laws of early Iceland is Grágás, *"wild goose", but we do not know why the name was given and it does not occur before the sixteenth century. There are two large collections of laws in codexes written in the latter part of the thirteenth century,* Konungsbók *(or Codex Regius) and* Staðarhólsbók. *They were compiled at just about the time when the old laws were superseded by new codes introduced on the authority of the king of Norway, to whom the Icelanders became tributary in 1262–4. The illuminated initial* Þ *in the illustration marks the opening of* Þingskapaþáttr, *"Assembly Procedures Section", in the* Konungsbók. – *Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.*

she had done. There was no lack of strong drink at the feast and everybody slept. During the night Guðrún and Högni's son killed Atli in his bed. Then they set fire to the hall and burnt everyone inside to death.

After this Guðrún meant to kill herself. She threw herself into the sea but did not drown. Instead, she drifted to the land ruled by King Jónakr. He married her and they had three sons, Sörli, Hamðir and Erpr, though some sources say that Erpr was Jónakr's son by a different woman. Svanhildr, daughter of Guðrún and Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and the fairest of women, grew up there with them. Jörmunrekr sent his son Randvér to ask for her hand on his behalf. Svanhildr was given to him, but there were some people who said she was a more fitting wife for Randvér because they were both young. When Jörmunrekr heard such talk, he had his son hanged and Svanhildr trampled to death by horses.

When Guðrún learned this, she urged her sons to seek revenge. She gave them coats of mail and helmets so stout that no steel would pierce them. She laid it down that they should attack Jörmunrekr as he slept, Sörli and Hamðir should cut off his hands and feet, Erpr his head. On the way Sörli and Hamðir asked Erpr what help he would give them. He answered that he would help them as foot helped foot, as hand helped hand. They saw little to gain from that and they killed him. When they came to Jörmunrekr's hall, Hamðir cut off his hands and Sörli both his legs: and then Hamðir said, "Off now would be his head, if Erpr was alive." They were attacked by Jörmunrekr's retainers but weapons made no impression on their armour. Jörmunrekr then ordered his men to stone them: so they did and both Sörli and Hamðir died there. "Then all the race and offspring of Gjúki were dead."

Four of the *Edda* lays treat these events. Three of them, *Atlakviða*, *Guðrúnarhvöt* (the first part) and *Hamðismál* are, with *Hlöðskviða*, reckoned to be the oldest of all eddaic poetry. Dating them is not however an easy matter. One factor to be taken into account is the links they have with verse by early scalds that can be dated with some confidence. Particular notice may be taken of the *Haraldskvæði* by Þorbjörn hornklofi, composed soon after the battle of Hafrsfjörðr at the end of the ninth century: it has even been suggested, though not very plausibly, that *Atlakviða* is the work of the same scald. Given their literary circumstances, it is most natural to believe that all these most ancient poems were composed in Norway about or a little before c. 870, the time when Iceland was first settled.

These antique heroic lays have a relentless primitive energy. Without exception they deal with dire events: kinsmen by blood and marriage

slaughter each other. Every character is stern, some to the point of cruelty, there is no sign of the genial or gentle, sorrow and suffering are the only feelings, love's only expression is in grief for dear dead ones. The narrative moves swiftly from one brilliant scene to the next, but the poets sometimes pause to dwell on an individual picture. They are willing to emphasize their statements by repetition or by the figure *accumulatio*, piling up lists of rich estates and magnificent arms and armour for example, which serve to create an impression of a calm surface contrasting with the surging currents beneath:

Skjöldu kneguð þar velja	There you can choose shields
ok skafna aska,	and smoothed ash-shafts,
hjálma gullroðna	gold-inlaid helmets
ok Húna mengi,	and a retinue of Huns,
silfrgylld söðulklæði,	silver-gilt saddle-cloths,
serki valrauða,	foreign-red shirts,
dafar, darraða,	darts, javelins,
drösla mélgreypa.	bit-clenching horses.

The simple, irregular metre lifts these poems above time and space; but their fragmentary nature, their difficult and archaic diction, and the fascination exerted by their exotic settings, all kindle an excited anticipation in our modern minds and prompt questions that will never be answered.

Atlakviða tells of the visit made by Gunnarr and Högni to the home of Atli, their brother-in-law, of the grim reception they met there, and of Guðrún's terrible revenge. The poem seems rather badly preserved, some stanzas must be lost and others misplaced or misshapen. It is conceivable too that some odd lines or stanzas from quite different poems have found their way into *Atlakviða*.

The poem begins with Atli sending a messenger to Gunnarr to invite him and Högni to visit him, promising them great gifts if they accept. But they suspect treachery, and Guðrún moreover has sent them a warning token, a bracelet with wolf's hair wound round it. But they set off, apparently just the two of them, with no retinue – a rather less than royal progress which some people think betokens the petty circumstances of the poet's milieu in ninth-century Norway. But there is ample compensation for this in the speed, din and colour of their journeying:

Fetum létu frœknir	The bold men
um fjöll at þyrja	let the bit-clenching
mari ina mélgreypu	horses gallop
Myrkvið inn ókunna;	through strange Myrkviðr;
hristisk öll Húnmörk	all Húnmörk shuddered
þar er harðmóðgir fóru,	where the severe men rode;
ráku þeir vandstyggva	they drove the whip-shy mounts
völlu algrœna.	over the bright green fields.

When they arrive, Guðrún tells them to leave at once, for they have little power to resist the grievous treacheries of the Huns; but Gunnarr says they have no choice:

Seinat er nú systir	It is too late now, sister,
at samna Niflungum,	to gather Niflungar;
langt er at leita	it is a long way to look
lýða sinnis til	for help from troops,
of rosmufjöll Rínar,	bold warriors,
rekka óneissa.	over the rose-tinted mountains of the Rhine.

After a bold defence by Högni, the brothers are captured and put in strong fetters. Atli offers Gunnarr his life in return for the Niflung gold, and Gunnarr makes a condition: first he will have brought to him the heart cut from the breast of his brother, Högni. Finally Högni's heart was cut out – he laughed while they did it – and brought bleeding in a dish to Gunnarr. It then becomes clear why he had made so cruel a bargain. He had feared that Högni might reveal the treasure's hiding-place, but now that he alone remains alive, he has no fear that the secret will be betrayed:

Rín skal ráða	The Rhine shall rule over
rógmálmi skatna	the strife-metal of men,
svinn, áskunna	the swift river of divine source
arfi Niflunga;	over the inheritance of Niflungar;
í veltanda vatni	foreign bracelets will gleam
lýsask valbaugar,	in tumbling water
heldr en á höndum gull	rather than be gold shining on the arms
skíni Húna börnum.	of the children of the Huns.

Later Gunnarr is put bound into the snake-pen, as told above, and Guðrún calls down dreadful curses on Atli. After Gunnarr is dead, a feast is prepared and Guðrún plays the regal hostess – but then she tells Atli what he has eaten:

Sona hefir þinna,	Dealer of swords,
sverða deilir,	you have chewed your sons'
hjörtu hrædreyrug	corpse-bloody hearts
við hunang of tuggin.	mingled with honey.
Melta knáttu móðugr	Proud man, you can digest
manna valbráðir,	slaughtered human flesh,
eta at ölkrásum	eat it as a drink-dainty,
ok í öndugi at senda.	send it into the seats of honour.

At this revelation weeping and wailing rise among the Huns:

nema ein Guðrún	except Guðrún alone,
er hon æva grét	who never wept
brœðr sína berharða	for her bear-hard brothers
ok buri svása,	and for sweet sons,
unga, ófróða,	young, innocent,
þá er hon við Atla gat.	whom she got with Atli.

Many people have thought that the poet of *Atlakviða* went too far in his account of Guðrún's revenge. Family ties were unbreakable among the early Scandinavians, and Guðrún's treatment of her children is a unique occurrence in old Scandinavian literature – unless one brings in the story of Signý Völsungsdóttir at the start of *Völsunga saga*, which is however related to *Atlakviða* and perhaps directly influenced by it. The motif is doubtless of southern origin, and from even remoter sources than other material in the lay. A well-known theme in classical Greek literature is the death of children at the hands of father or mother; they sometimes make a meal of them too – with Kronos himself setting a prime and primitive example. The story closest to that in *Atlakviða*, however, with children both murdered and eaten, is the myth of Procne and Philomela, best known in the form Ovid gives it in his *Metamorphoses*. Procne was married to King Tereus of Thrace and they had a son called Itys. Tereus coveted his wife's sister, Philomela, raped her and then cut out her tongue to prevent her telling his crime. But Philomela was a skilful weaver and she wove a tapestry for her sister with her story pictured in it. Procne took cruel vengeance, killing Itys

"Then Högni laughed as they cut him, the living warrior, to the heart – tears were farthest from him. They put it bloody on a platter and brought it to Gunnarr" (Atlakviða, *st. 24). The picture shows part of the carving on the church portal at Austad in Setesdal, Norway, dated to the first half of the thirteenth century. Photo: Universitetets oldsaksamling, Oslo.*

her son and feeding his flesh to Tereus. Afterwards she uses vile words to tell Tereus of the gourmet delights she has offered him: "You have in your gut the boy you are asking about."

The poet of *Atlamál* built on *Atlakviða* in the same way as the poets of the later Helgi lay and of the lays concerning Guðrún and Brynhildr built on their forerunners, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* and the "ancient lay of Sigurðr" respectively (and in the latter case also on poems that were once on the lost leaves of the Codex Regius). But there is a difference, for *Atlamál* is not simply a fuller, or diluted, account of what is told in *Atlakviða*. This poet has also turned to other sources which, if we are to judge by the *Nibelungenlied* and *Þiðriks saga,* must chiefly have been poetry and legend of German origin. It is in accord with German sources, for example, that Gunnarr and Högni go by sea (over Limfjord) to visit Atli, and Högni's son plays a part in the slaughter of Atli at the end. On the other hand, the poet's statement that Guðrún had drinking bowls made for Atli from the skulls of their sons is attributed to the influence of *Völundarkviða*.

The relations of *Atlamál* with older poetry may parallel those between the younger heroic lays and their predecessors, but it has little in common with them in other respects, or indeed with any other verse that we can ascribe to more or less the same period. This dissimilarity might suggest that *Atlamál* was created in some remoter milieu – somewhere different from the home of, say, the lays of Brynhildr and Guðrún discussed above. We may recall that in the Codex Regius the poem is referred to as "the Greenlandic *Atlamál*", and commentators have seen various things in the poem which might indeed indicate that it was composed in Greenland. A polar bear figures in a dream, for instance, and is interpreted as a portent of a snowstorm from the east; and it has been thought that the poet's burlesque vulgarity in dwelling on the terror of the cowardly slave Hjalli (whose heart Atli's men propose to cut out instead of Högni's) suggests a narrow and unrefined society such as the Greenlanders' isolation might have fostered. But the evidence of the Codex Regius must here be counted less than trustworthy, because *Atlakviða* is also described as "the Greenlandic lay of Atli" – a provenance that is out of the question because Greenland was not settled until the 980s. If one wants to reconcile these two ascriptions to Greenland, the most plausible explanation is that the poems were preserved among the Greenlanders and came from a Greenlandic source-man to the editor of the *Edda* collection.

At the end of the Codex Regius are *Guðrúnarhvöt*, "the egging of Guðrún", and *Hamðismál*, "the lay of Hamðir", two connected poems which also have some lines of verse in common. The *Hvöt* divides into two parts. In the first, the "egging" proper, Guðrún urges her sons to avenge their sister, Svanhildr (cf. p. 65 above), and this is closely related to the opening of *Hamðismál*, where we also meet Guðrún inciting her sons to vengeance. There are numerous verbal echoes, and stanza 4 in the "egging" is almost word for word the same as stanza 6 and the start of stanza 7 in *Hamðismál*. One explanation offered for this is that the poet of *Guðrúnarhvöt* knew and used *Hamðismál* – and then most probably in a version older and better than the one now preserved. But another theory seems altogether more probable, and that is that the beginning of *Guðrúnarhvöt* and what corresponds to it in *Hamðismál* were originally one and the same poem which has developed in deviant ways, both deformed and transformed in the process of oral transmission. It is conceivable that this poem represented the original opening of *Hamðismál*, but it appears more likely that it was an independent lay whose proper title would have been "the egging of Guðrún". The extant *Hvöt* must then be an extension and adaptation from a later date, for the second part of the poem as it appears in the Codex Regius belongs to the group of lays, described above, that make Guðrún's grief their special theme. In this part Guðrún enumerates her sorrows, each one more grievous than the last:

Þat er mér harðast	Hardest among
harma minna	my griefs is
of þann inn hvíta	to think of Svanhildr's
hadd Svanhildar:	bright head of hair:
auri tröddu	they trampled it in mire
und jóa fótum.	under horses' hooves.

At the end of the poem the *Hvöt* is called *tregróf* or *tregrof*, "row of woes" or "woes breaking silence", which might well serve as a name for all such lays of lamentation.

Hamðismál is called "the ancient lay of Hamðir" in the Codex Regius, and all agree that it must indeed be a poem of great antiquity – and probably, like *Atlakviða*, much changed from its original shape. Some scholars also conclude that calling it "the ancient" implies that a younger poem with the same name also existed. As noted above, it begins with Guðrún inciting her sons to seek vengeance, and then goes

on to describe the brothers' journey, their attack on Jörmunrekr and their death. *Guðrúnarhvöt* may be superior or fuller in places but some things are certainly better preserved in *Hamðismál*. Human isolation is compared to the bleak harshness of the natural world:

Einstœð em ek orðin	I have become solitary
sem ösp í holti,	like the aspen in the wood,
fallin at frændum	bereft of kin
sem fura at kvisti,	like a fir-tree of branches,
vaðin at vilja	stripped of joy
sem viðr at laufi	like a tree of leaf
þá er in kvistskœða	when the branch-perilous one
kemr um dag varman.	comes on a hot day.

There are various elements in the account of the attack on Jörmunrekr as told on p. 65 above which do not appear in the extant *Hamðismál*. This must in part be due to the defective state of the text; and also in part to the fact that the poet selects and discards as he pleases – for, like other makers of heroic lays, he was composing on themes from legends universally known and quite possibly already treated in other verse. The *Ragnarsdrápa* attributed to Bragi Boddason the Old has stanzas on the attack on Jörmunrekr (cf. p. 93 below). These fragments are brief and difficult but even so we can find details in them that are not in *Hamðismál*. We learn from them, for example, that Svanhildr was Jörmunrekr's wife and Randvér his son, facts not made plain in *Hamðismál*. It is thought most likely that Bragi knew *Hamðismál* in a fuller and more authentic form than we do, and he may perhaps have known other poems or stories about the same events.

Legends about Jörmunrekr spread far and wide. He was known in England, as we see from *Widsið* and *Deor*, but much more is told of him in German sources, some of it appearing in *Piðriks saga*. But in addition to the German material the sources most closely related to the eddaic lays are naturally our medieval prose accounts in Snorri's *Edda* and in *Völsunga saga* and, to some extent, in the *Gesta Danorum*, where however Saxo probably had Icelanders as his chief informants, as he did for other ancient lore.

Hamðismál has been likened to a noble ruin, a half-derelict cairn. In antiquity and vigour it is comparable to *Atlakviða*. If we know the legend on which the poet draws, we can appreciate the superb scenes presented in the extant stanzas. And even where the poem is obscure and

doubtless corrupt, an auditor cannot escape the spell of its mysterious, arcane utterance:

Spruttu á tái	On the doorstep deeds sprang up
tregnar íðir,	heavy with sadness,
grœti álfa	the joy-bereft deeds
in glýstömu;	that make elves weep;
ár um morgin	early in the morning
manna bölva	every grief
sútir hverjar	for the evils men suffer
sorg um kveykva.	wakens sorrow.

Sigurður Nordal has pointed out how fitting the end of this poem is, itself the last poem in the Codex Regius. On the point of death Sörli looks down on Jörmunrekr's blood-soaked retainers and proclaims the essence of the heroic ideal:

Vel höfum vit vegit,	We have fought well,
stöndum á val Gotna	we stand over the edge-weary
ofan eggmóðum	slain of the Goths
sem ernir á kvisti;	like eagles on a branch;
góðs höfum tírar fengit,	we have won good fame,
þótt skylim nú eða í gær deyja,	whether we are to die now or on some other day
kveld lifir maðr ekki	– a man lives out no evening
eptir kvið norna.	after the Norns' decree.

Among the most ancient of the heroic poems is also the *Hlöðskviða*, to give it its usual modern name. It has been reconstructed by threading verses which occur here and there in *Hervarar saga* (*Heiðreks saga*) but which evidently belong together. The part of the saga in which they are cited is thought to be a prose version of the original poem, with verses chiefly quoted when they contain direct speech. *Hervarar saga* was probably written in the latter part of the thirteenth century but its text is badly preserved and the remnants of *Hlöðskviða* have suffered with it. The oldest manuscript ends before the poem begins, and the next in chronological order ends when only the first few stanzas have been quoted. So most of the text exists only in two seventeenth-century paper manuscripts whose text is evidently corrupt in many places. In addition, they omit the few narrative stanzas originally given in the saga and retain only stanzas of direct speech. There is no way of remedying these defects. Even so, there is enough of the poem left to let us see that it was

once well worthy of a place beside *Atlakviða* and *Hamðismál*, both in the power of its diction and in the tragedy of its heroic theme.

Hlöðr was the illegitimate son of Heiðrekr, king of the Goths; he was brought up by his mother's father, King Humli in Hunland. When Hlöðr hears of his father's death, he rides westward to claim his inheritance. He comes to the Gothic king's palace in Árheimar just as his half-brother Angantýr is celebrating the funeral feast in honour of their dead father. Angantýr gives Hlöðr a good welcome and leads him into the hall, but Hlöðr at once presents his demands:

Hafa vil ek hálft allt	Half will I have
þat er Heiðrekr átti,	of Heidrek's riches,
kú ok af kálfi,	of cow and of calf,
kvern þjótandi,	of creaking handmill,
al ok af oddi,	tools and weapons,
einum skatti,	treasure undivided,
þý ok af þræli	slave and bondmaid
ok þeira barni,	and their sons and daughters;
hrís þat it mæra	the renowned forest
er Myrkviðir heita,	that is named Mirkwood,
gröf þá ina góðu	the hallowed grave
er stendr á Goðþjóðu,	in Gothland standing,
stein þann inn fagra	the fair-wrought stone
er stendr á stöðum Danpar,	beside the Dnieper,
hálfar herváðir	half the armour
er Heiðrekr átti,	owned by Heidrek,
lönd ok lýða	lands and liegemen
ok ljósa bauga.	and lustrous rings!

(*The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise.* Translated . . . by Christopher Tolkien, Edinburgh etc., 1960, pp. 48–49.)

His demands seem overweening to Angantýr. He would gladly give his brother gold and treasure: "I will give you twelve hundred retainers, twelve hundred steeds will I give you . . . a third of the Gothic people you alone shall rule." But, he says,

Bresta mun fyrr bróðir	The bright buckler
in blikhvíta lind,	shall break, kinsman,
ok kaldr geirr	the cold lances
koma við annan,	clash together,

ok margr gumi	grim men unnumbered
í gras hníga,	in the grass sinking,
áðr en Tyrfing	ere the heritage I share
í tvennt deila,	with Humli's grandson
eða þér Humlungr	or ever Tyrfing
hálfan arf gefa.	in twain sunder!

(*The Saga of King Heidrek* . . . p. 49.)

When old Gizurr Grýtingaliði, the man who had fostered King Heiðrekr, their father, heard Angantýr's offer, he thought it excessive to a man such as Hlöðr, "a bastard", "son of a bondmaid". Hlöðr was furious at this and returned to Hunland. Next spring Hlöðr and his grandfather Humli gather a host so vast that not a single able-bodied man is left at home in the land of the Huns, and they march against the Goths. They fight first with Hervör, Angantýr's sister, and her foster-father Ormarr; Hervör is killed but Ormarr escapes to King Angantýr in Árheimar. At this news Angantýr curled his lip and took time before speaking; and then he said:

Óbróðurliga vartu leikin	In no brotherly fashion were you treated
in ágæta systir.	famous sister.

He sent messengers in all directions to call men to his banner, whoever was willing to help and fit to wield weapons. Even so, when battle was joined the Huns outnumbered the Goths by two to one. They fought for eight days, only the leaders were left unwounded, and no one could tell the number of the slain. But new troops arrived by day and by night to support Angantýr, and at the end he had as many men as when the battle began. The Goths "were defending their freedom and the land of their birth . . . and for this they stood firm, and each man urged on his comrade. When the day was far spent the Goths pressed on so hard that the Hunnish legions gave way before them; and seeing this Angantýr strode out from behind the shield-wall and up into the foremost rank, and in his hand he held Tyrfingr, and he cut down both men and horses; then the ranks fell apart before the kings of the Huns, and brother struck at brother. There Hlöðr fell and Humli the king, and the Huns took to flight; but the Goths slew them . . ." King Angantýr went to inspect the fallen and found Hlöðr, his brother. Then he said:

Bauð ek þér bróðir	Treasures uncounted,
basmir óskerðar,	kinsman, I offered you,

fé ok fjölð meiðma	wealth and cattle
sem þik fremst tíddi;	well to content you;
nú hefir þú hvárki	but for war's reward
hildar at gjöldum	you have won neither
ljósa bauga	realm more spacious
né land ekki.	nor rings glittering.

(The Saga of King Heidrek . . . p. 58.)

Bölvat er okkr bróðir,	We two are accursed, brother.
bani em ek þinn orðinn;	I have become your slayer.
þat mun æ uppi,	That will live for ever.
illr er dómr norna.	Evil is the judgment of the Norns.

Völundarkviða is in many respects unique among the eddaic poems. Völundr is called "leader of elves" and "prince of elves", and that doubtless explains why it is included among the mythological poems in the first half of the Codex Regius. But otherwise it clearly belongs with the heroic lays, though it is acted on a larger stage and touches more chords than they usually do. In part the theme is a heroic legend of avarice, malice and ruthless revenge; but it is also a fairy-tale of a woman in the likeness of a swan who loses her bird-shape for a time and lives with a human being; and in the completion of the tale, we have another touching love-story with interwoven elements of deceit and treachery, anguished mourning at parting and loss, and abiding melancholy.

Völundr the smith was known throughout the Germanic world. Stories are told of him in *Þiðriks saga*, believed to be based on German sources. His tribulations and Böðvildr's are rehearsed in *Deor's lament*, and although the Old English text is only a few lines long, it has verbal similarities with *Völundarkviða*. It is also noteworthy that the so-called Franks Casket of seventh- or eighth-century Anglo-Saxon workmanship has two scenes from the Völundr story on it. One shows Völundr when the princess Böðvildr comes to him in his smithy, where her brothers' corpses lie concealed. The other shows Völundr's brother, Egill, inside a building and using his bow – the exact purport of this scene is not known but it must indicate that more legends were once current about Egill than our written sources preserve.

The poet of *Völundarkviða* depicts his characters with a few telling strokes. King Níðuðr's cruel treatment of Völundr is the result of his greed, but he is pitiable in his grief when the murder of his sons and the rape of his daughter are revealed to him. He seems indeed to be the tool

of his queen who rejoices when Völundr is captured and commands her men to cripple him. King Níðuðr understands this too late and regrets it:

Vaki ek ávallt	I stay awake all the time,
viljalauss,	joyless;
sofna ek minnst	I fall asleep so seldom
síz mína sonu dauða,	since my sons died;
kell mik í höfuð,	numbing cold in my head,
köld eru mér ráð þín . . .	cold to me your counsels . . .

Völundr himself is the most enigmatic and difficult of all the heroes of Germanic legend. He appears totally human in his love for the swan-maid and in his desolation when she flies away after their nine years together. In his captivity he is cunning but also full of savage ruthlessness, like Atli and Guðrún. He is a cousin of the Greek Daidalos, the most skilful of craftsmen who, when necessary, can fly through the air. This kinship was recognised early on by Norsemen who gave the name *Völundarhús*, "Völundr's house", to the Labyrinth of Daidalos. But even in his vengeance he is not utterly merciless. He tells Níðuðr he must bind himself on oath to spare his violated daughter and the child she will bear Völundr – and he, the avenger, calls her his wife and bride. Böðvildr herself is all womanly, lured by finery and novelty, whose grief for the loss of her innocence is mingled with grief for the loss of the lover who had overpowered her.

Völundr has himself known betrayal and loss when his swan-wife, the young Alvitr, flew away to the dark forest to follow her destiny. We see her only through Völundr's eyes, as he sits desolate after her escape. While his brothers, Egill and Slagfiðr, make active search for their swan-women, Völundr stays alone in Úlfdalir and finds solace in his craft, constant in his love, trusting that Alvitr might return:

Hann sló gull rautt	He tapped red gold
við gim fástan,	against the hue-rich gemstone;
lukði hann alla	he fully covered
lind baugum vel;	the whole linden-cord with rings;
svá beið hann	so he waited
sinnar ljóssar	for his bright wife,
kvánar ef honum	in case
koma gerði.	she should come to him.

Níðuðr, lord of the Njárar, hears of all the precious things made by Völundr and goes with his men to Úlfdalir:

Nóttum fóru seggir,	Men-at-arms went by night,
negldar váru brynjur,	their coats of mail were studded,
skildir bliku þeira	their shields gleamed
við inn skarða mána.	against the pared moon.

Völundr is out hunting, so they inspect his treasures and remove the finest of the bracelets from the cord they hang on. Völundr returns and sees the ring is missing:

Hugði hann at hefði	He thought
Hlöðvés dóttir,	that Hlöðvér's daughter,
Alvitr unga,	young Alvitr,
væri hon aptr komin.	had it – that she had come back.

Völundr sits there waiting until he falls asleep. Then it is not his bright swan-maid but fierce King Níðuðr who rouses him. He wakes to find "heavy oppression on his arms, a fetter clasping his legs". Níðuðr takes his captive home; he himself wears Völundr's sword. His queen did not like Völundr's look:

Tenn honum teygjask	His teeth are bared
er honum er tét sverð,	when the sword is displayed to him
ok hann Böðvildar	and he recognises
baug um þekkir.	Böðvildr's bracelet.
Ámun eru augu	His eyes are like
ormi þeim inum frána.	the gleaming serpent.
Sníðið ér hann	Cut away from him
sina magni,	the strength of his sinews,
ok setið hann síðan	and then put him,
í Sævarstöð.	in Sævarstöð.

So Völundr was hamstrung, put to live on a small island, and required to make all kinds of precious things for the king. He brooded on vengeance. The king's sons come to him, curious to see him and his work. He tells them to come again next day without telling anyone. When they came, he cut off their heads and from their skulls he made drinking bowls for Níðuðr, jewels made from their eyes he sent for the queen, brooches from their teeth for Böðvildr.

Then it happened that Böðvildr broke the bracelet, the first thing stolen from Völundr. She does not dare tell anyone and goes to Völundr to get it mended. His behaviour is described with remarkable reticence:

Bar hann hana bjóri	He overcame her with drink
því at hann betr kunni,	for he was more cunning,

Böðvildr and her maid visit Völundr in his smithy. She is passing the smith the broken ring to mend. Under the forge lies the body of her brother. An illustration from the Franks Casket, carved in whaletooth ivory, probably dating from c. 700 and now preserved in the British Museum. Photo: British Museum.

svá at hon í sessi	so that she fell asleep
um sofnaði.	on the seat.
„Nú hefi ek hefnt	"Now, with willing malice,
harma minna	I have avenged
allra nema einna	all my wrongs
íviðgjarna."	save one."

Böðvildr goes weeping from the island but Völundr flies laughing into the air. He settles on the parapet of the king's hall and calls Níðuðr to come and talk. He then tells him what has happened – but first gets him to swear oaths "by the ship's side and the shield's rim, the steed's

shoulder and the sword's edge" that he will do no harm to Böðvildr. Völundr then flies away and the king calls his daughter to come. He asks whether she has been with Völundr on the island and the poem ends with her mournful reply:

Satt er þat Níðuðr	It is true
er sagði þér:	what was told you Níðuðr:
Sátum vit Völundr	Völundr and I
saman í hólmi	stayed together on the islet
eina ögurstund,	for one heavy hour,
æva skyldi.	which should never have been.
Ek vætr honum	I had no skill
vinna kunnak,	to resist him,
ek vætr honum	I had no strength
vinna máttak.	to resist him.

Gróttasöngr is about two giant maidens and is consequently sometimes included among the mythological poems. It is preserved in the Codex Regius of Snorri's *Edda*, where it is cited to explain an expression like "flour of Fróði" for gold, a kenning which doubtless shows that the legend was well known in early times. The two giant maidens are named Fenja and Menja, and they are captive slaves of Fróði, king of the Danes, labouring at his great hand-mill called Grótti. The greater part of the poem is the song of the women at their work. For a long time the flour they grind for the king is the flour of peace – the peaceful reign of Fróði was remembered as a golden age in the North – and the flour of gold:

Auð mölum Fróða,	Let us grind wealth for Fróði,
mölum alsælan,	grind him all-prosperous,
mölum fjölð fjár	grind a mass of treasure
á feginslúðri.	over the trough of bliss.
Siti hann á auði,	May he sit on riches,
sofi hann á dúni,	may he sleep on down,
vaki hann at vilja,	may he know pleasure while wakeful
þá er vel malit.	– then it is well ground.

But the slave-women recall that they are descended from valiant giants and in their youth accomplished huge feats of strength and fought great battles:

Nú erum komnar	Now we are come
til konungs húsa	to the king's dwelling

"Now we are come / to the king's dwelling / unpitied / and enslaved." As described in Gróttasöngr, *the two giant maidens, Fenja and Menja, were captives of Fróði, king of the Danes, who forced them to labour at his great hand-mill, Grótti. A drawing by Ernst Hansen.*

miskunnlausar	unpitied
ok at mani hafðar.	and enslaved.
Aurr etr iljar,	Mire eats the soles of our feet,
en ofan kulði,	cold eats from above,
drögum dólgs sjötul,	we drag at the quern that ends strife
daprt er at Fróða.	– it is gloomy at Fróði's.

The king is to pay a high price for enslaving such mighty women. Now the flour they grind for him is the flour of war, and soon the flash of fire is seen from the ranks of his enemies. They grind harder until the millstone splits and King Fróði's life and reign are at an end.

There is unusual sympathy for the toiling slave-women in this poem: indeed, in modern times the poem has been treated as symbolic of cruel exploitation of workers in all ages.

Another poem which perhaps has its roots in ancient work-songs is the *Darraðarljóð* quoted in *Njáls saga*. The saga relates that a man in Caithness in Scotland heard twelve valkyries chant this poem on the day the great battle of Clontarf was fought outside Dublin in 1014. The valkyries had set up a loom on which the weights were human heads, the woof and warp human entrails, the batten was a sword and the pin-beater an arrow. The eleven stanzas we have are probably only part of the original poem. The verse represents the work-song of the valkyries as they weave the web of fate which will decide the outcome of the battle. As one might expect, they labour against a dark and dismal background – the air is tinted with blood and "bloodstained clouds draw across the sky". The matter of the poem classes *Darraðarljóð* with scaldic poetry but the metre is eddaic *fornyrðislag*.

Scaldic poetry

It is customary and convenient to divide the corpus of Norse-Icelandic verse into eddaic and scaldic kinds, though the boundaries between them are not absolutely strict. They are chiefly distinguished by criteria of form, matter and preservation:

(1) Eddaic verse is in metres without internal rhyme (*hendingar*) or end rhyme. Eddaic verse-forms to some extent represent common Germanic metres, but scaldic forms are peculiar to Scandinavia, particularly Norway and Iceland.

(2) The diction of the eddaic poems is simple while scaldic poets employed a specialised diction which has to be learnt to be fully comprehended. Word-order in eddaic verse is usually straightforward, in scaldic verse it is often exceedingly complex.

(3) Eddaic poetry takes its themes from pagan mythology and from legends of heroes who lived in a remote past. Scaldic poetry makes recent or even contemporary events its chief subject-matter; many scaldic poems are in praise of kings or other leaders, alive or recently dead.

(4) The great majority of scaldic poems are attributed to named poets; none of the eddaic poetry is.

There are some poems however that do not fit happily in this classification on account of their form or matter. *Haraldskvæði* and *Hákonarmál*, for example, are by named scalds and describe recent events but they are in eddaic metres. We count them as scaldic because of their themes and in part because of their diction. On the other hand, scaldic metres are used for legendary or mythological narrative in poems by named poets – in *Ragnarsdrápa* and *Haustlöng*, for example. These are counted scaldic because of their form. Both pairs of poems just mentioned are among the oldest Norse verse preserved; and as time goes on the distinctions between eddaic and scaldic become easier to observe. But as the preceding chapter will have shown, the term

"eddaic" is properly reserved for the poems found in the Codex Regius and in the few other sources that preserve verse comparable to them in both matter and metre.

Scaldic poetry is the usual English equivalent for what in twentieth-century Icelandic is called *dróttkvæði*, a modern term like *eddukvæði* for eddaic poetry. It is derived from the name of the single most popular metre of the scalds, *dróttkvæðr háttr* as Snorri calls it in his *Edda*, which must originally have meant "metre suitable for performance among the king's sworn retainers". In English there is no need to keep the generic Icelandic *dróttkvæði*, and best to use the adjective *dróttkvæðr* (n. *dróttkvætt*) as a technical term restricted to the description of the favourite stanza form of the scalds and to poems in that metre and its varieties.

Metres

This stanza by Sighvatr Þórðarson, made c. AD 1020, is in regular *dróttkvætt*:

Hugst*ó*ra biðk **h***ey*ra,
h*ress*fœrr jöfurr, þ*ess*ar,
þolðak **v***ás*, hvé **v***ís*ur,
v*er*ðung, of för g*er*ðak.
S*end*r vask **u**pp af **ö***nd*rum
au*st*r, svafk fátt í h*aust*i,
til **S**víþj*óð*ar, **s***íð*an,
svanv*ang*s í för l*ang*a.

Each stanza has eight lines, each line has six syllables, three given metrical weight, three not, with variations in distribution; by so-called "resolution" two short syllables can stand for one metrically long one; the cadence in each line however is always ⏑́ x (*heyra, þessar,* etc.). Two alliterating syllables in the first line of a couplet chime with the first syllable (always stressed) of the second line. (Alliterating letters are printed bold in the stanza above.) This rule is stricter than in *fornyrðislag* where sometimes only one syllable in the a-line alliterates with one in the b-line. A remarkable novelty is the obligatory internal rhyme: half-rhyme in the first of a pair (*stór* : *heyr*, *vás* : *vís*, etc.) and full rhyme in the second (*hress* : *þess, verð* : *gerð*, etc.); these are called *skothending* and *aðalhending* respectively and printed in italics in the text above. Note that the stressed cadence syllable always completes the rhyme in each line.

Icelandic sources of the thirteenth century tell us that the first poem

in *dróttkvætt* metre was *Ragnarsdrápa* by Bragi the Old, thought to be composed in the ninth century. Poets in the retinue of King Haraldr Fairhaired used *dróttkvætt*, so it was certainly current in Norway at the end of that century. The origins of the metre remain a mystery, but its characteristics are such that it is not inconceivable that it was the creation of an individual poet who was looking for novelty – an experimental form which was then developed and regularised by later practitioners. Use of the metre is virtually restricted to Norway, Orkney and Iceland. Examples found in a Danish or Swedish milieu are probably the work of West Norse poets or the result of West Norse influence.

As was mentioned, *dróttkvæðr háttr* is the most popular of the scalds' metres but it is not the only one they used. Some of their other forms are evidently developments from the Germanic kinds employed in eddaic verse, while others are varieties of *dróttkvætt* – sometimes they are offspring of both. Others again result from the influence of late Latin poetry, adapted for native use and never without alliteration as a binding principle.

Kviðuháttr comes closest to *fornyrðislag* (p. 33). It is however rigorously syllabic, with three syllables in the a-line, four in the b-line:

Hitt var fyrr
at fold ruðu
sverðberendr
sínum dróttni.

This is the metre of one of the oldest scaldic poems extant, *Ynglingatal* by Þjóðólfr of Hvin, and since it is so close to the common Germanic form one might be tempted to conclude that it was the earliest of scaldic verse-forms. But the syllable counting and the use of kennings relate it to verse in *dróttkvæðr háttr*, and it is just as likely that it is a subsequent development.

Other varieties are certainly later developments. We may take one or two examples. *Töglag* (or *toglag*) and *haðarlag* are difficult forms, created by introducing regular *skothending* and *aðalhending* into *fornyrðislag* and *málaháttr* (cf. p. 33) respectively, the first with only four syllables to the line, the second with five. An example of *haðarlag* from the thirteenth-century *Hrafnsmál* by Sturla Þórðarson is:

Sóttu sóknhvattar
sveitir háleitan

geira glymstœri
glyggs ór Finnbyggðum.

Two old metres were modelled on Latin forms, evidenced by the end rhyme in the one case, by the verse movement in the other. The oldest poem preserved with end rhyme (*runhenda*) is *Höfuðlausn*, attributed to Egill Skallagrímsson and supposed to have been made for presentation to Eiríkr Bloodaxe in York c. AD 950:

Óx hjörva glöm
við hlífar þröm,
guðr óx of gram,
gramr sótti fram,
þar heyrðisk þá,
þaut mækis á,
málmhríðar spá,
sú var mest of lá.

The next oldest examples with what seem reliable attributions are from c. 1000. The one fragment among them that is part of a panegyric on a reigning monarch was made for recitation in Denmark.

Old English end-rhymed poetry is known from the tenth century or earlier; it includes the so-called *Rhyming Poem*, whose metre is very similar to *runhent*. The association of Egill Skallagrímsson with England has consequently led some scholars to believe that he got to know the form from vernacular examples there, but the ultimate origins are doubtless to be sought in Latin verse.

Hrynhenda or *hrynhendr háttr* has alliteration and internal rhyme like *dróttkvætt* but instead of six syllables to the line it has eight. It has been seen by some as a straightforward extension of *dróttkvætt*, but the flow of the rhythm is different and for the first time in Norse verse we find strong tendencies towards a regular repetitive beat, a trochaic movement in imitation of Latin verse – a rhythm that was to prevail in Icelandic poetry for centuries to come. It may also be noted that what is regarded as the oldest fragment in this form is distinctively Christian in content, supposed to have been made by a Hebridean in the midst of tempest in the Greenland Sea just before AD 1000:

Mínar bið ek at munka reyni
meinalausan farar beina,
heiðis haldi hárar foldar
hallar dróttinn yfir mér stalli.

The next certain instance is a whole poem made in the metre by Arnórr jarlaskáld c. 1046. Three hundred years later Eysteinn used it in his famous *Lilja*, so in later Icelandic the form has often been called *Liljulag*, the "Lilja tune".

Finally the metre may be mentioned which Snorri called *hálfhnept* ("half-chopped", "truncated", to use Turville-Petre's glosses). This is *dróttkvætt* but without the final unstressed ending. We need not stop to discuss the various theories that have been put forward to explain the origin of this form. A well-known love stanza by Björn Breiðvíkinga-kappi (late tenth century) provides a good example:

Sýlda skar ek svana fold
súðum því at gæibrúðr
ástum leiddi oss fast
austan með hlaðit flaust.
Víða gat ek vásbúð,
víglundr nú um stund
helli byggir hugfullr
hingat fyr konu bing.

Scaldic diction

"There are two features which distinguish all poetry," says Snorri, "diction and metre." The specialised poetic diction is usually divided into two kinds: *heiti* (or *ókennd heiti*), "appellations", and *kenningar*, "kennings". Snorri uses the term *heiti* of all substantives found in verse whether everyday or special to poetry, but nowadays we generally reserve the term for nouns employed in poetry but not in ordinary speech or written prose: words like *jór* "horse", *jöfurr* "prince", *mækir* "sword". A kenning on the other hand is made up of two substantival elements, either compounded like *oddbreki* "point-wave", blood, *hreinbraut* "reindeer-road", land, or in genitive relationship, like *unnar hestr* "wave's horse", ship, *örva drif* "arrows' snowstorm", battle. The main element may be called the base-word, the genitive word (or its equivalent) the qualifier. It is said that a ship is called a horse and *kennt til*, "attributed to" or "referred to", a wave. But each part of a kenning may itself be expressed as a kenning. A ship may then be called *svana strindar blakkr* "(pale) steed of swans' land", where "swans' land" means sea; or *allra landa umbands harðvigg* "hard horse of the girdle of all lands"; battle may be *hrafns víns hregg* "storm of the wine of the raven", i.e. of blood,

Sköglar borðs skelfihríð "storm that makes shudder the board of Skögul" (Skögul is a valkyrie, whose board is a shield); or as part of the most extended kenning in all scaldic poetry, *nausta blakks hlémána gífrs drífa* "storm of the trollwoman of the lee-moon of the (pale) steed of boatsheds": "steed of boatsheds" is a ship, whose "lee-moon" is a shield – shields were mounted on the topstrake of a warship; a shield's "trollwoman" is an axe, the axe's storm is battle.

Our comprehension of this peculiar diction depends fundamentally on Snorri's *Edda*: when a fourteenth-century poet like Eysteinn in his *Lilja* talks of *Eddu regla*, "the rule of the Edda", he means what Snorri lays down on the subject of intricate and puzzling kennings. In *Gylfaginning* (cf. p. 176) Snorri tells the myths which one needs to know in order to understand kennings of heathen content, and in *Skáldskaparmál* (p. 178) he shows how things can be described by kennings that refer to the divine and human worlds and he relates more of the myths and heroic legends necessary for their understanding.

The obscurity of scaldic poetry is made all the greater by the fact that word-order and clause-distribution are generally very different from that of ordinary communication, spoken or written. Each half-stanza forms an independent unit but within its brief limits the poet has great freedom in disposing his statements. It is often doubtful which words go with which, and we are faced with a variety of interpretations depending on critics' views of how one should connect or understand the parts of the half-stanza under discussion, i.e. how to arrange the words to give the sense the poet intended. It is of course also possible that poets sometimes meant their words to be ambiguous or to serve a dual purpose.

Origins

Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa*, which early sources count the oldest of scaldic poetry, had pictures on a shield for its subject. We have fragments of other early shield-poems and references to others again that are lost. The depictions on these shields were often illustrations of myths, and we know that other scaldic poems were composed on exploits of the gods: whether they or some of them were shield-poems as well we do not know. A related kind is Úlfr Uggason's *Húsdrápa* which described mythological motifs as they appeared in carvings on the walls of a new house built by Óláfr pái at Hjarðarholt c. 985. As we have seen, much scaldic diction is closely connected with pagan religious beliefs: ken-

nings are full of references to gods and goddesses and make free use of divine names. It is natural therefore to consider all this under one head and to conclude that, like pictorial art, poetry was a handmaid of religion – a connection that remained unbroken throughout the pagan period, no matter whether the subject-matter of the scaldic verse concerned the gods directly or not. Names of gods and valkyries had two-fold significance: in kennings they come in phrases referring to men and weapons and battle, and so serve one purpose; but at the same time they serve another by inevitably drawing attention to the origins of the imagery in heathen belief and to the existence of the pagan deities and their intervention in human affairs – after all, poetry itself was a gift from Óðinn.

Preservation

As we have seen – with the Codex Regius as our best witness – numerous eddaic poems were recorded entire and collected together in manuscript books. We know of no similar collections of scaldic verse, but after the art of writing was introduced in Iceland some poems found individual record, especially poems on Christian subjects – indeed, these were very probably written down as soon as they were composed. Older scaldic poetry lived on orally, at least for some time. A vast amount has undoubtedly been lost, but what remains was saved chiefly because it was put to use in prose writings, sagas of various kinds and didactic works – Snorri, for example, includes many stanzas or parts of stanzas and even complete poems in his *Edda*. Authors cited verses to substantiate their history-writing – in the prologues to his separate *Óláfs saga helga* and *Heimskringla* Snorri devoted some famous lines to the principles of such citation. But this means that whole poems are rarely quoted, usually only individual stanzas as the narrative proceeds. The poems now have to be reconstructed from many small parts, but we can seldom be confident that a complete text has been recovered or stanzas restored in absolutely the right sequence.

As we have observed, some eddaic poems, especially the older ones, are badly preserved and consequently difficult to understand. We face still more problems when we come to interpret scaldic verse. The complex but regular form of the *dróttkvætt* metre was admittedly a notable mnemonic aid, but the specialised diction and the syntactic "dismembering" did little to help comprehensible oral transmission. When the verse was recorded in prose narratives, it was cited, as we just

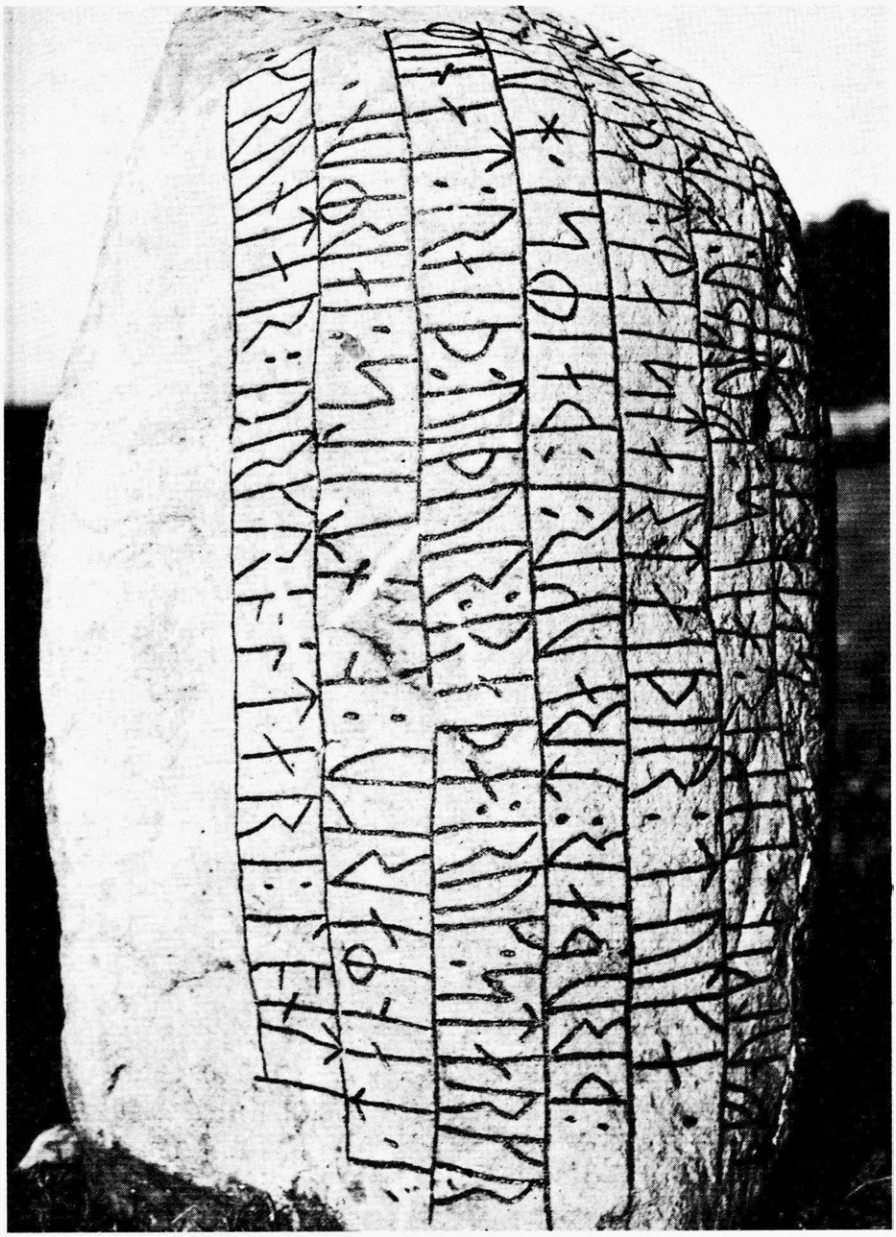
saw, in isolated bits and pieces, a form of quotation which did nothing to make the meaning clearer. An author sometimes tried to correct the verse he quoted, not necessarily to its advantage. Subsequently copies were made, and copies of copies, and in this process the verse ran the same dangers as in oral transmission or worse dangers still. Scribes who understood only a fraction of the verse they were copying put their own misapprehensions and errors into circulation and made unsuccessful attempts to improve their originals. *Dróttkvætt* verse is a delicate structure – one word wrong, one mistake breeding another, and half a stanza becomes a total enigma. Many *dróttkvætt* stanzas are in this state. We know that some corruption has crept in, but the chances of putting it right are almost nil.

With these reservations in mind, we may turn to the two main groups of scaldic poetry, poems on kings and great men and "free-standing" or "occasional" stanzas, Icelandic *lausavísur*, which we may keep as a convenient technical term.

Poems addressed to kings and great men

A custom of great antiquity, widespread and certainly common among all the Germanic peoples, was for poets to declaim poems in the presence of kings and other great patrons. Stories tell of poets reciting old heroic lays; a famous example is Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld's rendering of the ancient *Bjarkamál* to St Óláfr and his men on the morning of the battle of Stiklestad. But it was preeminently their own compositions that poets presented – *dróttkvætt* verse in the literal and proper sense of that term (p. 84). In an illiterate world the poets were both the entertainers and the memorialists of great men. They told the tale of their exploits and battles. But generally speaking the matter of these poems is less weighty than one might expect from contemporary recorders. More effort goes into the form, less into the content. Ships at sea and battles are described in more or less the same terms over and over again, the clash of weapons and the screech of carrion fowl are there in plenty, but the events themselves drown in the flood of kennings.

Most scaldic poems were composed on rulers of Norway, but we are told of some made in honour of kings of Denmark and Sweden, even of England, and a few such poems are still preserved whole or fragmentary. Leaders of lesser status, the earls of Orkney and chieftains of *hersir* rank in Norway, for example, also received panegyric poems from scalds. Elegiac praise-poems were also composed. We further know of



The Karlevi stone in Öland, Sweden, the oldest literary record containing a dróttkvætt *stanza. The stone was raised about the year 1000 over the grave of a Danish chieftain who died in Öland.*

poems made to glorify Icelanders: Þormóðr Trefilsson for instance composed a poem called *Hrafnsmál*, "Raven lay", on Snorri goði, which was used by the author of *Eyrbyggja saga*; and Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld commemorated his foster-brother, Þorgeirr Hávarsson, in a poem which was a main source for the first part of *Fóstbræðra saga* where the tale of Þorgeirr's manslaughters is told.

Praise-poems were composed in the metres described above and in a few other varieties, but the form most commonly used was *dróttkvætt*. A poem (*kvæði*) is classified as a *drápa* or a *flokkr*, depending on the disposition of the stanzas, not on the metre as such. A *drápa* is distinguished by the use of one or more refrains (*stef*) repeated at various intervals. The parts between the refrains were called *stefjabálkar* (refrain dividers or sections – *bálkr* = a balk of timber), and the last part of the poem was the *slæmr*, perhaps another loan from carpentry since the word otherwise means the angled crosscut which finishes off the end of a beam. A *flokkr* (group, band, flock), on the other hand, was a sequence of stanzas without refrains. The *drápa* was naturally thought a more distinguished form than the *flokkr*. The story is told that Knútr the Great of England and Denmark took offence when Þórarinn loftunga presented him with a *flokkr* and was going to have him hanged, but Þórarinn saved his neck by inserting refrains and so transforming his poem into a *drápa*.

Lausavísur

Snorri's *Edda*, the grammatical treatises and many *þættir* and sagas – kings' sagas, sagas of Icelanders and *Sturlunga saga*, these last two in particular – preserve a variety of stanzas, singly or in short sequences, most of them *dróttkvætt*, which are associated with fleeting occasions. Whereas verses from *flokkar* and *drápur* are used to substantiate what is told in the prose of a story, *lausavísur* are themselves part, sometimes indeed the core, of the narrative, and often add to what the prose relates. This is possible because they are presented as composed on the spur of the moment, or at least in more-or-less immediate association with the events described. Poems composed on long-past events could naturally not be used in this way.

Few doubts have been cast on the authenticity of the saga-attributions of praise-poems, but it is clear that some of the stanzas found in sagas of Icelanders – especially the later ones – cannot have been made by the poets whose work they are said to be. Late word-forms provide

the best evidence for such false attributions. One prime problem is where to draw the line between genuine and spurious ascriptions, and another is how to decide whether verses of suspect origin were made to accompany a story in an oral stage or were composed when a saga was written. These problems are extraordinarily difficult to resolve, not least because the scaldic metres retained their fixed characteristics and the *dróttkvætt* style changed little from one century to another. Some stanzas were evidently not composed in the circumstances related in the sagas, but even so they may still have been composed by the poets named; alternatively, the verses cited may be ancient but made by other poets and in other situations than those described in the prose narratives.

Scaldic poets

We have a source called *Skáldatal*, "enumeration of poets", known in late thirteenth-century versions but thought possibly to have originated with a list first compiled by Snorri. It gives the names of Norwegian and Icelandic poets and the rulers in whose honour they composed. In some cases we know no more of the poets and their poems than is found in the list. The first scald named there is Starkaðr the Old, of whom it says, "His poems are the most ancient of those that people know nowadays; he composed on kings of the Danes." But no one now has much confidence in the authenticity of the verse attributed to him or to any other of his "contemporaries" in the *fornaldarsögur*.

On the border between the prehistoric and the historic stands the figure of *Bragi Boddason the Old*, who lived in the ninth century but whether in its first or second half is disputed. Fragments of stanzas are attributed to him in Snorri's *Edda* and said to be from a poem called *Ragnarsdrápa* – descriptions of pictures on a shield given to the poet by a certain Ragnarr (possibly Ragnarr loðbrók, cf. p. 358). The themes are mythical and heroic: Þórr fishing for Miðgarðsormr; Gefjun ploughing out "Denmark's increment" – the island of Sjælland – from the land of Gylfi, king of the Swedes; Hamðir and Sörli taking vengeance –

Knátti eðr við illan	Again, Jörmunrekr woke
Jörmunrekr at vakna	to harsh reality
með dreyrfáar dróttir	among blood-shining retainers
draum í sverða flaumi.	in an eddy of swords.

Rósta varð í ranni	Tumult rose in the hall
Randvés höfuðniðja,	of the chief kinsman of Randvér
þá er hrafnbláir hefnðu	when the raven-black brothers of Erpr
harma Erps of barmar.	avenged their wrongs.

In *Ragnarsdrápa* we see that the specialised poetic diction is already remarkably well established and some of the kennings are complex: evidently some period of development in the *dróttkvætt* style had preceded its composition. But the kenning imagery is more lively than in subsequent poetry, the kenning components have a fresh, individual significance, they are not empty word-play. There is also less regularity in the internal rhyming than the later conventions required. These features give the verse an archaic stamp, and scholars generally incline to the view that this is indeed the oldest scaldic poetry we possess.

"There were poets in the following of King Haraldr [Fairhaired]," says Snorri, and *Skáldatal* names six of them. The best known were *Þorbjörn hornklofi* and *Þjóðólfr of Hvin*. Two poems by Þorbjörn are known – incomplete, of course, like most of the extant scaldic praise-poems. One of them has been dubbed *Haraldskvæði* or *Hrafnsmál* – the latter name is because the poet presents his poem as spoken by a raven to a valkyrie. It is in a mixture of *málaháttr* and *ljóðaháttr*, closely related in form to the oldest of the eddaic lays. The raven had followed the king when he undertook his youthful conquests, and in the first part of the poem he describes the battle of Hafrsfjörðr. In the latter part he portrays life in the king's retinue, and it can be seen that the king's poets were well content with their royal rewards:

Á gerðum sér þeira	One sees from their gear
ok á gullbaugum	and from their gold bracelets
at þeir eru í kunnleikum	that they are on close terms with
við konung,	the king;
feldum ráða þeir rauðum	they dispose of cloaks red
ok vel fagrrenduðum,	and beautifully striped,
sverðum silfrvöfðum,	of swords wound with silver,
serkjum hringofnum,	ring-woven corselets,
gylldum andfetlum	gilded baldrics
ok gröfnum hjálmum,	and chased helmets,
hringum handbærum	bracelets worth wearing
er þeim Haraldr valði.	which Haraldr picked out for them.

The other poem by Þorbjörn hornklofi is in *dróttkvætt*, *Glymdrápa*, "the ringing *drápa*". The name shows that men thought the hall resounded

when such a poem was declaimed, but to us the poem seems frigid and empty, once the grand ornament is stripped away.

Two poems by Þjóðólfr are also known. *Haustlöng* is a *dróttkvætt* shield-poem describing mythological scenes, like Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa*. The *dróttkvætt* form is stricter here but the pictures are full of life nevertheless.

It is Þjóðólfr's other poem, *Ynglingatal*, which is better known. He composed it in honour of Rögnvaldr heiðumhæri, a cousin of King Haraldr Fairhaired. Snorri used it as his chief source in *Ynglinga saga*, and says of it: "In that poem he named thirty of his [Rögnvaldr's] ancestors and told of the death and burial place of each one of them." The poem is a notable source for the student of ancient folklore, and it is no wonder that Þjóðólfr got *hinn fróði*, "the wise", as a nickname. The metre is *kviðuháttr*. The poem is well preserved; the word-order is simple and the many kennings are easily understood:

Ok Ingjald	And at Ræningr
ífjörvan trað	the one who sends smoke gushing
reyks rösuðr	trod down the still living
á Ræningi,	Ingjaldr,
þá er húsþjófr	when the housebreaker
hyrjar leistum	on stockinged feet of flame
goðkynning	stepped right through
í gegnum steig.	the man of divine descent.

It may seem surprising that it is the deaths of all these ancient kings that form the poem's main subject – though it is true that most of them ended their days in ways worth telling. And there is some compensation in a pleasant prospect of relaxation in the next world for some of them:

Ok Austmarr	And the Baltic Sea
jöfri föllnum	sings songs of Gymir [the ocean]
Gymis ljóð	for the pleasure
at gamni kveðr.	of the fallen prince.

Haraldr Fairhaired's eldest son and successor, Eiríkr Bloodaxe, was forced to leave Norway and was killed in England in 954. His queen, Gunnhildr, commissioned an unnamed poet to make a memorial poem in his honour, which in modern times has been given the name *Eiríksmál*. We have the opening of it in *Fagrskinna*. Like *Haraldskvæði* (*Hrafnsmál*) and some of the eddaic lays it is a mixture of *málaháttr* and *ljóðaháttr*. Óðinn wakes early in Valhöll and is gladdened by the dream

he has had – an outstanding king is coming who will help him at *ragnarök*:

því at óvíst er at vita,	for it is a problem to know
sér úlfr inn hösvi	– the grey wolf looks baleful
(greypr) á sjöt goða.	at the dwellings of the gods.

The bench-boards in Valhöll creak as Eiríkr approaches; Sigmundr and Sinfjötli, the Völsung heroes, are sent to receive him, and the fragment ends with Eiríkr's arrival followed by five other kings who had fallen with him in his last battle.

Eyvindr Finnsson got the nickname *skáldaspillir*, "spoiler of scalds", doubtless because he was thought too much of a plagiarist and not an improver of what he borrowed. He was a poet of King Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri, "the Good". About AD 960 Hákon was mortally wounded in the battle of Fitjar, fighting against the sons of Eiríkr Bloodaxe and Gunnhildr. When they came to rule in Norway after Hákon's death, Eyvindr's position was difficult, and his verse reveals both his mourning for the loss of Hákon and his hostility to the sons of Gunnhildr. He also composed a separate memorial poem on his dead king, *Hákonarmál*, preserved in *Heimskringla*. It is modelled to some extent on *Eiríksmál* and uses a similar blend of *málaháttr* and *ljóðaháttr*. Eyvindr goes further than the *Eiríksmál* poet, however, in making Óðinn send two of his valkyries to choose Hákon as a suitable warrior for Valhöll. The battle is described with resounding phrases and grand, bloodstained imagery:

Brunnu beneldar	Wound-fires burnt
í blóðgum undum,	in bloody gashes,
lutu langbarðar	swords leaned
at lýða fjörvi,	towards men's vitals,
svarraði sárgymir	wound-sea surged
á sverða nesi,	on the headland of swords,
fell flóð fleina	flood of javelins
í fjöru Storðar.	fell on the foreshore of Stord.

This time it is Hermóðr and Bragi who are sent to receive the dead king. On his entry Hákon thinks Óðinn eyes him malevolently – doubtless because he had been a Christian. But Bragi reminds him that he has eight brothers in Valhöll, and it is now made plain that Hákon had also allowed his subjects to keep their pagan faith:

Þá þat kynndisk	Then it was made known
hvé sá konungr hafði	how well that king

vel of þyrmt véum,	had cared for sanctuaries
er Hákon báðu	when all those
heilan koma	who have domination and power
ráð öll ok regin.	bade Hákon welcome.

Eyvindr's enemies called him "spoiler of scalds" but there is no need to let them spoil our judgment. *Hákonarmál* is in fact one of the very best of all Norse poems. As the gods lead Hákon into Valhöll, so the poem leads us into an antique world where two faiths struggle for mastery. The closing stanzas convey the poet's grief in simple words, but they have such power that posterity's opinion of King Hákon has always been shaped by them; and they give him a cognomen as fair as Eyvindr's was foul and undeserved:

Góðu dœgri	On a day of fair omen
verðr sá gramr of borinn	is a king born
er sér getr slíkan sefa,	who acquires such a temperament;
hans aldar	his time
mun æ vera	will always be
at góðu getit.	spoken of with fair words.
Mun óbundinn	The wolf Fenrir
á ýta sjöt	will move unfettered
Fenrisúlfr fara,	against the dwellings of men
áðr jafngóðr	before as good
á auða tröð	a king-man comes
konungmaðr komi.	to this desolate land.

It has long been believed that the composition of scaldic verse more or less ceased in Norway at the end of the tenth century. But various studies and discoveries in recent years show that the art lived on among the Norwegians – and it would have been extraordinary if it had not. The excavations at Bryggen in Bergen, for example, have brought to light rune-sticks with *dróttkvætt* verse on them; they are dated to c. 1200 and later, on into the fourteenth century, though of course the verse itself may be older than its inscription. Lack of the right literary kinds meant that little Norwegian poetry was preserved. Scaldic poems were embedded in sagas of kings – and these were written in Iceland. Everyday verse and probably some praise-poems too were lost among the Norwegians because there were no sagas to frame them. We may compare the situation in Iceland, where we find few *lausavísur* preserved from ages that found no record or reflection in sagas (cf. below, p. 179).

But it remains a fact that no Norwegian praise-poems are extant from after the time of Eyvindr. If there was much poetry made of this kind, some of it would surely have been preserved because of its source-value, even though the sagas were written in Iceland and not in Norway. But in Iceland the practice of scaldic poetry waxes as it wanes in Norway; verse becomes a kind of national game and an article of export. Young Icelanders with skill in the craft visited foreign rulers, presented their *drápur*, and were rewarded with honours and gifts. Sometimes the poet stayed with his patron for a shorter or longer time; sometimes he continued his triumphant voyaging from one king to another, always with a new "cargo of praise" on board. Many perils might meet the poet in a turbulent world – some never came back, but others returned to their family-farms, rich in knowledge of foreign ways and distant events. Later their poems and careers made them both source-men and heroes in the written sagas of kings. The panegyric kind of poetry flourished almost without a break for many centuries and it did not finally succumb until towards 1300. Sagas took the place of scaldic poetry as sources of knowledge about the past. But the *hrynhent* metre was popular in religious verse down to the Reformation, and the scaldic diction was inherited by the *rímur*-poets and has lived on to the present day.

The first – and the greatest – of all Icelandic scalds was *Egill Skallagrímsson*. It is astonishing that this kind of poetry should reach such a peak of achievement straightway at the outset. But the eddaic lays and the early Norwegian scaldic verse show that a long evolution lay behind it, and we know that the art flourished among Egill's kinsmen and forebears in Norway. It is true that Egill was a great poet in any case, but he would never have attained such heights if others had not already laid the foundations.

A separate saga was written on Egill's career: an outstanding work of art which will always mould our ideas about him. But it will never be decided whether the saga depends on reliable oral tradition, whether Egill was really the man the saga makes him. There are no serious discrepancies between what the saga tells and what we learn from the *lausavísur* and poems there ascribed to him: and in fact the verse does confirm various features of the saga's portrait, though, as might be expected, it does not reveal all the characteristics with which the author endows his personality. Egill was a son of one of the most prominent settlers in Iceland and himself a chieftain in Borgarfjörður. The stanza

he is supposed to have composed when he was six, *Þat mælti mín móðir*, shows how deep engrained in these kinsmen the fighting strain was. Egill got his wish, he sailed to foreign lands, took part in Viking raids and pitched battles, composed *drápur* on mighty kings. He made many *lausavísur*, full of skilfully wrought imagery, on his forays and fights. He is better than most scalds in maintaining the congruent style Snorri called *nýgervingar*: "It is *nýgervingar* to call the sword a snake, using a correct kenning, and the scabbard its paths, and the straps and covering its skin," he says, and cites a stanza to demonstrate the figure. There is a famous description in the saga, of Egill sitting in King Athelstan's hall, mournful and with eyebrows sunk and louring because of the death of his brother, Þórólfr: "Then the king drew his sword from the scabbard and took a bracelet from his arm, a fine big one, slipped it over the sword's point, stood up and stepped onto the floor and stretched it across the fire to Egill. Egill stood up and drew his sword and stepped onto the floor, he stabbed his sword into the bight of the ring and drew it his way, went back to his place. The king sat down in the high seat. And when Egill sat down, he slipped the ring on his arm, and then his eyebrows came into place." In the stanza cited to support this account, the poet likens the gold bracelet to a ringing noose, *hrynvirgill*, and the arm to the "windy tree – the gallows – of the hawk", *heiðis vingameiðr*. So the king, referred to as "god of the mail-shirt" *(brynju Höðr)*, hangs this noose on the gibbet. Then the poet lifts the ring, which is called the "cord of the gallows-beam of the shield-wearier" (*gelgju seil rítmæðis*) – a sword "wearies" a shield, the "gallows-beam" of a sword is the arm of its wielder – the "cord" of the arm is thus the bracelet. The same image is maintained: Egill takes the bracelet from the king's sword with his own sword: and he describes his sword as the "gibbet-bar" of the "spear-storm" (*gálgi geirveðrs*), a kind of fatal sign-post of battle. Egill compresses all this most beautifully and economically into 36-odd syllables, and has room to add in an interlaced clause "the feeder of battle-hawks commands all the more praise:"

Hrammtangar lætr hanga hrynvirgil mér brynju	The god of the mail-shirt [warrior] suspends the ringing noose of the fist-tongs [bracelet]
Höðr á hauki troðnum heiðis vingameiði.	on the hawk-trodden gallows of the falcon [arm].
Rítmœðis kná ek reiða – ræðr gunnvala bræðir –	I raise the cord of the gallows-beam of the shield-wearier [bracelet]

gelgju seil á gálga	on the gibbet-bar of spear-storm [sword].
geirveðrs – lofi at meira.	The feeder of battle-hawks [warrior] commands all the more praise.

Egill's fame as a poet, however, depends not on his *lausavísur* but on the three longer poems by him that have survived, though by no means in perfect condition. Two of them are in simpler metres which allow freer rein to the poet's imagination.

The best-preserved is *Höfuðlausn*, "Head-ransom" – whatever the reason for its good state may be. The saga tells that Egill fell foul of King Eiríkr Bloodaxe, cursed him with a "pole of scorn", and killed one of his sons. Afterwards Eiríkr was driven out of Norway and ruled in York with his wife, Gunnhildr. Arinbjörn *hersir*, Egill's old friend and kinsman of his wife, Ásgerðr, is in exile with the king. Because of a tempest raised by Gunnhildr's witchcraft, Egill's ship is driven to the Yorkshire coast and wrecked off the mouth of the Humber. He goes straight to Arinbjörn in York, who sees nothing for it but to take him boldly to King Eiríkr and appeal for mercy. Gunnhildr wants Egill killed at once but Arinbjörn persuades the king to postpone the execution till morning. He now advises Egill to make a poem in praise of Eiríkr, and in what is left of the night Egill composes a twenty-stanza *drápa* in the novel *runhenda* metre (cf. p. 86). In the morning he recites it before the king and queen and is given his head as a reward. The rhymed verse is plangent and the diction strident, but the poem is singularly devoid of precise statements of fact, even for a scaldic encomium. One explanation offered for this is that the poem was made in haste and on an uncongenial subject. Other critics deny Egill's story. They note that this is only one of several inter-related "head-ransom" tales in early literature, and what we have is a literary motif borrowed by one author after another. They also detect signs of late composition in the language. In countering this view, other critics claim that ancient metrical rules are observed in the *drápa* and that, although the poem is unlike others by Egill in form and content, it has certain features of style in common with his poetry that are not easy to parallel in the work of other early scalds. Finally we may register the argument, not the least weighty of them, that in his *Edda* Snorri refers to the poem on more than one occasion and unhesitatingly ascribes it to Egill.

Arinbjörn's good support in York did nothing to reduce Egill's warm regard for him, and if *Höfuðlausn* has a certain frigidity, Egill could make

up for it by a more ardent tone when composing on his friend. His *Arinbjarnarkviða* is only preserved in Möðruvallabók, the great fourteenth-century codex containing sagas of Icelanders, where it is written on a single page at the end of *Egils saga*. This page is not completely legible and the following leaf which contained the end of the poem is lost. By the mercy of providence, however, we know two more stanzas because they are cited by Óláfr hvítaskáld in his *Málskrúðsfræði*, "doctrine of rhetoric" (often referred to as the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, cf. p. 130). So enough remains of the poem to give us a good idea of its qualities: the verse is ablaze with sincerity but under the control of an extraordinarily powerful and precise word-craft. Egill has a good deal to say about his visit to York and confirms that he carried his "head-ransom to the prince's knees". In what seems the last stanza, quoted by Óláfr hvítaskáld, Egill regards his work with the satisfaction of a Horace:

Var ek árvakr,	I was early wakeful,
bar ek orð saman	I gathered words together
með málþjóns	with the morning labours
morginverkum,	of the speech-servant [tongue];
hlóð ek lofköst	I built a stack of praise
þann er lengi stendr	which will long stand,
óbrotgjarn	not hasty to collapse,
í bragar túni.	in the courtyard of poetry.

The saga tells that when Egill heard of the death by drowning of Böðvarr his son, he decided to starve himself to death. His daughter Þorgerðr persuaded him not to end his life until he had made a memorial poem for him. Egill had lost another son, Gunnarr, not long before, and he remembers both the boys in his *Sonatorrek*, "Sad loss of sons" (*torrek* originally meant "difficult vengeance", then "great loss"). In its way this poem is as badly preserved as *Arinbjarnarkviða* – we have it more-or-less complete but only in late paper manuscripts that are seriously corrupt. Nevertheless this must be counted the most remarkable poem we now have by any named poet of the Viking Age. Only the greatest of the eddaic poems will stand comparison with it.

Sonatorrek is the lament of a grieving father. At first he finds it difficult to utter his thoughts, as he plainly says in the first stanza:

Mjök erum tregt	It is a hard drag for me
tungu at hrœra	to move my tongue
. . . . .	. . . . .

. . . . .	. . . . .
er-a nú vænt	there is no prospect now
of Viðurs þýfi	of Óðinn's theft [poetry],
né hógdrœgt	nor is it easily drawn
ór hugar fylgsni.	from thought's hide-out.

His solitariness stabs him: he remembers that he had lost father and mother, and now Rán and Ægir, goddess and god of the sea, have robbed him of his son:

Grimmt varum hlið	To me it was a harsh breach
þat er hrönn of braut	which the wave
föður míns	broke in my father's
á frændgarði,	kindred-wall;
veit ek ófullt	I know the gap
ok opit standa	left by my son,
sonar skarð	which the sea made for me,
er mér sær of vann.	stands vacant and void.

For a moment his Viking nature surges up: if he could take vengeance with the sword he would set out to attack the rulers of the sea. But he sees that is hopeless, he has not the strength to contend against his son's slayer. Grief for loss again overwhelms him, grief for loss of son, brother, friends. And grief for what he now finds worthy of record in the latter part of his poem: Óðinn had earlier taken his other son "in the fire of sickness" to join him in the world of the gods:

Áttak gótt	I was on good terms
við geirs dróttin,	with the lord of the spear,
gerðumk tryggr	I made myself secure
at trúa honum –	in trust of him . . .

he says, but now the god has severed their ties of friendship and so Egill is reluctant to sacrifice to him. But "Egill began to improve as the making of the poem progressed," says the saga, and indeed one may clearly read this out of the poem itself. By the end he has quelled his grief and reconciled himself with Óðinn through his poetry:

Gafumk íþrótt	The enemy of the wolf [Óðinn],
úlfs of bági	used to battle,
vígi vanr	gave me a skill
vammi firrða,	removed from blemish,

ok þat geð	and such a cast
er ek gerða mér	of mind that I made
vísa fjandr	open enemies
af vélöndum.	of wily plotters.
. . . . .	. . . . .
Skal ek þó glaðr	Yet glad,
með góðan vilja	in good heart
ok óhryggr	and not cast down,
heljar bíða.	shall I wait for death.

Although Icelandic poets of old assiduously cultivated praise-poetry and won advancement at foreign courts, not many works of this kind appeal to modern readers. It has been said that they aim more at the head than the heart. Some indefatigable students dig deep into them and believe they can appreciate them like any other verse, but most people find them more like puzzles than poems. The content is thin and the poets not deeply engaged; they ply their trade for profit, not as a vocation. The *dróttkvætt* metre and other complex forms are fetters that chain inspiration and imagination. The success of Icelandic poets in the courts of foreign rulers makes a remarkable tale, out of this world, but modern readers find their poems chiefly valuable as monuments of history and philology. Sigurður Nordal found it appropriate to give the first part of his chapter on Icelandic court-poets in his book, *Íslenzk menning*, the title, "A dead literature's living story" – *Lifandi saga dauðra bókmennta.*

The quantity of scaldic verse preserved from the century following Egill's mature period is more or less equally divided between praise-poems and *lausavísur.* As one would expect, the former are chiefly found in kings' sagas, the latter in the sagas and *þættir* about Icelanders. The period told of in the sagas of Icelanders ends about AD 1050, and thereafter we have a century and a half from which very little verse is known. In *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, telling of events from c. 1110–1120, and in *Guðmundar saga dýra*, telling of events from c. 1180–1200, there are 17 and 5 stanzas respectively. It is not until the recording of "contemporary" sagas begins in earnest in the thirteenth century that *lausavísur* once more appear in any number.

Kormákr Ögmundarson composed in honour of Sigurðr Hlaðajarl (died c. 965). A few half-stanzas of his poem are preserved; they are unusual because they each end with a clause that refers not to the earl, but to

mythical and legendary tales (*Seið Yggr til Rindar*, *Komsk Urðr ór brunni*, and so on). In *Kormáks saga* we are told that Kormákr was in love with Steingerðr Þorkelsdóttir but failed to turn up at their wedding. The saga contains a mass of stanzas, most of them attributed to Kormákr: some are love-poetry on Steingerðr, some are scurrilous verse insulting the two husbands she had. Scholars disagree whether this verse is really by Kormákr. Some believe it was composed long after his day, even at the time when the saga was written. The verse is badly preserved – the saga is only found in Möðruvallabók – and that does not make the problem any easier to solve. Nevertheless, there are various ancient features in the verse that suit Kormákr's time better than the saga-writer's, while on the other hand few young linguistic forms are apparent. And some of the stanzas ascribed to Kormákr are in truth worthy of an earl's poet:

Brim gnýr, brattir hamrar
blálands Haka strandar,
allt gjálfr eyja þjálfa
út líðr í stað víðis.
Mér kveð ek heldr of Hildi
hrannbliks en þér miklu
svefnfátt, sörva Gefnar
sakna man ek ef ek vakna.

The surf roars, the steep cliffs
of the shore of Haki's dark land (waves),
all the surge of the belt of islands (sea)
flows out into the realm of the ocean.
I say that I am much more sleepless
than you
because of the valkyrie of the light of the
wave (girl),
I shall miss the goddess of the necklace
(girl) if I awake.

Einarr skálaglamm Helgason composed a *drápa* in honour of Hákon jarl Sigurðarson (died 995) which was called *Vellekla* ("gold-dearth" – probably because people thought the poet showed little inhibition in claiming reward for it). The poet harps on the theme of Hákon's zealous support for the pagan cults, and it is assumed that this emphasis is because of Einarr's awareness of the advance of Christianity. Snorri has a high regard for *Vellekla* as a historical source and often quotes it in *Heimskringla*.

From the end of the heathen period we have fragments of two poems on mythological subjects, preserved in Snorri's *Edda*. One is *Húsdrápa*, so called because, as was noted earlier, it was composed by *Úlfr Uggason* on the pictures carved on the wainscotting of Óláfr pái's grand house at Hjarðarholt. In what we have left the poet describes Þórr's fishing for Miðgarðsormr, Baldr's funeral, and a swimming contest between Loki and Heimdallr. The other poem, by *Eilífr Guðrúnarson*, was on Þórr's

visit to Geirröðr. This is the most difficult of all scaldic poems and will never be fully understood. It demonstrates that the extended kenning style was still as vigorous as ever. Most people will doubtless agree that verbal art has gone astray in such a work as this, but anyone with a mind to delve deep into Eilífr's verse will be gripped by its majestic imagery and magnetic mysteries.

But we are on the verge of a new epoch. Eilífr survived the transition and later made poetry on Christ, though we know only half a stanza of it. As we saw, kennings were rooted in heathen beliefs to no small degree and now, when Christianity prevailed, they were torn up from their native soil. It was felt unsuitable for newly converted poets to use kennings containing names of pagan deities, and the necessary corollary was that kennings became both fewer and simpler. This change first becomes evident in poems on the missionary kings of Norway, Óláfr Tryggvason and St Óláfr Haraldsson.

Hallfreðr Óttarsson made poems in honour of Óláfr Tryggvason (who ruled AD 995–1000), both in the king's lifetime and after his death. It was the king, so we are told, who gave Hallfreðr his nickname *vandræðaskáld*, "troublous poet", because he at first found him a handful to deal with. Hallfreðr later became a staunch supporter of the king, and his loyalty shows clearest in the admirable memorial *drápa* he composed after Óláfr Tryggvason's death at the battle of Svold:

Norðr eru öll of orðin auð lönd at gram dauðan, allr glepsk friðr af falli flugstyggs sonar Tryggva.	All the northlands are become desolate on the king's death; all peace is confounded because of the fall of Tryggvi's son, who shied away from any thought of flight.

In this *drápa* Hallfreðr notably avoids kennings with pagan associations, doubtless out of deference to the Christian king who had stood sponsor to him at his baptism. In *Hallfreðar saga*, on the other hand, it says that Hallfreðr long remained mixed in his beliefs, and he describes his own dread of the next world in the last verse attributed to him (cf. below, p. 229).

Judging from the sagas of the two poets, one would conclude that Kormákr and Hallfreðr had careers that were similar in various ways, but one must remember that *Kormáks saga* probably exerted a direct literary influence on *Hallfreðar saga*. Though Hallfreðr is in love with Kolfinna, he will not marry her; and the saga quotes many verses which

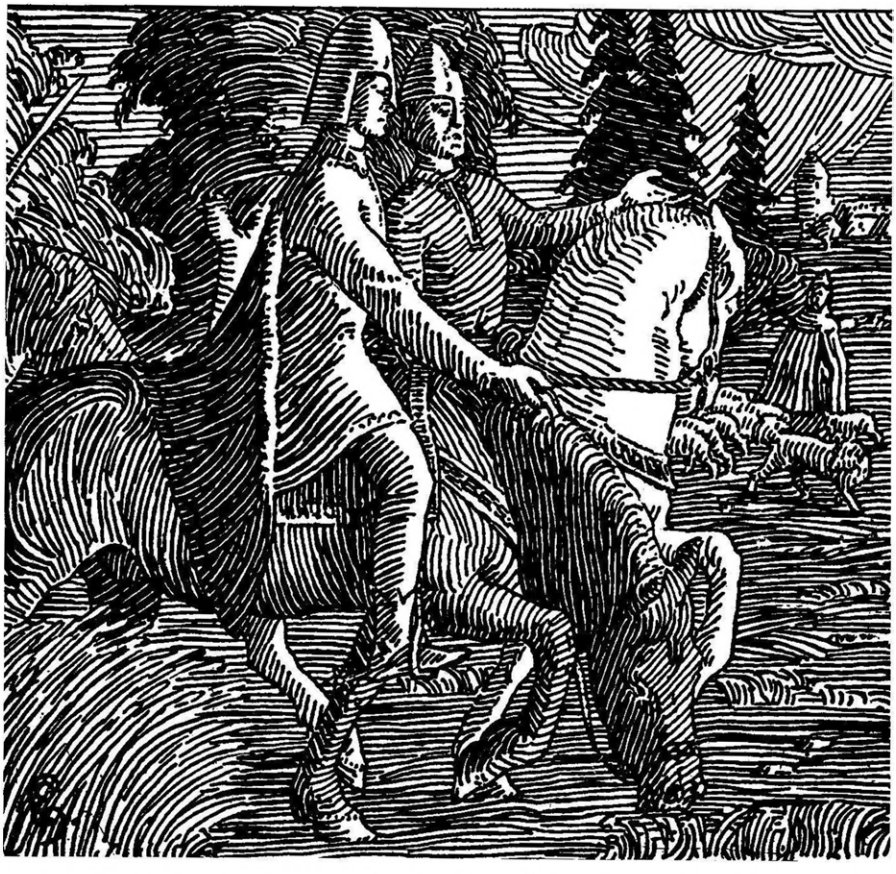
he made about her and her husband, Gríss. Comparison of these stanzas with Hallfreðr's praise-poems puts no obstacle in the way of assuming their common authorship.

Many Icelandic poets served or visited King Óláfr Haraldsson (reigned 1015–1030) but one stands head and shoulders above the rest – *Sighvatr Þórðarson*, from Apavatn in Grímsnes, not far north of Skálholt. We have more verse by him – *lausavísur* and parts of many longer poems – than by any other poet of the pre-literate age. Snorri tells us that "Sighvatr was not a fluent man in prose speech, but verse came to him so naturally that he spoke verse just as if he were talking in ordinary language." Such a man doubtless composed a vast amount of verse, but to ensure its preservation in quantity he needed the advantage he had of being the poet of a martyr-king on whom long written sagas were put together. Snorri has much to tell of Sighvatr's tactful courtesy and sagacity, and it is clear from his poetry that he enjoyed the king's high favour. St Óláfr made him his marshal, for example, a post of distinction in the royal retinue.

Avoidance of kennings with names of heathen divinities in them, first observed in Hallfreðr's poetry on Óláfr Tryggvason, was clearly Sighvatr's policy as well. This must be why his kennings are comparatively few and easy to understand. It is not that he consciously cultivated a simple style, however, for his word-order and syntax are as complex as any scald's, and it is often extremely difficult to work out exactly which parts of his stanzas belong together.

Some of St Óláfr's poets died with him at Stiklestad – Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld among them, whose end was described by saga-authors in a memorable death-scene – but Sighvatr missed the battle because he was on pilgrimage to Rome. He describes his sorrow at the death of his king in the stanza:

Há þótti mér hlæja	The high, leaning cliffs round all Norway
höll of Nóreg allan	seemed to me to smile
– fyrr var ek kenndr á	when Óláfr was alive
knörrum –	– I used to be known on ships.
klif meðan Óláfr lifði.	Now, afterwards, the slopes seem to me
Nú þykki mér miklu	much less friendly –
– mitt stríð er svá – hlíðir	such is my grief.
(jöfurs hylli varð ek alla)	I had the king's complete favour.
óblíðari síðan.	



The poet Sighvatr Þórðarson reciting verse to his companions on his journey to Götaland. A drawing by Halfdan Egedius.

St Óláfr was killed fighting his own countrymen in 1030. His son, Magnús, a boy only some ten years old, was brought home from exile to become king of Norway five years later. As he grew to be independent, he began to take harsh action against men who had been his father's opponents. The landowners and farmers were not prepared to put up with this, and they chose Sighvatr to remonstrate with the young king. Sighvatr elected to do so in verse and addressed Magnús in a poem which has since been known as *Bersöglisvísur*, "frank-speech verses". A large part of it is preserved in *Heimskringla*, and we can see from it that the poet brought the protest home to the king with skill and sincerity.

He presents to him as models those earlier kings of Norway who had been just law-givers and had made no exceptions in their own favour. He lets it be understood that he could transfer his allegiance to King Hörðaknútr in Denmark, but declares at the end of the poem that what he most wants is to stay with Magnús:

Erum Magnús vér vægnir, vilda ek með þér mildum – Haralds varðar þú hjörvi haukey – lifa ok deyja.	Magnús, we are easy-going: I would want to live and die with your generous self – you protect Haraldr's hawk-island [Norway] with the sword.

The king turned over a new leaf on Sighvatr's admonition and afterwards became so popular that he was – and still is – called Magnús the Good.

Sighvatr seems to have died soon after his protest to Magnús, or perhaps he did after all leave the king's service in spite of his assertion at the end of *Bersöglisvísur*. His place was filled by *Arnórr Þórðarson*, called *jarlaskáld* because he composed in honour of the Orkney earls. He was one of the first poets we know to use the *hrynhent* metre (p. 86), in a poem on King Magnús: apparently because the metre was so much of a novelty, the poem was named after it and called *Hrynhenda*. The form is rhythmic and sonorous, and it is in keeping that Arnórr's poem is laudatory and hyperbolic in the extreme:

Magnús, hlýð til máttigs óðar, manngi veit ek fremra annan, yppa ráðumk yðru kappi, Jóta gramr, í kvæði fljótu. Haukr réttr ert þú, Hörða dróttinn, hverr gramr er þér stórum verri, meiri verði þinn en þeira þrifnaðr allr, unz himinn rifnar.	Magnus, hear my matchless poem: mighty art thou, none more valiant! Praise I shall thy dauntless prowess, Prince of Jutes, in rapid measures: hawklike art thou, Lord of Hordland – hardly any ruler like thee. Thrive then may'st thou more than they shall, thane, till rive the very welkin.

(Lee M. Hollander, *The Skalds*, Princeton 1945 [and reprinted], p. 183.)

Arnórr also composed on Haraldr the Hardruler, Magnús's successor, and we have poems on these two kings by Arnórr's contemporary, *Þjóðólfr Arnórsson*, as well. But Þjóðólfr was especially attached to

Haraldr and made a *drápa* in his praise called *Sexstefja* – that means it had six refrains and must have been very long. We only have fragments of it now.

From 1066 to 1093 Óláfr, son of Haraldr the Hardruler, was king of Norway. He was a man of peace and got "the Quiet" as his nickname. This had its effect, for court-poets could compose on few themes other than strife and battle, and for a time there is almost no scaldic poetry to speak of. His son and successor, however, was the warlike Magnús Bareleg and a number of scalds made poems in his honour. One of them was *Gísl Illugason* who composed a memorial *drápa* on Magnús (killed in Ireland in 1103) using the metre *fornyrðislag*, a novelty in the scaldic tradition. As the twelfth century progresses, we observe a change in scaldic style, as poets once more begin to make unrestrained use of "pagan" kennings. This must be the result of antiquarian interests: the oldest known poets were taken as models. Christianity was firmly established and uttering names of heathen gods was not going to imperil one's immortal soul. But this return to archaic diction makes the dating of *lausavísur* all the more difficult.

We may end this survey by mentioning some of the chief poets from the last phase of the *dróttkvætt* tradition. *Markús Skeggjason* the Lawspeaker (died 1107) composed much verse, most notably a poem in memory of the Danish king, Erik Ejegod, which follows the form of Arnórr's *Hrynhenda*. But in fact the best-known poet of the twelfth century is *Einarr Skúlason*, priest. He composed praise-poems on several rulers but little of them is preserved. His most famous poem is *Geisli*, in honour of St Óláfr, which will be referred to below. *Snorri Sturluson* (1179–1241) also composed laudatory poems on various princes and even one on a Norwegian princess, but the only praise-poem of his extant is the *Háttatal* preserved as part of his *Edda* (p. 175), on King Hákon and Earl Skúli of Norway. The last of the court-poets to bequeath us royal panegyrics were the brothers, *Óláfr hvítaskáld* (died 1259) and *Sturla Þórðarson* (died 1284). A good deal of Sturla's poetry is included in his history of King Hákon the Old, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*.

Lausavísur. Many sagas of Icelanders, over and above those already mentioned, contain verse that is customarily described as scaldic and part of the *dróttkvætt* tradition. Who actually made these stanzas is very

hard to say. Some of them are probably ancient and correctly attributed; some of them were composed in the oral story-telling stage that came between the original events and the saga-recorded narrative. In the circumstances it is best to heed the advice of one of our outstanding literary historians: take the verse as it comes in the story, enjoy it if it is good, and give up worrying about the poet's identity.

An example of stanzas whose attribution seems self-evidently genuine is to be found in the so-called *Máhlíðingavísur* by *Þórarinn svarti Þórólfsson* cited in *Eyrbyggja saga*. In the verse – and in the saga narrative – the poet appears as a peaceable man who is unwillingly drawn into feud. The poetry is notable for the insight it gives into Þórarinn's mind.

In contrast, most people think that the stanzas attributed to Gísli Súrsson cannot be as old as his saga would have us believe and that instead they were composed to play a part in oral stories told about him, probably in the twelfth century. The poet has however lived himself into the role of Gísli the hunted outlaw in an admirably effective way, and his verse both adds to the artistic appeal of the saga and deepens its psychological realism.

The *Gísla saga* verse, and verse in other sagas of Icelanders that was the creation of a story-telling – as distinct from a saga-writing – age, is perhaps to be associated with the learned and antiquarian interests of the twelfth century. Some didactic poems and others on antique heroes are fruit of the same tree.

Rögnvaldr Kolsson, earl of Orkney, collaborated with an Icelander named *Hallr Þórarinsson* to make a poem which in *Orkneyinga saga* is referred to as *Háttalykill hinn forni*, "the ancient key of metres". The fragments we have show that it exemplified many different metres, though sometimes it is more a matter of stylistic than metrical variation. The subject-matter is treated in a desultory way, the poets introducing heroes known from eddaic poetry and *fornaldarsögur* as well as Norwegian kings from Haraldr Fairhaired to Magnús Bareleg. Generalised battle-din is the staple content. Snorri composed his *Háttatal* on the model of this earlier *clavis rhythmica*.

At least two *drápur* were composed on Óláfr Tryggvason long after his death. One of them is *Rekstefja* by an otherwise unknown poet named *Hallar-Steinn* (perhaps from Höll in Borgarfjörður?). Yet another unknown scald is *Haukr Valdísarson* who composed *Íslendingadrápa*, a poem about ancient Icelandic heroes and warriors. The Jómsvikings

were also celebrated. A certain *Þorkell Gíslason* made a *drápa* on Búi, and *Bjarni Kolbeinsson*, bishop of Orkney, another, *Jómsvíkingadrápa,* with Vagn Ákason as the chief hero. Bishop Bjarni's poem has a personal touch because he begins by speaking of the sorrows love has brought him, and they echo again in the refrain:

Ein drepr fyrir mér allri	A grandee's wife
ítrmanns kona teiti.	ruins all my cheerfulness.

This is reminiscent of the *planh*, the amorous complaint of the French troubadours, and it also points forward to the *mansöngvar*, the introductory stanzas which *rímur*-poets often addressed in conventional love-terms to women.

Bishop Bjarni is usually also counted the author of the so-called *Málsháttakvæði*, "Proverb poem" – it is found with *Jómsvíkingadrápa* in the Codex Regius of Snorri's *Edda*, the only manuscript to preserve the two poems. The *Málsháttakvæði* is made up of short aphoristic sentences, usually proverbial statements modified to suit the verse-form. Sometimes the poet brings in motifs from ancient legend, sometimes he refers to the pangs of love which he suffers on account of a woman called Rannveig. The metre is a regular four-beat line in rhyming couplets disposed in eight-line stanzas:

Yndit láta engir falt,	Seldom offered – joy for sale;
allopt verðr í hreggi svalt,	someone's often chilled by gale;
andaðs drjúpa minjar mest,	funeral over – soon forgot;
magran skyldi kaupa hest,	fancy nags more lean than not;
œrit þykkir viðkvæm vá,	woe's an edge that cuts full keen –
vinfengin eru misjöfn þá,	caring friends are then best seen;
fasthaldr varð á Fenri lagðr,	fetters that Fenris-wolf should hold
fíkjum var hann mér rammligr sagðr.	fabulous strength had – so I'm told.

Christian poetry

Scaldic poetry on Christian themes appears to be almost as old as the Conversion itself. *Hafgerðingadrápa,* described above (p. 86), is supposed to have been composed (by a Hebridean Norseman) on a voyage to Greenland late in the tenth century. Eilífr Guðrúnarson made a *Þórsdrápa* (p. 104) but also composed on Christ – locating his throne, though, in the south by the well of Urðr, the pagan goddess of fate. Half a stanza is extant:

Setbergs, kveða sitja
sunnr at Urðar brunni,
svá hefir rammr konungr
remmðan
Róms banda sik löndum.

They say he sits in the south
by the well of Urðr:
so the mighty king of Rome has
imposed himself
on the lands of the mountain-gods
(Norway and Iceland?).

However strange it may seem, poets of the Christian faith made no bones about adopting scaldic forms, even though traditional scaldic diction was half-founded on pagan names and pagan myths. As we saw above, the new poets understandably avoided outright pagan language and took over only the metres and the general style of the earlier scalds. They created new kennings for the persons and concepts of their new theology, often calques on existing Latin circumlocutions for God, Christ, the Blessed Virgin, heaven and so on; e.g. for God *Róms konungr* (king of Rome), *himna harri* (king of the heavens), *himins dróttinn* (lord of heaven); for Mary *sævar stjarna* (star of the sea), *sprunda gimsteinn* (jewel among women); for heaven *guðs höll* (abode of God), *engla vegr* (path of angels).

From the twelfth century onwards religious poems were written as soon as they were composed, or composed pen in hand. The first of them that can be dated with precision is Einarr Skúlason's *Geisli*, delivered in the cathedral in Nidaros in 1153 or 1154, just after Nidaros had been made a metropolitan see. The *drápa* is on St Óláfr, his death and especially his miracles. The name *Geisli*, "beam" or "ray", comes from references to St Óláfr in the poem as *geisli miskunnar sólar* "beam of the sun of mercy" and *geisli guðs hallar* "beam of God's hall". The archbishop and the three kings who ruled in Norway at that time were among Einarr's first audience; and the saga tells us that the church was filled with a sweet odour when he recited his poem.

A poem called *Harmsól*, on the theme of repentance, was composed by *Brother Gamli*, an Augustinian canon of Þykkvabær. It reveals a sincere and devout humility, the poet remorsefully confessing his own sins at the same time as he describes Christ's Passion and the doomsday to come. From the same period, the late twelfth century, we also have *Plácitusdrápa*, a versification of the legend of St Eustace, which we know too in Icelandic prose; *Leiðarvísan*, "the guide", on the sanctity of the sabbath and on various events that have fallen on Sundays; and

Líknarbraut, "the road of grace", on the Holy Rood. But probably the religious verse of the early period which seems to us most moving nowadays is the three rhyming stanzas which *Kolbeinn Tumason* is said to have composed on the day he was struck down in battle against the followers of Bishop Guðmundr Arason at Víðimýri on 9 September 1208:

Heyr þú himna smiðr	Catch this scald's cry,
hvers er skáldit biðr,	Creator of the Sky –
komi mjúk til mín	make thy mercy flow
miskunnin þín,	mild on me below.
því heit ek á þik,	Thus I call on thee –
þú hefir skaptan mik,	thou didst fashion me,
ek em þrællinn þinn,	I am thrall all thine –
þú ert dróttinn minn.	thou art master mine.

Sólarljóð, "Songs of the sun", is a Christian work but it is unique among the early religious poems and in matter and style very close to eddaic poetry. It is only preserved in late manuscripts (seventeenth-century the earliest) and its text is certainly imperfect. The age of *Sólarljóð* is a mystery but scholars are chiefly disposed to date it to the early thirteenth century. The metre is *ljóðaháttr*, and the first part of the poem is a collection of *exempla* and good advice – a sort of Christian *Hávamál* – and indeed the kinship with that old collection of poetry is easy to see. As the poem continues, the poet begins to speak in his own person, and we now learn that the words are those of a dead father speaking to his living son, giving him counsel and describing the other world. The poem appears to be fragmentary and is hard to understand but that does not diminish its mystical power and extraordinary appeal. As in other medieval visionary literature – Dante's *Divine Comedy* is the great example – we are led first to the places of torment prepared for sinners and then to the blessed homes of the righteous. But the most famous stanzas in the poem are those describing the father's departure from this world, when he looked on the sun for the last time:

Sól ek sá,	I saw the sun,
sanna dagstjörnu,	the true daystar,
drúpa dynheimum í,	droop in dinning worlds,
en Heljar grind	and on the other side
heyrðak á annan veg	I heard the ponderous roar
þjóta þungliga.	of the barred gate of Hel.

Sól ek sá	I saw the sun,
setta dreyrstöfum,	set about with blood-stripes
mjök var ek þá ór heimi hallr.	– I was then leaning far out of the world.
Máttug hon leizk	It looked mighty
á marga vegu	in many ways
frá því er fyrri var.	more than it was before.

Sól ek sá,	I saw the sun
svá þótti mér	– it seemed to me
sem ek sæja göfgan guð.	like seeing glorious God.
Henni ek laut	I made it reverence
hinzta sinni	for the last time
alda heimi í.	in the world of men.

The latter half of the poem's last stanza is used today as a prayer in funeral services of the Church of Iceland:

Hér vit skiljumsk	Here you and I part
ok hittask munum	and we shall meet
á feginsdegi fira;	on the day of bliss for men.
dróttinn minn	May my lord
gefi dauðum ró,	give rest to the dead
en hinum líkn er lifa.	and grace to those who live!

An age of learning

Foreign currents

It was noted earlier that at some time towards 1100 the Icelanders began to write their own language, using a form of the Roman alphabet. The art of writing was thus itself a piece of imported learning, whose introduction owed most to its status as an essential tool of the Christian faith. Some of the early promoters of Christianity in Iceland, bishops and other learned men, studied abroad and brought foreign knowledge home with them, some in their heads and some in written books. The first Icelandic writings consequently bear the inevitable stamp of their origin and have a marked didactic character. Naturally enough, we can detect two currents, one religious coming from Europe, the other secular flowing from native sources. True to their nature and origin, the learned writings we know from the early period were almost exclusively produced for practical educational purposes – probably, indeed, more practical than we can now realise. Both the main currents, foreign and native, religious and secular, mingled from the start. Some differences of language and style can be observed, and the term "learned style" has been especially applied to the typical manner of some works of ecclesiastical edification. On the other hand, traces of Latin influence are clearly visible in the language of the earliest writings on secular, native subjects. In both cases we are dealing with Icelandic language and literature. And although the main emphasis of the oldest Icelandic works is on the didactic and scholarly, preeminently in the service of Christianity, some of the stories and anecdotes in them have entertaining and artistic qualities that point forward to the saga-writing of a later age.

This widespread pursuit of knowledge and practice in forms of literary composition testify to connections with contemporary centres of learning in the outside world. During the time when Christianity

became consolidated in Iceland, in the first half of the eleventh century, the chief clerics in the country were missionary bishops, and they must certainly have given necessary religious instruction to a number of young Icelanders and taught them some Latin. Some of the pioneers and leading lights of Christianity in Iceland went abroad for education. Gizurr the White sent his son, Ísleifr, to a convent school at Herford in Westphalia, and in the next generation, Gizurr, son of Ísleifr, also studied in Germany, possibly at the same school as his father. These two, father and son, were the first Icelandic bishops. Sæmundr Sigfússon "the Wise", Bishop Gizurr's close collaborator, spent some years in *Frakkland*, "the land of the Franks", probably on or near the Rhine. Two pupils taught by Bishop Ísleifr at his home in Skálholt were his son, Teitr, and Jón Ögmundarson, who later became the first bishop of Hólar, the northern diocese in Iceland. We do not know if Teitr went abroad, but we know that his brother, Gizurr, as well as going to school abroad, also made trading voyages in his younger years, so it is not unlikely that Teitr also saw foreign parts. Jón went abroad after he had spent some years at school in Skálholt, "to see the customs of good men and to add to his education," as it says in the saga about him. Teitr subsequently kept a school in Haukadalur, and Jón established a school at his new cathedral church at Hólar after his consecration as bishop in 1106. The author of *Jóns saga* speaks of his school in glowing terms. His schoolmaster was a certain Gísli from Götaland in South Sweden (probably Västergötland); he taught Latin, *grammatica* as it is called in one of the *Jóns saga* texts; and a Frankish man, called Ríkini, perhaps from Alsace-Lorraine, taught liturgical singing and metrical composition. In the first period the Anglo-Norman sphere was the chief source of ecclesiastical learning in Iceland, and we know of Icelandic clerics who also went to France and England to study later on in the middle ages. St Þorlákr, bishop of Skálholt 1178–93, had been a student in Paris and in Lincoln; and his nephew and successor as bishop, Páll Jónsson, who was regarded as the most learned man of his time in Iceland, had also studied in England. These are just one or two names of men we happen to know, but it may well be both that more foreign teachers worked in Iceland than we find in the sources and that more Icelanders than we ever hear of went abroad to improve their education. People on pilgrimage did not in the ordinary way spend long in the holy places they visited, but they might certainly return to Iceland with novel and fruitful notions gained on their travels, not least if they already had

some education to build on. And a factor of great importance: many such men brought books back to Iceland.

The Icelanders were quick to become both book-collectors and book-producers. That is amply testified by the manuscripts that are still extant – in spite of the ravages of time and the neglect of centuries. That books were owned and read and copied is evidenced no less by the many novel kinds of literature that came into being in this twelfth-century "age of learning". Icelanders could not have pursued so many branches of international learning if they had not imported a goodly array of books from abroad. Without them they could not have created their notable early works of erudition and edification. And those early works have in them the seeds of the original and unique vernacular literature that was to follow.

If one is asked *where* this learned literature was read and written, one thinks first of the cathedral establishments at Skálholt and Hólar and also of some particular church-farms, like Oddi and Haukadalur, where we know learned men took pupils. When monasteries were established, they too in varying degrees became centres where works of literature were created and books produced – as they continued to be down to the Reformation. The first monastery in Iceland was opened at Þingeyrar in 1133. It played an important part in the literary history of the last phase of the "age of learning", as we shall see below.

One of the oldest prose works in Icelandic to be preserved is the so-called *First Grammatical Treatise*, written about 1150 or, more probably, a little before that date. The author's aim was to provide the Icelanders with a practical alphabet which would make it easier for them to set down and to read the writings that were then current in the country: laws, genealogy, sacred exposition, and "also that wise learning which Ari Þorgilsson has put into books with his perceptive understanding". In all probability, these four kinds were the precise sum of the literature that flourished in Iceland about the middle of the twelfth century. We may look a little closer at each of them.

Grágás. Early Icelandic law

In *Íslendingabók*, written not later than c. 1130, Ari says that at the General Assembly of 1117 the legislators took the novel decision to have the laws set down in a book, and that in the following winter sections of the laws were put into writing at the home of Hafliði Másson, at

Breiðabólstaður in Vesturhóp. This is the first certain writing in Icelandic that we know about, though it is commonly assumed that a tithe law, introduced on the initiative of Bishop Gizurr Ísleifsson a little before 1100, was also written down from the start. Presumably this official codification of the laws was completed in the years following 1117–18; and between 1122 and 1133 the laws relating to Christian observance in the country were revised and recorded, and then subsequently incorporated as the first section of the general collection of laws. That first legal recording, called *Hafliðaskrá*, "Hafliði's code", has of course long since disappeared, but it is thought to have provided the kernel of the law texts that are preserved.

Many copies of the laws, or of sections of them, were produced, and gradual efforts were made to include fresh legislation and to remove obsolete articles. There was no centralised consistency in this activity and it was not long before there was great confusion over what was valid law and what was not. Complicated rules were then devised to be applied in cases where law books were at odds with each other.

The name covering all the laws of early Iceland is *Grágás*, "wild goose" – we do not know why and it does not occur before the sixteenth century. We have two large collections in codexes written in the latter part of the thirteenth century, *Konungsbók* (or *Codex Regius*) and *Staðarhólsbók*. They were made at just about the time when the old laws were superseded by new codes introduced on the authority of the king of Norway, to whom the Icelanders became tributary in 1262–4. *Staðarhólsbók* lacks a number of sections that are in *Konungsbók*, including the sections on Assembly procedures, the Law Council, and the Lawspeaker, and the so-called *baugatal*, "wergild ring list", on atonement payable in killing cases. On the other hand, *Staðarhólsbók* is usually fuller and more detailed than *Konungsbók* in the parts they have in common.

The Icelandic law texts are much more varied and extensive than those of comparable age from the mainland Scandinavian countries. In general, the Norwegian, Danish and Swedish laws appear more popular and primitive and show more signs of oral preservation and delivery, evident in some degree from their use of fixed phrases and a preference for alliteration and other mnemonic devices. Ari says that the men responsible for writing down the laws in 1117–18 were to introduce "all such new laws as seemed to them better than the old laws". It seems as if these first "authors" went a long way towards impressing on the Icelandic laws that bookish stamp they have in their extant shape.

But *Grágás* has some notable passages where devices like alliteration and rhythmic clause patterning are evident, and we may believe that such mnemotechnic features were frequent in legal composition in the pre-literate age. The following passage is not a piece of legislation as such but shows the "rhapsodic" elements that may have been characteristic of some earlier legal language. It is from the so-called *Tryggðamál*, "Peace guarantee speech":

Sakar váru á milli þeira N.N ok N.N, en nú eru þær settar ok fé bættar sem metendr mátu ok teljendr töldu ok dómr dæmdi ok þiggjendr þágu ok þaðan báru með fé fullu ok fram komnum eyri þeim í hönd selt er hafa skyldi.

Þit skuluð vera menn sáttir ok samværir at öldri ok at áti, á þingi ok á þjóðstefnu, at kirkna sókn ok í konungs húsi, ok hvervetna þess er manna fundir verða þá skuluð þit svá samsáttir sem aldregi hæfisk þetta ykkar á meðal. Þit skuluð deila kníf ok kjötstykki ok alla hluti ykkar í milli sem frændr en eigi sem fjándr. Ef sakar gerask síðan á milli þeira annat en þat er vel er, þat skal fé bæta en eigi flein rjóða. En sá ykkarr er gengr á görvar sáttir eða vegr á veittar tryggðir, þá skal hann svá víða vargr rækr ok rekinn sem menn víðast varga reka, kristnir menn kirkjur sækja, heiðnir menn hof blóta, eldr upp brennr, jörð grær, mögr móður kallar ok móðir mög fæðir, aldir elda kynda, skip skríðr, skildir blíkja, sól skínn, snæ leggr, Fiðr skríðr, fura vex, valr flýgr várlangan dag, stendr honum byrr beinn undir báða vængi, himinn hverfr, heimr er byggðr, vindr þýtr, vötn til sævar falla, karlar korni sá. Hann skal firrask kirkjur ok kristna menn, guðs hús ok guma, heim hvern nema helvíti.

There were causes of dispute between A and B but now they are settled and atoned with money, as the valuers valued and the tellers told and the judges judged and the receivers received and carried it away, the cash in full and each ounce produced, handed to him who should have it.

You two are now to be men reconciled and able to keep company over beer and board, in assembly and array, in coming to church and in the king's house, and wherever there are meetings of men you shall be as much at one as if this had never arisen between you. You shall share knife and meat-bit and all things with each other like family and not like foes. If matters later come up between you that are other than smooth, you shall redress with cash and not redden the spear. But the one of you who tramples on treaties made or smites at sureties given, he shall be an outcast despised and driven off as far and wide as ever men drive outcasts off, Christians come to church, heathens hallow temples, fire flames, ground grows, son calls mother, mother bears son, men make fires, ship glides, shields flash, sun shines, snow drifts, Lapp skis, fir tree grows, falcon flies a spring-long day with a fair wind beneath both wings, heavens revolve, world is inhabited, wind whistles, waters flow to the sea, men sow seed. He shall shun churches and Christian people, house of God and man, every home save hell.

The *Grágás* texts clearly demonstrate the great interest of Icelanders

in laws and legislation. Much of what they contain belongs with the oldest of all Icelandic writings: the effective language, at once concrete and supple, the legal thinking, both finespun and fair-minded, and the extensive and detailed practical information – all make *Grágás* a unique source of knowledge about early Icelandic culture, society and government.

Ari the Wise

In his list of the literature available to Icelandic readers the author of the *First Grammatical Treatise* refers last to the works of Ari Þorgilsson, generally known in later times as *Ari fróði,* Ari the Wise. Ari came of well-known families in Breiðafjörður and the southeast of the country. His grandfather Gellir was son of Þorkell Eyjólfsson and Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, the heroine of *Laxdæla saga.* Ari's mother, Jóreiðr, was a granddaughter of Þorsteinn Síðu-Hallsson (cf. p. 249).

Ari was born in 1067 or 1068 and died at a ripe old age in 1148. According to *Laxdæla saga,* his father Þorgils was drowned while still a young man. Ari was fostered by his grandfather Gellir but on his death, when Ari was seven years old, he went into the home of Hallr Þórarinsson in Haukadalur, where he stayed until he was twenty-one. Teitr Ísleifsson was also brought up by Hallr. He was some years older than Ari and acted as his tutor – Ari calls him his "fosterer". In *Jóns saga ins helga* it says that "Teitr brought up and taught many clerics." What happened to Ari after he left Haukadalur is obscure. It has been conjectured that he lived as householder and priest at the farm called Staður (now Staðarstaður) on Snæfellsnes, chiefly because we know that that was where his descendants lived.

The only certain remains that we possess of Ari's "wise learning" is *Íslendingabók,* Book of the Icelanders, a highly concentrated history of the nation from the settlement to Ari's own time. Ari writes a preface in which he gives a brief account of the work's genesis:

> I first made the Book of the Icelanders for our bishops, Þorlákr and Ketill, and I showed it both to them and to priest Sæmundr, and since they were pleased to have it as it was or in augmented form, then I wrote this in similar vein, omitting the tracing of pedigrees and the reigns of kings but adding what became better known to me subsequently – which is now more fully told in this version than in the former one.

This makes it clear that Ari wrote his book twice. The first version

was drafted between 1122, when Ketill Þorsteinsson became bishop of Hólar, and 1133, when Bishop Þorlákr Runólfsson of Skálholt and Sæmundr the Wise both died. The second draft, the text we now possess, was probably also written in the lifetime of the two bishops, say c. 1130. The first version included accounts of the kings of Norway and genealogies which were omitted in the second edition; in their place Ari brought in more Icelandic material, apparently urged to do so by the bishops and Sæmundr. The first version is lost, and the second came close to suffering the same fate. The only copy in existence in the seventeenth century was in an ancient manuscript which at some stage came into the hands of Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson. He commissioned the well-known copyist, Rev. Jón Erlendsson of Villingaholt, to make two transcripts of the *Íslendingabók* text, and we now know the whole work only in them.

Íslendingabók gives information about certain major events in Icelandic history, those which Ari and his patrons thought most significant. He tells first of the settlement and in particular of four outstanding settlers, one in each Quarter of the country, and he then describes the establishment of the General Assembly, the *Alþingi*, and the constitutional arrangements. He spends most time, however, on the coming of Christianity and its consolidation in the country, enumerating the bishops and their pedigrees and dwelling especially on Ísleifr and Gizurr, father and son, the first two Icelandic prelates – given Ari's education and position and the circumstances of the book's genesis, this is not a surprising emphasis. A matter that is more surprising – and one of supreme significance for Icelandic literature and culture – is that Ari wrote in his native tongue and not in Latin, the language of learned men throughout Christendom. And this is still more surprising when we consider that Sæmundr the Wise, one of Ari's mentors and supervisors, had himself apparently written in Latin on one of the subjects included in the first edition of *Íslendingabók*, the lives of the kings of Norway. But thereafter Icelanders followed Ari's example and regularly elected to use their own language for writing books of history – which they did through many generations, as we shall see.

As a historian Ari appears admirable for two particular reasons. The first is his critical sense, the second his care for chronology.

He scrupulously chose the most knowledgeable and reliable informants known to him and openly acknowledged them as his authorities for this or that part of his narrative. When he wants to date the beginning of the settlement he refers to three people: "Teitr, my fosterer,

son of Bishop Ísleifr, the wisest man I have known; Þorkell Gellisson, my father's brother, who remembered a long way back; and Þóríðr, daughter of Snorri the Chieftain, who was wise in many things and whose knowledge was unmendacious." He calculates that the first Greenland settlement was "fourteen or fifteen winters before Christianity came here to Iceland, according to what a man who had personally accompanied Eiríkr the Red on his voyage counted up for Þorkell Gellisson [Ari's uncle, that is] in Greenland." Concerning the first body of laws, *Úlfljótslög*, and the creation of the *Alþingi*, he refers to Teitr and Hallr Órækjuson and to Úlfheðinn Gunnarsson who was Lawspeaker 1108–16. He had been preceded by Markús Skeggjason who was Lawspeaker for twenty-four summers. Ari says that it was according to Markús's account that he wrote of the careers of all the Lawspeakers who had lived before his own memory could serve; and Markús had been told by Þórarinn, his brother, and Skeggi, their father, and other wise men about the Lawspeakers who had held office before his time, and that was in accordance with what Bjarni the Wise, their father's father, had said – and he "remembered the Lawspeaker Þórarinn and six more after him." Þórarinn was the second Lawspeaker in Iceland's history, succeeding Hrafn Hængsson who, according to Ari's reckoning, held office AD 930–49. Such a series of named sources takes us remarkably close to the origins of the Icelandic state and one would need real bravado to challenge statements so strongly supported.

As is well known, medieval authors were in the habit of referring to great men as their authorities, whether justifiably or not. Ari's conscientious citation of source-men may perhaps in part be due to this convention, but we can see that he is not so much trying to impress with great names as carefully selecting informants who he knew stuck to the truth and had long memories. There is thus no occasion to belittle the sincerity of his statement at the end of the prologue or regard it as an empty claim that chiefly betrays the author's self-conceit. There he says: "And whatever is mis-said in this history, one is duty-bound to prefer what proves to be more true." The history that Ari records in the succeeding chapters is the best proof that these words are not trite phrases but rather the program of a reliable scholar.

The importance Ari attached to chronology will have become clear from some of the points noted above. He dates some main events by the customary reckoning from the birth of Christ and pinpoints other Icelandic happenings in relation to them. As the skeleton of his national history he uses the term in office of the Lawspeakers – he knows the

number of years each of them served from 930 onwards – and he then links one event to another until everything is firmly locked in an integrated system. We can never measure our debt to him for providing this basic chronology for the first two and a half centuries of Iceland's existence. All this demonstrates his pioneering stature as a thoroughly trustworthy historian and the first author to use Icelandic as his medium.

Some later sources contain chronological or other information to do with kings of Norway that can be traced to Ari. It must have been derived from the first edition of *Íslendingabók* which included what Ari calls *konunga ævi* (for which "reigns of kings" must be the best translation, though *ævi* is a singular word, meaning "life, generation"). Some scholars have thought that this was a separate and rather extensive section, but it is more likely that the *konunga ævi* were comparable to the *lögsögumanna ævi*, as Ari calls them, in the extant *Íslendingabók* (translated above as "careers of Lawspeakers"), and were concise entries stating the length of each king's reign and recording a few notable events associated with them. Snorri Sturluson set great store by these *konunga ævi*, adopting Ari's material and following his chronology in *Heimskringla* (p. 168). "All his account seems to me of greatest note," says Snorri. It is from Snorri's Prologue to *Heimskringla* that we learn most of what we know about the lost first edition of *Íslendingabók*.

We know little for certain about Ari's other contributions under the head of "wise learning", but a few small pieces or memoranda have been plausibly attributed to him. The most remarkable among them are a list of Icelandic priests, dated 1143 (printed with commentary in *Diplomatarium Islandicum* I, 180–94), and the so-called *Ævi Snorra goða*, "Career of Snorri the Chieftain", preserved incomplete as an appendix in one manuscript of *Eyrbyggja saga*.

In his *Heimskringla* Prologue Snorri says that Ari was the first man "here in the country" to write "history both ancient and modern in the Norse tongue". From this one might conclude that Snorri was also familiar with history that was not written in Icelandic. As noted above, it is believed that *Sæmundr Sigfússon* (1056–1133), Ari's older contemporary, wrote on historical matters but used Latin. Reference is twice made to Sæmundr in the *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* of Oddr Snorrason, and on the one occasion the author says specifically, "So Sæmundr has written about King Óláfr in his book." The source which tells us most about that book, however, is a poem called *Nóregs konungatal* ("enumera-

tion of the kings of Norway"), composed late in the twelfth century in honour of Jón Loptsson: Jón had Sæmundr for a grandfather, but his mother was a daughter of King Magnús Bareleg of Norway (died 1103). The poet counts up kings and earls in Norway from Hálfdan the Black in the ninth century to Sverrir (whose rule was effective from 1184 – he died in 1202) and gives a few facts about them, chiefly relating to their deaths. After mentioning Magnús the Good (died 1047) he says:

Nú hef ek talit	Now I have counted
tíu landreka,	ten rulers, each of whom
þá er hverr var	was [in line of descent] from
frá Haraldi.	Haraldr [Fairhaired].
Innta ek svá	I rehearsed their reigns
ævi þeira	in the way Sæmundr the
sem Sæmundr	Wise told them.
sagði inn fróði.	

The poem thus presents Sæmundr's chronology, which differed in some respects from Ari's. Later historians followed Ari, doubtless because his dating appeared more reliable – and they probably found his history an advance on Sæmundr's not merely because he wrote in Icelandic.

Genealogies and Landnámabók

As we saw, when Ari wrote his second edition of *Íslendingabók* he left out the "tracing of pedigrees and the reigns of kings". There is no reason to suppose that the pedigrees were long and detailed, any more than the "reigns of kings" were. Ari does not say that the bishops and Sæmundr thought his first book had too much in it – on the contrary, they were pleased to have it as it was or even augmented – and he tells us that things he got to know better are now more fully told in the second recension. But when we consider the brevity of the extant *Íslendingabók*, it becomes impossible to think that the matter he omitted from his first edition was extensive and elaborate.

The tenth and last chapter of *Íslendingabók* concludes with the words, "Here ends this book." There then follow however two genealogical lists. The first traces the descent of four bishops from four of the chief settlers, one in each Quarter of Iceland. The second traces Ari's own pedigree, with Yngvi, king of the "Turks", as progenitor. In all probability these genealogies were lifted from the first recension of *Íslendingabók* to make an appendix to this second version. They provide examples

of the material Ari dispensed with when he came to make the extant *Íslendingabók*.

We recall however that the author of the *First Grammatical Treatise* refers both to Ari's writings and to genealogy (*áttvísi*) among the commendable and available reading-matter of his time. (He mentions genealogy before Ari's works but of course that need have no chronological significance.) There has been much discussion of what precise writings he had in mind – too much, indeed, to consider in detail, and here I shall stick to what seems the most plausible interpretation of his words.

The work called *Landnámabók*, Book of Settlements, is preserved in a number of versions. The oldest extant is *Sturlubók*, compiled by Sturla Þórðarson (died 1284), probably late in life. Next comes *Hauksbók*, made by Haukr Erlendsson soon after 1300. Haukr says that he followed the book Sturla had written "and that other book which Styrmir the Wise [died 1245] wrote; and I took whatever was more extensive from each, though for the most part they both said the same." The third medieval version is known as *Melabók*, of which only a small fragment is preserved. Jón Jóhannesson thought that all the medieval versions were descended from Styrmir's lost work, but it has recently been argued by Sveinbjörn Rafnsson that *Melabók* is not related to *Styrmisbók* and that Sturla did not follow Styrmir directly but used the same sources as Styrmir had done. Two early modern recensions are those by Björn Jónsson of Skarðsá (died 1655) and Þórður Jónsson of Hítardalur (died 1670) – called *Skarðsárbók* and *Þórðarbók* respectively. The former is a conflation of *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók*. Þórður followed *Skarðsárbók* but he also knew *Melabók* in better condition than it is now and he sometimes includes material from it – invaluable information about a source that is otherwise largely lost.

Nothing suggests that Haukr Erlendsson used any versions of *Landnámabók* other than those of Sturla and Styrmir, the two he names, but he knew – or thought he knew – that still older men had made their contributions to the work. "Now the settlements made in Iceland have been surveyed in accordance with what learned men have written, first priest Ari Þorgilsson the Wise and Kolskeggr the Sagacious." It is usually assumed that Haukr got these references from Styrmir's lost book. We find further that, when the account in *Sturlubók* reaches Húsavík in the northern part of the East Quarter, it says, "Now, from here on, Kolskeggr has told the tale of the settlements." And from this point the pattern of the description changes and various new stylistic

characteristics appear – they are very noticeable in the first of the succeeding chapters and occur intermittently thereafter up to the end of the section on the East Quarter. Probably Kolskeggr dictated the substance of these parts of *Landnámabók*, or perhaps wrote them down himself – difference between the two processes is only a matter of degree. His own pedigree is traced in *Landnámabók* and it seems likely that he was rather older than Ari: he was, for example, a great-uncle of the priest and Lawspeaker, Finnr Hallsson, who died in 1145 – Ari, we recall, died in 1148.

The fact that Kolskeggr seems certainly to have recorded or sat over the recording of settlements in the East Quarter lends weight to Haukr's testimony that Ari also wrote on the history of the settlement. Our *Landnámabók* texts contain one direct reference to him and one to Þorkell Gellisson, his uncle – which doubtless came through Ari as well. It has been conjectured that Ari was the chief editor of the first *Landnámabók*, assisted by well-informed men like Kolskeggr. Other scholars have thought it more likely that Ari was the author of only part or parts of the original work – or even that his contribution was confined to the information included in the first edition of *Íslendingabók*. About 1700 Árni Magnússon sapiently remarked: "It is probable that Ari's work on the settlement did not cover the whole country, for that was a task of ample difficulty for a single man to accomplish."

How do our ideas on the composition of *Landnámabók* harmonise with the statements of the author of the *First Grammatical Treatise*? Kolskeggr was Ari's senior and presumably started work before him. Genealogies were the main substance of the first *Landnámabók*, and it may be that the Grammarian meant *Landnámabók* when he referred to genealogy (*áttvísi*) second after law in his list of literature. Alternatively, he might have meant smaller collections of pedigrees. If, on the other hand, Ari had made a complete *Landnámabók*, the Grammarian might have included it among "that wise learning which Ari Þorgilsson has put into books".

In comparison with the earliest *Landnámabók*, the preserved versions must contain a vastly increased store of personal history, with family trees often brought down to the thirteenth century or later. Lines of descent to members of the Sturlung family are often traced in *Sturlubók*, those of the Melamenn in *Melabók* (whence its name) particularly to Markús Þórðarson, father of Snorri (Lawman 1302–7, died 1313). Some brief anecdotes figured in the original *Landnámabók*, antique tales that reveal dark superstition and a lawless society. Many more stories of various kinds are woven into the texts of the extant versions, most of

them extracted from sagas of Icelanders (p. 203). Sturla Þórðarson is thought to be chiefly responsible for these additions. Some of them come from sagas otherwise lost and others from versions of sagas older than those we now possess. This extra matter brings life and variety into the dry recital of genealogies: not that we would not prefer to have the original *Landnámabók* just as it was, or even Styrmir's book or the whole of *Melabók*.

Some four hundred and thirty independent settlers, men and women, are named in *Landnámabók*, along with an account of their homesteads and the boundaries of their settlements. Names and lines of descent from settlers are probably trustworthy on the whole, but relying on the pedigrees of the settlers themselves is another matter – they are often traced to royalty and great men of the dim and distant past. Reports of events are often dubious too, even those that must have been in the original *Landnámabók*, for many of them wear the garb of folk-tale and are altogether larger than life. These tales turn *landnám* into literature but do less for the status of *Landnámabók* as history. But in its various recensions it remains a remarkable piece of medieval scholarship. It offers some explanation of the causes of the migration to Iceland and describes the origins of the settlers – and much of what it says is confirmed by other sources and by modern research. It preserves a vast amount of personal and family history, and provides vivid illustration of ways of life and of men's thoughts and beliefs in the Icelandic community's early days.

"Sacred exposition"

In his list of available writings the author of the *First Grammatical Treatise* includes *helgar þýðingar*. Obviously we have to decide what he meant by the word *þýðing*. It has sometimes been taken in its plain modern sense of "translation", but that does not seem to answer to early usage, since "translate" in the old language was usually expressed by the verbs *snúa* or *snara* (literally, "turn, twist"). The sense of *þýðing* seems rather to have been "explanation, exposition", which probably included translation or paraphrases of foreign material of various kinds, and the Grammarian was presumably referring in a general way to works of religious edification. That must have included the homilies which we know from various evidence were among the very first writings in Icelandic – perhaps indeed the very first compositions that could be dignified with the title of Icelandic literature. Priests were required to

preach in the mother tongue at Sunday services and other festivals, and clerics in Iceland must certainly have tried to fulfil this duty as soon as the Church was established in the country. There are no explicit instructions about preaching in the early church laws of Iceland, but they occur in later archiepiscopal statutes and in them are doubtless a dinning-in of ancient custom. Accounts in bishops' sagas also show that preaching was common twelfth-century practice. On the continent and in England separate homiliaries soon came into existence for the convenience of preachers, with contents chiefly drawn from sermons by Fathers and Doctors of the Church. These collections in whole or in part were then put into the vernacular and circulated among clerics in copies and extracts. We have very ancient Icelandic manuscripts containing homilies, including the fragments that are considered to be the oldest of all our manuscript remains. These are in AM 237a fol., where two homilies are represented, one of them the so-called Dedication Homily, on the symbolism of the church-building itself. These two manuscript leaves are dated to c. 1150. We have other fragments with homily texts from the latter part of the twelfth century, and the oldest Icelandic book preserved in anything like complete shape is the so-called Icelandic or Stockholm Homily Book, written c. 1200 and now in the Royal Library, Stockholm.

It has been suggested that saints' lives translated from Latin into Icelandic were also among the Grammarian's *þýðingar helgar*. The use of the words *þýða* ("to translate") and *þýðing* ("a translation") in Old Icelandic does not appear to conflict with the possibility that the Grammarian was also referring to the oldest translations of saints' lives, which would then mean that they are older than the middle of the twelfth century. A number of these are extant in very ancient manuscripts, and the reading aloud of such stories in the vernacular was normal Christian practice in the early days of the Church (see below pp. 135–136, 140–143).

It has also been argued however that we cannot legitimately draw sweeping conclusions about Icelandic literature on the basis of what the Grammarian does not say: he may have been merely mentioning examples of what was available. This seems to me unconvincing: his choice of phrase seems to me to signify quite definitely that he knew these kinds of literature and no others that were worth mentioning. At the end of his treatise he repeats his list and names just these same kinds, though with a slight variation in the manner of early writers to avoid exact repetition. He now puts "sacred expositions" first and does

Plate 8

Of all the manuscripts containing apostles' sagas Skarðsbók *is the biggest and most beautiful. Of its original 95 leaves only one is lost. The codex is believed to have been written about 1360, probably in the monastery at Helgafell, commissioned by the Lawman, Ormr Snorrason, of Skarð on Skarðsströnd (c. 1320–1401/2). The copy of the law-book* (Jónsbók) *in AM 350 fol. (also known as* Skarðsbók*) was probably also made for him. Ormr presented his book of* postula sögur *to the church at Skarð, and it was last inventoried there on the occasion of a rural dean's visitation on 25 July 1807. But twenty years later it was noted at a similar visitation, reported on 9 August 1827, that "The sagas of apostles on vellum were now not there." When next heard of, the codex was in England, but how it got there is not known. On 30 November 1965 it was auctioned in London and bought by Icelandic banks who presented it to the nation. It is now in the collection of the Árni Magnússon Institute in Reykjavík. – The picture is of St John the Evangelist, holding a book in his left hand, his usual attribute. – Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.*

Plate 9
St Nicholas brings dead men to life. Illustration in Helgastaðabók, *14th century. See pp. 140–42. – Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.*

not mention Ari by name but speaks in general terms of "rational and useful knowledge" (*skynsamleg nytsemi*) which people may want to "cull or teach from books". We are fortunate in being able to demonstrate by other means that precisely his four kinds of literature really were in existence about the middle of the twelfth century: something that cannot be done for any other branches of early Icelandic writing. Laws were recorded not later than the winter of 1117–18. Kolskeggr made his contribution to *Landnámabók* early in the twelfth century. Homilies exist in manuscripts from as early as c. 1150. Ari wrote his *Íslendingabók* before 1133 and died in 1148.

Learning of many kinds

Scholarly endeavour in the twelfth century did not remain devoted only to historical recording and Christian edification. The *Grammatical Treatise* throws light on our first Icelandic literature, but it is still more remarkable for what it tells us about the Icelandic language of the twelfth century. The author proposes an orthography for Icelandic writing based on Latin but with modifications invented by himself. In order to explain his proposals he gives a precise description of the sound system as it was in his day, so precise indeed that it has been said that, following his instructions, we can accurately reproduce all the sounds of twelfth-century Icelandic. The author was evidently familiar with European grammatical theory but he nevertheless makes his own original observations and his methods are equally independent and novel. He is the only authority to tell us that in certain positions vowels were "spoken in the nose" – nasalised, that is – and we can see from comparative philology that in just the positions he describes there were original nasal sounds which were lost soon after his time. His description of mutated vowels prefigures the observations of nineteenth-century scholars; and his practice of using "minimal pairs" to show the difference between long sounds and short, nasalised and unnasalised, was unparalleled in European tradition until modern linguists began to employ the same method. For anyone surveying the development of Icelandic the *First Grammatical Treatise* represents a summit from which one can look both backwards and forwards with inestimable advantage.

This twelfth-century work is called the *First Grammatical Treatise* because it is followed by three others in the Codex Wormianus of Snorri's *Edda,* where it is preserved. The *Second,* also concerned with orthography, was made in the 13th century. The *Third* and *Fourth* are

handbooks of grammar and rhetoric, adapted from current schoolbooks for Latin learners (works by Priscian, Donatus and others) but with examples drawn from vernacular Icelandic verse, a feature which associates them with Snorri's *Edda*. The *Third Treatise* is probably the most notable after the *First*. It was made by Snorri Sturluson's nephew, Óláfr hvítaskáld Þórðarson, who died in 1259. The *Fourth Treatise* seems to have been made towards the middle of the fourteenth century.

There was naturally no early end to the composition of works of Christian edification, and translation of works of this kind from Latin must have become more and more common as the twelfth century progressed. *Elucidarius* is a famous didactic work in colloquy form, on the Creation and Fall, Christ's sacrifice, and the soul's salvation or damnation. We have it in Icelandic in a manuscript, sadly defective, of about the same age as the *Icelandic Homily Book* and also defective in *Hauksbók* from about 1300. Such a tract as *Elucidarius* might well seem to fit under the heading of "sacred expositions", but Honorius Augustodunensis who wrote the Latin original was a younger contemporary of Ari Þorgilsson, so the Icelandic version can hardly have been made before the latter part of the twelfth century. From the same period we have translations of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues* and of works by Alcuin and other well-known churchmen, but much of what is preserved is fragmentary and much has gone for good. "Remains of ancient Icelandic Christian lore" was the title Þorvaldur Bjarnarson chose for his selection of these early texts published in 1878, a collection which bears witness to the prolific extent and eclectic nature of Icelandic translation in the twelfth century. Interest in foreign learning and devotional literature did not of course disappear in the thirteenth

Physiologus *is the name of a treatise on natural history written in Alexandria in the first centuries AD. It deals especially with the marvellous characteristics of various beasts, birds and peoples – some real and some from folklore. The work was translated early into Icelandic and exists in manuscript fragments, with some remarkable illustrations, from about 1200. The bottom row of figures on this page represent the Cyclopes who have a single eye-socket in the middle of their foreheads and one eye which they take it in turn to use, the Panotii with ears big enough to cover the whole body, and the Hippopodes with hooves like horses instead of feet. From AM 673 a I 4to, c. 1200; the Árni Magnússon Institute, Reykjavík. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.*

century, but it dwindled, partly because the early works provided a sufficient stock and partly because other literary kinds, particularly sagas, were more in demand.

Numerous kinds of more secular study were also pursued in the "age of learning". It is true that works on geography and natural and human history were often not merely informative but served pious and moral purposes. Works of this kind were naturally of foreign origin, usually derived at some remove or other from Isidore, Bede, Honorius and similar authorities. The little book called *Veraldar saga* – "the world's history" – covers the six *ætates mundi* from the Creation down to the author's own time, with most attention paid to the history of the Jews. At the end it says, "Konrad was emperor when Gizurr Hallsson was in the south [i.e. in Germany] but now Frederick is." This must have been first written after 1152, when Gizurr returned from his European travels, and before 1190, when Frederick Barbarossa died. Gizurr Hallsson must have been connected in some way with the composition of *Veraldar saga* – some scholars have thought he wrote it.

The best-known of the "scientific" translations is the so-called *Physiologus*, originally written in Greek some time in the first centuries of our era and then popularised in Latin throughout the western world. It describes various marvellous creatures, some real, some fabulous. When their characteristic features have been related, the allegorical lessons that can be drawn from them are made plain, usually in relation to mankind or Jesus or Satan. The Icelandic *Physiologus* is preserved in manuscripts from about 1200 which include illustrations of the creatures. They are the earliest pictures known in Icelandic manuscripts; they show English influence.

Various pieces on foreign lands were translated – Icelanders were great travellers – and present a not unexpected mixture of factual information, historical lore and pious comment. Some of this matter is found in *Hauksbók*, made about 1300, and in other miscellany manuscripts of varying ages (much of it published by Kr. Kålund in *Alfræði íslenzk* I and III, 1908–18). Some more significant works were based on what the authors had seen on their own travels abroad. Abbot Nikulás of Munkaþverá compiled a pilgrim's guide to Rome and Jerusalem, paying special attention to the shrines of saints in the cities on his route. This little book is known as *Leiðarvísir* ("guidebook") or *Leiðarvísir ok*

borgaskipan ("guidebook and list of cities"), a title based on its concluding words. Abbot Nikulás gives a clear account and his topography is extraordinarily accurate – but then he had seen it all himself. He returned to Iceland in 1154 and died in 1159 – his *Guide* was written between these two dates. As far as we know, it was the first *itinerarium* for pilgrims ever to be composed in the Scandinavian world.

From ancient times the Northmen divided the year into two seasons, winter and summer, and reckoned the passage of time in winters. From the Christian south they adopted a division into twelve months and fifty-two weeks, with necessary intercalations which in Iceland were made according to a native scale invented by Þorsteinn surtr who, as Ari tells us in *Íslendingabók,* proposed the "summer eke" reform about AD 950. After the Conversion Christian time-reckoning was introduced, though it was far from unified in European practice of the time; and the early laws say that at the end of the General Assembly each summer the Lawspeaker should announce the calendar and feastdays to be observed in the coming year. In the twelfth century some Icelanders proved experts in *computus,* the ecclesiastical arithmetic combined with astronomical calculations on which the Church's calendar and chronology were based. They translated and adapted works by foreign authorities and at the same time made their own observations and developed their own chronological methods. The priest named Bjarni "the number-wise" (died 1173) studied in the cathedral school at Hólar in the days of Bishop Jón Ögmundarson (1106–21) and wrote some sort of treatise on *computus.* Another specialist in the field was "Star"-Oddi Helgason, who belonged to Múli in Aðalreykjadalur (Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla). He made remarkably accurate observations of the sun's course and the difference in daylight hours in different seasons. Competent judges consider him to have been one of the most notable European astronomers of his age. Oddi's work and the fruit of his observations are embodied in a treatise on *computus* which was made shortly after his death and is preserved in a manuscript from the end of the twelfth century. The work is sometimes called *Rímbegla.* It is based partly on foreign sources but also, as noted, on independent observation of Icelandic conditions.

Hagiography. Saints' lives

Matter and characteristics

The oldest Icelandic manuscripts containing prose narratives that we have today contain lives of saints, translated from Latin (cf. p. 148 below). Without doubt the oldest saints' lives in Icelandic preceded our first home-made sagas. It is consequently essential to pay more attention to these religious narratives than has generally been done hitherto before we go on to investigate the origins of native saga-writing.

It was in Christendom's early days that people began to put together accounts of saintly men and women, chiefly those who had been martyred for the faith. Those accounts were joined to a canon made up of Scripture and the fixed parts of the liturgy and came to be read, *in extenso* or in part, either in daily services or on other appropriate occasions. (A saint's life was a "legend" – from *legenda,* "what is suitably read"; *legere* "to pluck, cull, read".) In services the texts were invariably read in Latin but if the saint's day was publicly observed his life had to be translated for the congregation. A saint was especially commemorated on his birthday – not the day he was born into this world but the day of his death, when he was born into the next. And on such a day of rejoicing it was particularly common to read in public the record of his life and miracles. Numerous collections of saints' lives, arranged on various principles, were made for liturgical or general use. The well-known *Legenda aurea,* put together c. 1260 by the Italian Dominican, Jacobus de Voragine, proved one of the most popular of all.

Works on the apostles (*acta apostolorum*) naturally took pride of place, supplemented by accounts of the martyrs of the early Church. These centred on their *passio,* the history of their martyrdom. Typically, a pagan ruler persecuted the saint with accusations and torture. He defended his faith with long speeches and patiently suffered every torment until death crowned his victory, as in Christ's own Passion.

Later other holy men and women were commemorated who had not actually suffered martyrdom but were famous for piety, self-denial or preaching the Gospel. The history of such a confessor is often called a *vita*, a "life". In the case of a martyr, the whole legend usually comprises both *vita* and *passio*. A third part which was a more-or-less obligatory addition was a record of the marvellous works attributed to the saint's intercession – his miracles (*acta, miracula*). It gradually came about that it was hardly conceivable to have a saint without a *vita* or a *passio* or both. Over the centuries the saints of the Church have become a vast host and their *legenda* form a huge library. Moreover, a saint's life often exists in numerous versions, sometimes abridged, sometimes variously farced and larded.

Saints' lives were evidently very popular in Iceland, just as they were everywhere else in pre-reformation Europe. We still have them in many manuscripts, despite the reformers who forbade invocation of saints and were positively hostile to the hagiographic literature that perpetuated their cults. To modern taste – at least to that of lukewarm Protestants – these saints' lives seem monotonous and derivative, even puerile. The saint and his allies are totally virtuous, their persecutors wholly depraved; and one text is very much like another, all set in a rigidly conventional mould. However, accounts of miracles sometimes offer interesting material: founded on a childlike acceptance of the marvellous and the descriptions of immediate witnesses, they were often written soon after the saint's death – as in the case of St Þorlákr of Skálholt, for example, who died in 1193 and whose *acta* were first put together about 1200. The circumstances of the miracles can be very varied and the accounts often give fascinating glimpses into the everyday life of distant times and places.

Style

Although the hagiographic literature of medieval Iceland has not enjoyed much esteem in modern times and been totally overshadowed by indigenous saga-writing, we must not shut our eyes to the fact that narratives of saints doubtless served in many ways as models for native authors. They played some part in bringing the genre of *Íslendinga sögur* into the world and had some influence on their form and composition. Deeper study is necessary before we can be certain how extensive that influence was (cf. p. 212 below). Here I shall only try to show, by quoting a few selected pieces from very ancient saints' lives, that such

narratives can be pointedly reminiscent of the diction and story-telling methods of Icelandic saga-authors. The use of direct speech in native sagas – rapid dialogue exchange, charge and counter-charge – has often been highly praised, for example – but parallels to it are readily found in early saints' lives. The examples that follow are all from AM 645 4to, one of the earliest manuscripts containing complete, rather than fragmentary, saints' legends.

One of the texts in AM 645 4to is a translation of the life of St Clement, who succeeded the Apostle Peter as bishop of Rome. At the beginning of the story we learn that a Roman noblewoman, Mathidia, is travelling to Syria with her two sons, Faustus and Faustinus (*Postola sögur*, p. 128):

Þeim fórsk vel unz þeir liðu um Sikiley. Þau fóru í nánd við borg þá er Patera heitir ok Nicholaus byskup var síðan fæddr í. Þar tók þau útsynningr steinóðr ok keyrði of nótt at eyju þeiri er Corphu heitir. Þar leysti skip allt í sundr undir þeim, ok [fórusk] fjárhlutir allir ok menn nema Mathidia ok synir hennar – þau ein höfðu líf. Hon fylgdi skipsborði nökkuru til lands ok gekk síðan á land upp. Hon kom of miðnætti til húss einnar auðigs manns konu, ok var þar tekit vel við henni. Þeir Faustus ok Faustinus sátu á skipsflaki, ok er lýsa tók, þá sá þeir fara í nánd sér víkinga skip. Þeir leituðu sér ráðs sín á milli hvat tiltækiligast væri. Þá mælti Faustus við Faustinum bróður sinn: „Þessir menn munu taka okkr ok selja mansali. Gefum vit okkr nöfn önnur en vit eigum áðr. Ek mun nefnask Niceta, en þú skalt heita Aquila." Síðan gripu víkingar sveina þessa báða ok höfðu þá út of haf til Jórsalalands. Þeir seldu þá í sjáborg þeiri er Cesarea heitir húsfreyju auðigri, ok hét sú Justa ok var Gyðinga kyns. En húsfreyja sú lagði ást mikla á sveinana ok gerði þá sér at óskbörnum. Hon seldi þá til læringar Símoni inum fjölkunnga af Samaria, er kraptr Goðs almáttigs lézk vera. En er þeir höfðu numit allar íþróttir hans, þá fundu þeir at hann loddi flærð einni saman ok illsku. Þeir hljóp-

Their voyage went well until they were passing Sicily. They sailed in the neighbourhood of the city called Patera, where Bishop Nicholas was later born. A fierce southwesterly caught them there and drove them through the night to the island called Corfu. There the whole ship was ripped apart under them and all the goods and people perished except Mathidia and her sons – they alone survived. She got ashore on a ship's plank and went up on land. About midnight she came to the house of a certain lady, a rich man's wife, and was well received there. Faustus and Faustinus sat on some wreckage, and when it began to grow light, they saw a pirate ship sailing close by. They talked over what the best thing to do was. Then Faustus said to Faustinus, his brother: "These men will seize us and sell us as slaves. Let us give ourselves different names from those we now have. I shall say Niceta is my name, and you shall be called Aquila." Afterwards the pirates seized both these boys and took them across the sea to Jerusalem. In the city by the sea called Cesarea they sold them to a rich lady – she was called Justa – of Jewish race. But that lady came to love the boys so much that she made them her adopted children. For education she put them in the hands of Simon

usk á braut frá Símoni illa ok sóttu fund Pétrs postola. Hann tók við þeim vel ok kenndi þeim kristinn dóm, ok gerðusk þeir þá hans lærisveinar.

Magus of Samaria, who claimed he was a power of God Almighty. And when they had learnt all his skills, they realised that he clung only to falsehood and evil. They ran away from Simon the wicked and went to find Peter the Apostle. He received them kindly and taught them Christianity, and they became his disciples.

Further, here is a short passage from a life of St Peter (*Postola sögur,* p. 210). If names and circumstances were altered, it would not seem at all out of place in one of our native sagas:

En er Paulus var til höggs leiddr, þá var á götu hans ein göfug kona ok ráðvönd, en hon hét Plautilla. Paulus mælti við hana: „Léðu mér dúks þíns at binda fyrir andlit mér, er ek em höggvinn, en ek mun selja þér dúkinn er ek hefi hafðan sem ek þarf." En hon . . . fekk honum dúkinn. En þeir er Paulum leiddu til höggs þá hlógu at henni ok mæltu: „Fyrir hví glatar þú, kona, dúki þínum góðum?" Plautilla svaraði: „Eigi glata ek honum, heldr mun ek heðan bíða unz hann kömr mér til handa." Þá var Paulus leiddr á stræti þat er kallat er Via Ostensis ok höggvinn þar, ok sýndisk mjólk renna ór sárum hans heldr en blóð. En er þeir vildu taka dúkinn, þá hvarf hann ór höndum þeim. Þá hurfu þeir aptr ok fundu Plautillam á götu ok mæltu við hana í háði: „Hvar er dúkr þinn er Paulus hét at færa þér?" Plautilla svaraði: „Hér hefi ek dúkinn, því at hann kom at færa mér svá sem hann hét mér." Þá tók hon dúkinn ór serk sér ok sýndi þeim, en þeir urðu ókvæða við er þeir sá dúkinn blóðgan ok kenndu.

When Paul was led to execution, there was on his road a noble and virtuous woman, and her name was Plautilla. Paul said to her: "Lend me your kerchief to tie over my face when I am executed, and I shall return the kerchief to you when I have had it for my needs." And she gave him the kerchief. And those who were leading Paul to execution laughed at her and said: "Why are you throwing away your good kerchief, woman?" Plautilla answers: "I am not throwing it away, and I shall wait here for it to be returned to me." Then Paul was led along the street called Via Ostensis and executed there, and milk rather than blood appeared to flow from his wounds. But when they tried to pick up the kerchief, it vanished out of their hands. Then they went back and met Plautilla on the road and spoke to her in derision: "Where is the kerchief Paul promised to bring you?" Plautilla answered: "I have the kerchief here — for he came to bring it to me as he promised." Then she took the kerchief from her dress and showed them, and they did not know what to say when they saw the bloodstained kerchief and recognised it.

Hagiographic texts in Norwegian and Icelandic can be divided into two main groups according to their age. The changes from one stage to

another are reflected in style and vocabulary and to some extent in choice of subject-matter. The first stage ends about the middle of the thirteenth century and in this early period authors typically followed their originals rather closely. It is true that we rarely know the exact Latin sources they were using, but versions closely related to them are often to be found in the available printed texts.

As the thirteenth century went by, fewer translations of saints' lives seem to have been made. Instead, existing translations were expanded with pious comment and reflection and often refurbished in the so-called "florid style". As the name suggests, this style is characterised by ornate diction and rhetorical mannerisms: a profusion of adjectives and compound nouns, often abstracts, with frequent repetition for the sake of parallelism or antithesis; abundant alliteration; and a preference for participial verbal forms in imitation of Latin usage. It is true that such features are also typical of the antique learned style that we find, for example, in the Homily Books, but now they are piled up and employed to excess. The emergence of this style is connected with general developments in European Latin writing in the thirteenth century, where we find growing preference for the elaborate and bombastic. There were practitioners of this style in Iceland in the latter half of the thirteenth century – it is found fully-fledged in the *Jóns saga baptista* by the priest, Grímr Hólmsteinsson (died 1298), for instance – but its great age was the fourteenth century, with Bergr Sokkason, sometime abbot of Munkaþverá in Eyjafjörður, as its best-known exponent.

To illustrate this development and the phenomenon we dub the "florid style" I quote a short passage (1) from an old translation of a life of St Nicholas preserved in a manuscript fragment of about AD 1200 and the corresponding passage (2) from the magniloquent *Nikulás saga* made by Abbot Bergr a century and a half later.

(1) There was a rich merchant who wasted great wealth in drinking and in many other ways of spending and never noticed until he was nearly penniless. But because he was ashamed to become publicly dependent on others, he went to a certain Jew who owned a house a short way from him – he was well endowed with riches – and the merchant asked him to let him have money on loan and so ease his wretchedness.

(2) There was a certain merchant in Licia, close to Myrra, sailing from one country to another, wondrously rich for a space with every kind of wealth that is customary in those parts, a

shrewd man and skilful in making gains of the sort the world prefers. But inasmuch as this world is deceitful and mutable, leading some men to prosperity from loss and destitution, but stripping others of their goods and adorning them with the reproach of poverty, so as time goes by the aforementioned merchant takes care of his wealth unwisely, preserving his daily state very grandly with drink and delicacies, making substantial feasts for lay lords with honourable presents of precious things, lavishly providing liquor and lodging for players and vagabonds who sing his praises, and all so improvidently that he never looks around until his last penny is spent and he has tumbled from the seat of honour into the reproach and blush of disdain, for no one is ready to bow before him once money cannot provide recompense. Now, rich as he had been, so much the heavier his misfortune to bear, if he must become a beggar to public view in the place where he was born. Therefore he considers his options, making trial to see whether any Christian will let him have money on loan, but he finds nobody who is willing to lend or part with his goods except in return for full security. But when this hope is completely dissipated, he visits a certain Jew, mightily rich in gold and silver, to whom this kind of business was customary, asking him to let him have a certain sum in gold on loan ...

Sagas of apostles. Sagas of saints

The Norwegian scholar, C. R. Unger, was a prolific editor of Norwegian-Icelandic hagiographic literature. We still rely for the most part on his editions, even though they are bound to seem rather out of date. He published separate substantial volumes covering the main hagiographic kinds and reproducing the bulk of the sources.

Lives of the apostles were translated early, naturally enough for after Christ himself they are the foundation stones of the Church. The oldest more-or-less complete manuscript containing saints' lives – AM 645 4to, mentioned above – has seven sagas of apostles in it. The biggest and finest codex of these sagas of apostles, however, is Skarðsbók, written about 1350 or soon afterwards, which by some mysterious means landed in England early in the nineteenth century. Then it was bought by a group of the major Icelandic banks at a London auction in 1965 and presented as a gift to the Icelandic nation. The texts in this

Unidentified saints. Part of an eleventh-century carved panel in the so-called Ringerike style from Flatatunga in Skagafjörður. Photo: Gísli Gestsson.

large volume have varying origins: some are ancient, some are in the younger "florid style". The most voluminous is the so-called *Tveggja postola saga Jóns ok Jakobs* (on John and James the Greater, sons of Zebedee). It is a compilation in the "florid style", based on older independent texts concerning these apostles and a number of other medieval sources.

Unger published a large collection called *Heilagra manna sögur* in 1877. These are the *vitae* and *acta* of saints other than apostles: martyrs, Fathers of the Church, confessors and so on. The protomartyr Stephen is there, so are Sebastian and Placidus – also known as Eustace – who was put to death under Emperor Hadrian and was a very popular figure in the middle ages (there is a twelfth-century *drápa* in *dróttkvætt* on him, cf. p. 112 above). Holy virgins who suffered horrible torments for their faith are well represented by Agatha, Cecily, Catherine and not least by Margaret – her aid is precious in childbirth, so her saga was especially important – indeed, it was one of the very few *heilagra manna sögur* that were copied and circulated long after the Reformation in Iceland. At the end of the life of St Cecily there is an account of two miraculous cures attributed to her intercession which took place in Borgarfjörður in the late twelfth century. The vows to St Cecily were instigated by the priest Brandr Þórarinsson, whose church at Húsafell was dedicated to God, the Blessed Virgin and St Cecily. The three great Fathers of the Church, Ambrose, Augustine and Gregory, all have a saga. The first *Augustinus saga* was written by Runólfr Sigmundarson, abbot of the Augustinian house of Þykkvabær (died 1307). By far the longest text in this collection of Unger's is a translation of the *Vitae patrum* – the *Historia Lausiaca* of Palladius and other sources on the Desert Fathers, the fourth-century monks of Egypt.

Individual works

Maríu saga is the title given to a massive collection of material published by Unger in 1871. It is not an entirely felicitous title for the life of St Mary is little more than an introduction to a vast number of miracle stories from many different countries and ages. A fourteenth-century source attributes a *Maríu saga* to the priest Kygri-Björn (Hjaltason), who is known to have worked both at Hólar and Skálholt; he died in 1238. But the use of later sources in the preserved text of the saga shows that it must have been compiled after his time. Many of the miracle stories exist in two or more versions that vary in style and often illustrate

the development of the "florid" manner. There is much work still to be done on tracing the connections between these translations and their Latin sources.

A saga of St Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, martyred in 1170, exists in two complete recensions and in fragments of two others. St Thomas's death caused a great stir throughout Christendom and he had his admirers and imitators in Iceland too – Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson (died 1213) and Bishop Guðmundr Arason (died 1237) among them.

Barlaams saga ok Jósaphats is a Norwegian translation of a very popular piece of edifying literature about the son of an Indian king who is converted to Christianity by the hermit, Barlaam. In the *Guðmundar saga Arasonar* by Arngrímr Brandsson (c. 1350) it says that Hákon the Young, son of King Sverrir, had translated the work "in a notable style". Hákon died in 1204 and it seems unlikely that the saga is so antique, both because of its mannered style and its relations with later thirteenth-century writings. Scholars have consequently preferred to associate it with Hákon "the Young", son of King Hákon, who died in 1257, six years before his father, and they have emended "translated" to "caused to be translated" (*lét snara* for *snaraði*). But now the emendations begin to pile up, and it is safer to disregard the attribution in Arngrímr's *Guðmundar saga* altogether – it is after all by no means a contemporary source.

We have no evidence to show that the whole Bible was translated into Icelandic in the middle ages but it is conceivable that it was. All that we have is a translation or paraphrase of the beginning of the Old Testament down to the end of the Second Book of the Kings. This text is known as *Stjórn* (how old this name is, is uncertain), probably a reference to God's "governance" in the world. It divides into three main parts. Part 1 goes only to Exodus 18 but is very extensive because the biblical text is throughout accompanied by a detailed exposition drawn from the work of medieval commentators. Part 2 goes to the end of Deuteronomy: a comparatively plain translation though with some abridgment. Part 3 starts with Joshua and ends with Kings II: it is a mixture of translation and paraphrase in the medieval manner but without any substantial omissions or additions.

It is clear that these three parts were originally independent and were merely linked together in the archetype of the manuscripts we possess.

(Further investigation may show that the process of composition was still more complex.) In the prologue we are told that "the worthy Lord Hákon, crowned king of Norway, son of King Magnús" had this book put into Norse; and a later heading says: "Here begins the second part of this work [made] at the dictate of Hákon, crowned king of Norway." Hákon Magnússon reigned in Norway from 1299 until his death in 1319. Some scholars doubt whether any significance can be attached to these references to him, or believe that they are relevant only to Part 1 (Genesis and Exodus 1–18). Part 3, the last and largest section, can hardly have resulted from Hákon's initiative because its language and style have features which suggest an origin in the thirteenth century, a generation or two before his reign. It used to be thought that *Stjórn* was a wholly Norwegian work, mainly because of the references to King Hákon, but the possibility of Icelandic provenance has recently been canvassed. It has been pointed out, for example, that Icelandic alliteration (on *hl-*, *hn-*, *hr-* as opposed to Norwegian *l-*, *n-*, *r-*) is found extensively in Part 3. Parts 1 and 2 have many complexities and further research on their origins is highly desirable.

The work called *Gyðinga saga,* saga of the Jews, is a translation, largely based on Maccabees I, to which two legends, those of Pontius Pilate and Judas Iscariot, are appended. The probable source of these two legends is indicated by Jón Helgason in his article "Gyðinga saga i Trondheim", *Opuscula* V. *Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana* XXXI (1975). At the end of the saga it is stated that Brandr Jónsson, priest, later bishop of Hólar, translated the book from Latin into Norse, along with *Alexanders saga* (which follows *Gyðinga saga* in AM 226 fol., the main manuscript); and did so at the behest of King Magnús Hákonarson. This attribution has caused much controversy. Some scholars believe that *Gyðinga saga* and *Alexanders saga* are so unlike in style that they can hardly be by the same man and accordingly ascribe only the one or the other to Brandr. Other scholars refuse to associate him with either work and dismiss the testimony of the manuscript out of hand.

Mention may finally be made of the tales called *ævintýri,* which were extremely popular in the later middle ages. In modern Icelandic the word is used of *märchen,* fairy-tales, but the medieval *ævintýri* are Christian *exempla,* entertaining short stories that inculcate a pious lesson. They are not far removed from some of the edifying episodes that occur in saints' lives, and in both the overt moralising tends to spoil the art of the

Plate 10

God on his throne. Miniature from Stjórn, *14th century. – Photo: Arne Mann Nielsen.*

Plate 11
The Blessed Virgin. Illustration in a Calendar, 14th century. – Photo: Arne Mann Nielsen.

story-telling and diminish the modern reader's enjoyment. Not always though, and there are some gems in the great collection published by Hugo Gering in his *Islendzk Æventyri* (1882–3).

Jón Halldórsson, a Dominican from Bergen, who was bishop of Skálholt 1322–39, set store by such *exempla* and told or recorded them, probably both. A *þáttr af Jóni Halldórssyni* includes two *ævintýri* which Jón himself was supposed to have experienced while studying in Paris and Bologna; and elsewhere we are told of a little book "made up of those entertaining tales which the worthy Lord Bishop Jón Halldórsson told people for their amusement".

The association with Bishop Jón led scholars to think that all such *exempla* were written or translated in the fourteenth century, and Latin sources were discovered for some of them. But it has recently been shown that a fair number of such texts were translated from English and probably not before the middle of the fifteenth century.

After the middle part of the thirteenth century we have little evidence of fresh translations of saints' lives into Icelandic until the early sixteenth century, when the end of the old dispensation was in sight. Possibly we shall discover that activity in this field was more continuous than now appears. Interest in hagiographic literature certainly remained alive, as we can tell from the constant copying of early texts.

Early in the sixteenth century the Icelandic magnate, Björn Þorleifsson of Reykhólar, translated a large collection of saints' lives from Low German. His autograph manuscript is in Perg. fol. nr 3 in the Royal Library, Stockholm (published as *Reykjahólabók* by Agnete Loth, Editiones Arnamagnæanæ, Series A, 15–16, 1969–70). Björn may have felt a special need to have as many saints as possible on his side, for he had become involved in bitter wrangling over his patrimony, disputes that had even led to bloodshed. As time went on, he came to benefit from the friendship and support of Bishop Ögmundr of Skálholt. Björn, who died about 1550, must have been a good son of the Church.

His chief source was the Low German collection called *Passional* or *Der Heiligen Leben*, a late fourteenth-century adaptation of the *Legenda aurea* (cf. p. 135). The *Passional* was first printed in 1471 and rapidly became popular. Björn Þorleifsson worked from a printed text, probably the first time a printed source was ever put into Icelandic. The collection contains lives of several saints who had not hitherto enjoyed much veneration among Icelanders, such as Christopher, George and Anna, the mother of the Blessed Virgin – and not forgetting Gregory

who had had a child by his own mother and spent years tethered to a rock out in the ocean until he was finally rescued and raised to the papal throne.

But the Reformation was just round the corner and the new order saw to it that Björn's collection had no opportunity to compete for popular favour or fame. Some people may think it not much of a loss for the language of the translation is heavily affected by German, a miscegenation which will stand comparison neither with the older saints' lives nor with the writings of the Protestant reformers who were about to appear on the scene.

Kings' sagas

Origins

Sagas are the outstanding literary achievement of the Icelanders, but their origins and early development remain mysterious in many ways. One main reason for this is the loss of so many early manuscripts – and not a little of the literature with them – and we must be grateful to the scribes of younger generations for what was saved.

In pondering the germination of saga-writing, two points come to mind.

(1) As we saw, the oldest works on Icelandic national and personal history include anecdotes that have a certain kinship with saga narrative, though briefly told and tersely phrased. In chapter seven of *Íslendingabók* Ari tells of the events at the General Assembly when Christianity was accepted and refers to Teitr, his "fosterer", as his source. There are fewer traces of Latin influence on his style at this point than elsewhere in *Íslendingabók*, and he gives the reader a lively impression of the action and the people involved. The impetuous Hjalti Skeggjason recites an insulting couplet about the pagan gods at the Law Rock and is banished for blasphemy. His defiant attitude is the same when he breaks the law by returning to Iceland and riding to the Assembly while still under sentence of exile. We see the kinsmen and friends of the newly-arrived Christian chieftains riding to meet them, and the whole party advancing in battle array to join the Assembly, with the heathen party fully armed and formed up to receive them: it seemed that bloodshed was inevitable in this tense situation, but somehow it was avoided. We see how Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði the Lawspeaker settled down under his cloak, and we even hear part of the speech he made that rescued people from their predicament and introduced a new official faith in Iceland: "But now that seems to me good counsel that we too do not let those prevail who are most eager to go at

each other, but let us so mediate the matter between them that each side may get part of his case, and let us all have the same law and the same religion. It will turn out to be true that, if we rend the law asunder, we shall also rend the peace."

As noted earlier, the first *Landnámabók* records included a variety of tales that were part and parcel of the histories of the colonisers and their descendants, explaining how and why particular places were settled and particular family relationships established. Such anecdotes made the factual reports more attractive and entertaining. Take for example the story of Löðmundr in Sólheimar and Þrasi in Skógar, which must have come from Kolskeggr. There was a great flood in the stream called Fúlalækr and by his wizardry Þrasi turned the spate east in the direction of Sólheimar. Löðmundr's slave saw it and said the sea was surging towards them from the north. "Löðmundr was then blind. He told the slave to fetch him what he called sea in a tub, and when he came back, Löðmundr said, 'This does not seem like sea-water to me.' Then he told the slave to go with him to the water – 'and stick the point of my staff in the water.' There was a ring in the staff and Löðmundr held on to the staff with both hands and bit on the ring. Then the waters began to fall back westward in the direction of Skógar. Then they each kept turning the water away until the two of them met beside a certain gully. Then they agreed that the river should flow by the shortest course it had to the sea. The river is now called Jökulsá and is a Quarter boundary." This "glacier river" divided the East and South Quarters.

(2) A problem to consider is whether the first sagas on native subjects were perhaps inspired by foreign stories which had been put into Icelandic from Latin. The narratives that might chiefly come into question in this early period would be translated saints' lives, some of which exist in very ancient manuscripts (cf. p. 135). It is true that dating early manuscripts is a tentative business and errors of a few decades either way are quite possible. We are never dealing with originals either and chance dictates whether the derivative copies we inherit are older or younger. But obviously originals precede transcripts, and it is noteworthy that the oldest *saga* texts to be preserved are sagas of saints, *heilagra manna sögur*. In manuscripts dated to about 1200 or the first decades of the thirteenth century we find lives of Mary, Nicholas, Silvester (two texts), Erasmus and Basil. A manuscript assigned to the twelfth century contains lives of Eustace, Blaise and Matthew. Because of Norwegian features in the language these last are usually assumed to be Norwegian in origin, but they could have been translated in Iceland

for there is no sign that the manuscript itself was ever in Norway. There are at least eight sagas of saints in manuscripts that are older than any sources containing sagas on native subjects. We then have three vernacular texts preserved in manuscripts from about 1220–30 but certainly put together around or before 1200: the Miracle Book of St Þorlákr (*Jarteinabók Þorláks helga*), the Compendium of the Histories of the Kings of Norway (*Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sögum*), and the Oldest Saga of St Óláfr (*Elsta saga Óláfs helga*). The lost manuscript of *Íslendingabók* copied by Jón Erlendsson (p. 121) must also have been written about 1200. In these instances we see that some of the most ancient pieces of literature are preserved in some of the most ancient manuscripts. The number of early copies of saints' lives shows that translation of such texts was in full swing in the latter part of the twelfth century, and the first of these must certainly antedate any original saga-composition in the vernacular.

So far there have been no thorough studies of the ways in which such hagiographic narratives, whether in Latin or translated, might have influenced the native sagas – and this is not the place to embark on so difficult an undertaking. A distinction has been made between a "learned" style, found in translated hagiography and other ecclesiastical literature, and a "popular" style, found in native composition on native subjects. The distinction is built however on a very small number of stylistic features; and the texts investigated are not a wholly well-balanced selection. Recent studies have made it clear that alleged characteristics of the "learned" style do not figure much in the oldest *heilagra manna sögur* and are by no means unknown in the oldest sagas on native themes (cf. pp. 136–138 above).

Everything suggests that the native sagas had their roots in two kinds of narrative: oral reports of events in the comparatively recent past, and written accounts of saints and associated church literature. The oral stories were probably very much like those we hear today from knowledgeable people with an easy flow of talk: brief and unadorned, with little or no direct speech, though sometimes an apt response is included. From the written stories interested men learnt how to put flesh on the bones, how to make a written style on the basis of the spoken word (with some influence from Latin), how to construct rounded narratives and how to enliven them with telling dialogue. As Gabriel Turville-Petre said, "Thus, they helped the Icelanders to develop a literary style in their own language, and gave them the means to express their own thoughts through the medium of letters. In a word, the

learned literature did not teach the Icelanders what to think or what to say, but it taught them how to say it" (*Origins of Icelandic Literature*, 1953, p. 142).

The first saga

We have a few scraps of information about the development of vernacular saga-writing in the latter part of the twelfth century. In *Heimskringla* Snorri speaks of an Icelander named Eiríkr Oddsson and says:

> Eiríkr wrote the book called *Hryggjarstykki*. That book tells of Haraldr gilli and his (two) sons and of Magnús the Blind and of Sigurðr slembir, down to their deaths. Eiríkr was a sensible man and at this time spent long periods in Norway. He wrote some of his account following what was told him by Hákon Belly, landed man (*lendr maðr*) of the sons of Haraldr. Hákon and his sons were in all these quarrels and counsels. Eiríkr names still more men who told him of these events, sensible and truthful men who were at hand to hear or see what occurred; and some things he wrote from what he himself heard or saw.

Unfortunately these remarks by Snorri are not clear enough to be very helpful. It is not obvious whether Eiríkr's book ended with the death of Magnús the Blind and Sigurðr slembir (or slembidjákn) after the battle of Holmengrå in 1139, or after all the sons of Haraldr gilli were dead – that is, not until 1161. One can get a fair idea of what *Hryggjarstykki* was like from *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*, which take long passages from it with little alteration. Parts indubitably from it include those on the career of Sigurðr slembir. In these *Morkinskinna* is doubtless closer to *Hryggjarstykki* than *Heimskringla* is. They bring us as close as we can get to Eiríkr Oddsson's matter and manner.

We do not know at precisely what point Ari concluded his *konunga ævi*, but it is reasonable to think that he brought them down to c. 1120, as he did his Icelandic material. The king of Norway then was Sigurðr the Jerusalem-farer, half-brother of Þóra, daughter-in-law of Sæmundr Sigfússon. The narrative in *Hryggjarstykki* began therefore at about the time when Ari's history ended, and with the death of King Sigurðr and the advent of Haraldr gilli one of the most frightful periods of Norway's history was launched. The monk Theodoricus, or Þórir, Norway's first native historian, writing in Latin c. 1180, stopped his account with the

death of King Sigurðr because, he says, it is "totally unfitting to consign to the memory of posterity the crimes, killings, perjuries, parricides, pollution of sacred places, contempt of God, depredations suffered no less by religious than by all the people, abduction of women and other abominations that would take long to enumerate." This is the half-century of Norwegian history before Theodoricus wrote and to some extent at least the age described in *Hryggjarstykki*.

As one might expect, Eiríkr Oddsson learnt much from Ari. He is anxious to establish facts truthfully and accurately and, like Ari, cites source-men. "Eiríkr Oddsson who first wrote this account says that he heard Einarr Pálsson in Bergen tell of these events." "Bishop Ívarr declared that the time he found himself most deeply affected of all was when Ívarr dynta was taken ashore to the block and he embraced them before he went and wished them a happy reunion. Guðríðr Birgisdóttir, sister of Archbishop Jón, told it to Eiríkr Oddsson in this way." Eiríkr was told of the capture and torturing to death of Sigurðr slembir by Hallr, son of Þorgeirr the physician Steinsson, who was a retainer of King Ingi. After that episode neither *Morkinskinna* nor *Heimskringla* cites any source-man traceable to Eiríkr Oddsson, and this is an indication that he ended his work with the events of 1139.

But in some respects *Hryggjarstykki* looks forward to saga narratives as we know them, and it is the nearest we have to a pioneer work in their development, though of course it is the sagas that tell of contemporary or recent events which it resembles most closely, i.e. *Sverris saga* and the sagas of the Sturlungs (pp. 152, 187). The author is in the thick of things, records minor details, mentions a host of names. Such features indicate that as literary works the sagas sprang primarily from oral reporting and story-telling and were not mere imitations of foreign written narrative. Accounts of contemporary affairs come first, sagas about the past follow. Unfortunately we cannot take the *Hryggjarstykki* passages we know as fully satisfactory evidence of the language and style of the earliest sagas, for we cannot be sure how far Eiríkr Oddsson's own words are exactly preserved in *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*.

The date of *Hryggjarstykki* is important for the chronology of saga-writing. As I mentioned above, it may have ended with the events of 1139, and it has been argued that it was primarily intended as a biography of the ill-fated Sigurðr slembir, on whose behalf partisan claims to sainthood were made soon after his death. If so, Eiríkr must have completed his work by c. 1150 or even earlier; but if, as some scholars believe, he continued his account down to 1161, then a date of

composition c. 1165 must be thought probable. The earlier date allows more time for the flourishing literary activity we must postulate in Iceland in the last decades of the twelfth century. On the other hand, it may perhaps be wrong to think that Eiríkr Oddsson was an isolated chronicler, even though his is the only name we know. The last part of *Heimskringla,* right up to where it ends in 1177, is obviously based on some written contemporary narratives. It is conceivable that when Karl Jónsson began his historical writing around 1185, he represented an Icelandic school of historians, whose existence might be implied, though it cannot be plainly proved, by the laudatory references to Icelandic cultivation of the past found in Danish and Norwegian works written between about 1180 and 1210.

Abbot Karl Jónsson

After long years of internecine strife in Norway, part described in *Hryggjarstykki*, it looked as though peace would dawn with the accession of the boy-king, Magnús, in 1161, and the regency of his father, Earl Erlingr skakki. Snorri describes Erlingr as "a good governor and authoritative, reckoned rather harsh and severe; and what mattered most was that he allowed few of his opponents to stay in the country, even though they were willing to submit to his terms, and because of that there were many men ready to join rebel bands as soon as they were formed against him." When King Magnús grew up, he turned out to be an easy-going young man, fond of games and girls and generally popular. He and his father also had the full support of the Church, and Magnús, whose royal blood came only through his mother, had been crowned by Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson – the first Norwegian king ever to be consecrated by coronation.

But things changed suddenly when a priestling from the Faroes, Sverrir, who called himself son of King Sigurðr munnr Haraldsson, came to Norway and made himself the leader of a little band of ragged partisans who wanted to see him on the throne. Few such desperate struggles have been undertaken with such high hearts. But Sverrir's triumphant progress is one of history's marvels. Gradually he succeeded, with brilliant propaganda and equally brilliant strategy, and finally defeated and killed King Magnús and Earl Erlingr and secured the submission of the archbishop. From 1184 he was Norway's king, but not unchallenged for he had many threats of rebellion and many

disputes with the Church to weather. He died in 1202, his bishops in exile and he himself under a papal ban.

Just about the time when Sverrir destroyed Magnús and seemed secure on the throne, a retired abbot from the Benedictine monastery of Þingeyrar in North Iceland, Karl Jónsson by name, arrived in Norway. He stayed for some years and began to write the saga of Sverrir, at the king's own dictation. "That account does not go very far," it says in the saga's prologue, "some of his battles are described there." But, it continues, "the later part of the book was written following the accounts of men who remembered these things, for they themselves had seen and heard these events and some had been in battles with King Sverrir. Some of these happenings were committed to memory by men who wrote them down as soon as they had newly occurred, and they have not been altered since."

There has been much dispute over the significance of these words in the prologue. The extent of the first part – called *Grýla* – written at Sverrir's dictation has seemed especially problematic, as has also the actual extent of Abbot Karl's authorship – did he write part of the saga or all of it? The favoured view at the moment is that *Grýla* went only to the Hirtubrú battle in 1178, i.e. to chapter 31. After that the narrative style changes and the attitudes of Sverrir's antagonists are better represented. On the other hand, the whole saga makes such a unified impression that it is most likely the work of one writer. Abbot Karl returned to Iceland in 1188. He resumed the abbacy at Þingeyrar and remained in office until 1207. He died in 1213. It seems most likely that after recording chapters 1–31 with Sverrir as his informant, he continued to collect more material during his years in Norway. In Iceland he went on collecting and writing, doubtless in stages, until he finished the whole saga in the first years of the thirteenth century, soon after Sverrir's death in 1202.

Like *Hryggjarstykki*, *Sverris saga* is a "contemporary" saga, put together in a similar way but as a far more ambitious and substantial structure. Many factors contributed to its success: the development of saga-writing in the last decades of the twelfth century; Abbot Karl's own distinctive literary talent; the superb subject-matter for story-telling that Sverrir's career provided; and not least the many brilliant speeches made by the king at fateful moments in the action. It has sometimes been claimed that the saga is propaganda for Sverrir's cause but that is too hasty a judgment. The value of the saga certainly resides in the portrait it

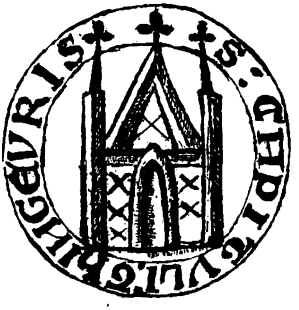
presents of Sverrir himself, but equally in the objectivity achieved by the author in balancing Sverrir and his opponents. He does not play down King Magnús's popularity and good qualities, for example, and shows genuine lack of bias when he lets the reader see Sverrir through the unfriendly eyes of his enemies – as an impostor, Satan's minion – and the saga is so coloured by their judgments that few historians nowadays are prepared to believe that Sverrir really thought he was the son of King Sigurðr munnr. But from the saga we learn too that his confidence never wavered, there is no shadow of doubt in his mind that his mission is just – in a way he proved his royal birth by his deeds, even if he never did by any church-supervised ordeal.

Snorri learnt much from Abbot Karl: how history is shaped by great men, how mighty antagonists can be set off against each other, how men can sway others with eloquence at times of crisis. Snorri is more neutral still, more objective, more economical in his rhetoric, but on the other hand, the speeches of *Sverris saga* seem more natural and life-like. It is an admirable thing – and one that well shows the impartiality of Icelandic saga authors – that a Benedictine abbot should write so judicious an account of an apostate king who at the end of his life was under the ban of the pope in Rome, and at the same time be able to present the king's struggle for his cause as a deeply-felt response to a sacred call.

Böglunga saga relates the struggle between the Baglar and Birkibeinar factions in Norway after King Sverrir's death, so that it fills the gap between *Sverris saga* and *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar,* i.e. 1202–17. It is a good historical source, based on eyewitness accounts, but is less interesting as a literary work. It is preserved in two versions, which differ in both content and preservation. The shorter version, which is biased towards the Baglar faction, is less detailed and goes only as far as 1208. The longer version, which is biased towards the Birkibeinar group, is preserved only in a Danish translation from the sixteenth century by Peter Claussön Friis. For a long time it was thought that the shorter version was the more original, but now scholars tend to believe that it is an adaptation, made for political reasons, of the first part of the longer version.

Synoptic histories

Among the earliest works on the history of the kings of Norway are two brief Latin surveys made by Norwegians late in the twelfth century.



The writing of kings' sagas flourished in the monastery at Þingeyrar about the year 1200. There Abbot Karl Jónsson wrote the saga of King Sverrir Sigurðarson, and the monks Oddr Snorrason and Gunnlaugr Leifsson wrote sagas about King Óláfr Tryggvason. Above: the monastery's seal, a drawing from about 1700 in the manuscript AM 217 8vo. Árni Magnússon Institute, Reykjavík. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.

One is called *Historia de antiquitate regum Norvagiensium*, written by a man whose name, probably Þórir, is latinised as Theodoricus. He is thought to have been a Benedictine monk of Nidarholm. He begins his work with Haraldr Fairhaired and ends with Sigurðr the Jerusalem-farer (1130), as noted above. Various things suggest that he wrote his book in the period 1177–80. He says he got his information from Icelanders, who are especially knowledgeable about the ancient kings, recalling what is told in their antique poems (*qui hæc in suis antiquis carminibus percelebrata recolunt*). He seems to be referring only to personal contacts with Icelanders, not to written works, although obviously the books of Sæmundr and Ari were in circulation at the time. Theodoricus turns his essay into a typical medieval exercise, with long digressions that have no bearing on Norwegian history. He does appear however to transmit a synopsis of what Icelandic oral traditions, supported by old poetry, told of the early Norwegian kings. When we find the same material in subsequent writings, it can be difficult to decide whether it came from Theodoricus or from the oral Icelandic sources he had used.

The other synoptic work in Latin is the anonymous *Historia Norvegiæ*. The author and Theodoricus must have been working at about the same time but neither knew the other's book. The *Historia* is extant in a manuscript thought to have been written c. 1450 in Orkney. It opens

with a geographical account of Norway and its colonies, and the history proper begins with the dynasty of the Ynglingar in Sweden. It ends abruptly with the arrival of St Óláfr Haraldsson in Norway, but whether the work is defective or whether the author really stopped there is uncertain, though from his prologue we see that his original intention was to write more. He knew various Latin authors but was especially influenced by Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiæ pontificum*, written c. 1070.

A third synoptic work from this early period is extant, this time in the vernacular and preserved in an Icelandic manuscript from the first part of the thirteenth century. It is called *Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sögum* (Compendium of the histories of the kings of Norway), usually *Ágrip* for short. It is related to both Theodoricus and *Historia Norvegiæ*, borrowing directly from the former, possibly also from the latter. It has recently been suggested that a lost common source for *Historia Norvegiæ* and *Ágrip* was Ari's first *Íslendingabók* or the *konunga ævi* contained in it, but this seems doubtful, partly because the source used in Norway must have been more substantial than we can reasonably suppose Ari's work to have been. In addition to these and perhaps other written sources, the author of *Ágrip* also followed oral tradition, chiefly relating to Trøndelag. This and the accurate Trøndelag topography persuade most scholars that the book was composed there. A copy of it soon came to Iceland, however, and Icelandic historians were quick to incorporate matter from it in their works.

The style of *Ágrip* is learned and latinate and it has been suggested that it is a translation from Latin. This is quite uncertain, however, and it may just as well represent a pedantic and rhetorical vernacular style, not dissimilar from what may be found in some sagas of saints and in orations in *Sverris saga*. In his short book the author strides through the history of the Norwegian kings but still finds time for a variety of anecdotes and accounts of extraordinary events that appealed to him. He wastes few words on Haraldr Fairhaired's struggle to impose his rule on all Norway, for example, but spends much more time on the love-story – complete with witchcraft – of the king and his Lapp mistress, Snjófríðr.

Ágrip proved an important source for later kings' sagas. Authors used the facts it recorded as the kernels of more elaborate narratives. They adopted its lively anecdotes and took them as models for new stories. In

Heimskringla, for instance, Snorri borrowed the whole tale of Snjófríðr and hardly altered a word.

Royal saints and Icelandic authors

The literature produced by the Benedictines of Þingeyrar towards and about 1200 shows the dual origins of Icelandic saga-writing. On the one side, we have Abbot Karl's *Sverris saga*, a "contemporary" saga based on oral sources and a development from the concise factual recording of Ari and the first *Landnámabók*. On the other side, we have "histories" of long-dead kings of Norway presented as Christian heroes, works that were modelled on saints' lives from abroad and in some cases first composed in Latin themselves, full of exaggeration and supernatural intervention. These are chiefly represented by "lives" of Óláfr Tryggvason and St Óláfr Haraldsson.

Two Þingeyrar monks wrote Latin lives of Óláfr Tryggvason. One was Oddr Snorrason, about whom we know nothing except that his family is traced in *Landnámabók* and *Sturlunga saga* and the generation-count shows that he lived in the second half of the twelfth century. We learn that he was in priest's orders and a monk at Þingeyrar from a passage near the end of the extant Icelandic versions of his book about Óláfr Tryggvason. We know rather more about Gunnlaugr Leifsson, his fellow-monk at Þingeyrar, because he plays a part in accounts of Bishop Guðmundr Arason of Hólar (1203–37). He was at first a supporter of the bishop but his enthusiasm waned as time went on. He is referred to as "the most outstanding cleric and the most benevolent man" in the north of the country, and as "the most competent man in Latin in all Iceland". As well as a life of Óláfr Tryggvason, he wrote a Latin life of St Jón Ögmundarson of Hólar, now known only in Icelandic versions (p. 182). He composed a rhymed Latin office for the feast of St Ambrose, and translated the Prophecies of Merlin into *fornyrðislag* from the Latin of Geoffrey of Monmouth. He died in 1218 or 1219.

There are indications that Gunnlaugr's life of Óláfr Tryggvason was more detailed and extensive than Oddr's, but since Gunnlaugr seems certainly second in the field this is not surprising. Oddr evidently knew and used Theodoricus and Gunnlaugr knew and used Oddr. Some lines in Flateyjarbók are on the literary work of the two monks. There we find: "And subsequently Gunnlaugr says that he showed the saga of King Óláfr to Gizurr Hallsson, and the said Gizurr kept the book for

two years, and afterwards, when it came back to Gunnlaugr, he himself emended it where Gizurr thought necessary." Gizurr Hallsson died in 1206, so Gunnlaugr must have written the first draft of his work by 1204 at the latest. Theodoricus influenced Oddr, and his book was written in Norway about 1180 or a little before. In round terms we can therefore say that the two Þingeyrar works on Óláfr Tryggvason belong to the last twenty years of the twelfth century. Oddr's work is customarily dated c. 1190, Gunnlaugr's just before 1200.

Both Latin texts were quickly put into Icelandic, possibly by the authors themselves or under their supervision. Once vernacular writing was thoroughly fashionable, works composed in Latin were likely to suffer neglect and in fact neither Oddr's nor Gunnlaugr's Latin text has survived. We have no Icelandic version of Gunnlaugr's work either, though a quantity of material in later texts and a series of additions to the *Great Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason*, compiled early in the fourteenth century, are thought to come from it. What can otherwise be safely attributed to Gunnlaugr is very hard to say, but he is generally credited with a body of material concerning the conversion of the Icelanders to Christianity, found in the *Great Saga* and to some extent in other sources.

Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* thus stands as our chief witness to the royal hagiography of the Þingeyrar monks. The text is preserved in two manuscripts which contain rather different versions and in a small fragment of a third. The longer version is thought to be closer to the original but it too has undergone some revision. As well as using Theodoricus, as was mentioned above, Oddr followed Sæmundr and Ari, as far as they went, and refers to them both by name. Their works gave him a framework of fact which he filled out with stuff from oral tradition and story-telling, selected and shaped in accordance with the general conventions of saints' lives. Much that Oddr tells of Óláfr Tryggvason is pure legend, including motifs that have their origin in the Bible or other Christian literature. It is generally assumed that Oddr was himself responsible for adapting such tales and that he introduced them in order to demonstrate Óláfr Tryggvason's sanctity, even though he was "not known for miracles after his death", as the author acknowledges in his prologue. It is also possible, however, that oral traditions about Óláfr Tryggvason had already attracted legendary stories of this kind in greater measure than is generally conceded. Oddr's frequent references to oral report suggest this ("Some men will have it . . . but others say . . ."), and oral traditions about the facts – legendary or otherwise – of Óláfr Tryggvason's life and death were certainly current.

We see from Hallfreðr's memorial *drápa* that it was rumoured straightway after the battle of Svold that the king was still alive.

Oddr is delighted by Óláfr Tryggvason's superb abilities, his courage and the divine favour he enjoyed, and he describes with particular enthusiasm his missionary efforts in Norway and his ruthless oppression of pagans and warlocks. The saga is not well constructed as a whole but some episodes are told with remarkable skill. The description of the approach of Óláfr's fleet before the final battle, culminating in the advent of Ormrinn langi, all seen through the eyes of the watching kings of Denmark and Sweden, is deservedly famous. Snorri took it over in *Heimskringla*, as he did other passages from Oddr, though not without improvements here and there.

The lives of Óláfr Tryggvason by Oddr and Gunnlaugr represent an important stage in the development of saga-writing. On the one hand they show the influence of the realistic contemporary histories, *Hryggjarstykki* and *Sverris saga*; on the other, they follow foreign patterns, composed as they originally were in Latin and full of supernatural elements and hagiographic conventions. They are the first sagas that deal with the distant past and have roots both in native oral tradition and in foreign literature: they point the way forward to Snorri Sturluson and the anonymous authors of the sagas of Icelanders.

St Óláfr Haraldsson, Óláfr Tryggvason's namesake and successor, had to have a saga too. The first prose composition on the great saint of the North was in Latin and meant for liturgical use. We have a *passio et miracula*, in shorter and longer versions, made by Archbishop Eysteinn (died 1188), and a related vernacular text in the *Norwegian Homily Book* from c. 1200. From the early thirteenth century we have a few fragments – found in a binding in the Riksarkiv, Oslo – of an Icelandic manuscript containing bits of what is now generally known as the *Oldest Saga of St Óláfr* (*Elsta saga Óláfs helga*) – when it was originally composed is hard to tell. We have a full version of it in the so-called *Legendary Saga of St Óláfr* (manuscript DG:8II in the University Library, Uppsala, c. 1250), which can be taken as an adequate representative of the *Oldest Saga* if two evident accretions are disregarded. These additions, which differ in language and style from the remainder, concern St Óláfr's missionary efforts and miracles that took place after his death. It is largely because of this extra matter that this version acquired the "legendary" label, although the *Oldest Saga* itself clearly also contained many hagiographic elements.

The connections between the *Oldest Saga* and the Þingeyrar lives of Óláfr Tryggvason are not direct and of small significance. Altogether the *Oldest Saga* belongs to quite a different world. It was put together in Icelandic from the start and its style, though in some ways rather primitive and fumbling, has few "learned" characteristics. The author evidently knew some of the synoptic works, including *Ágrip*, but the staple of the narrative consists of a variety of more-or-less unconnected episodes, often with Icelanders as principal actors in them. In this respect the *Oldest Saga* is a precursor of *Morkinskinna*, a history of kings which is also largely made up of separate tales, and of the independent *þættir* and sagas of Icelanders. It was probably composed in a very different atmosphere from that of the monastery at Þingeyrar. Since *Ágrip* was known to the author, it cannot have been written before c. 1200, but the date of the early manuscript fragments shows it cannot have been written long after that period either. The clumsy style and imperfect construction may mean that the art of saga-writing was still in chrysalid state, or that the author was a novice, or possibly both.

On the basis of Oddr's work Gunnlaugr Leifsson produced a more elaborate life of Óláfr Tryggvason. Similarly, on the basis of the *Oldest Saga* Styrmir Kárason, prior of the Augustinian house of Viðey, produced a longer, revised life of St Óláfr Haraldsson. Styrmir's book suffered the same fate as Gunnlaugr's: it has been lost save for some excerpts quoted in Flateyjarbók and some chapters included in the *Great Saga of St Óláfr* which, like the *Great Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason*, was compiled soon after 1300.

Styrmir died in 1245 but he must have written his *Óláfs saga helga* well before that. It is believed to have been Snorri's chief source for his *Saga of St Óláfr*, so Styrmir's book must have been in existence by 1230.

Thus at the beginning of the thirteenth century three kinds of histories of the Norwegian kings were in existence: (1) concise synoptic works, like the books of Sæmundr and Ari and like *Ágrip;* (2) "contemporary" accounts, like *Hryggjarstykki* and *Sverris saga;* and (3) histories in Latin and Icelandic of the missionary monarchs, Óláfr Tryggvason and St Óláfr Haraldsson. Scholars have for the most part assumed that separate sagas had also been composed on other individual rulers, but since any that may have existed have disappeared, it is safer to leave them out of the picture.

Morkinskinna and Fagrskinna

The next stage in the development of kings' sagas saw the composition of new surveys of Norwegian history that were much longer and more detailed than the earlier ones. These were free revisions of older texts supplemented by matter drawn from the verse of court-poets, from oral tradition – some of which was undoubtedly associated with the verse – and from the imaginations of the authors themselves. The first of these new surveys to be preserved is *Morkinskinna* which may be said to be a continuation of *Óláfs saga helga* since it begins with the reign of his son, Magnús the Good. Much obscurity surrounds the original *Morkinskinna* and the alterations it underwent to reach the state in which we know it. Sources used by the original author are no longer extant in original form, and the work was certainly changed and augmented in scribal transmission. Many of the *þættir* which make *Morkinskinna* such entertaining reading, for example, were not in the text from the beginning – in some instances we have them as independent texts which are evidently closer to the originals than the *Morkinskinna* versions. References to particular people known from other sources have led to the conclusion that the first *Morkinskinna* was composed about 1220, but it may be necessary to reconsider that dating because the references in question could themselves be the result of editorial innovation. All we can say for certain at present is that *Morkinskinna* was written before *Fagrskinna*, and that *Fagrskinna* was written before Snorri's *Heimskringla*. That *Morkinskinna* has an antique origin is suggested by certain features of language and style, and no less by the uneven construction – the author gets things in the wrong chronological order, repeats himself, even contradicts himself. Some of the confusion is doubtless because he is cobbling discrepant sources. But in its present shape *Morkinskinna* certainly marks an advance on Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and the *Oldest Saga of St Óláfr*. Some episodes are told in masterly fashion – though some of them are to be credited not so much to the *Morkinskinna* writer as to the authors whose work has been adapted in the compilation we now have. Snorri profited more from *Morkinskinna* than from any other book he knew, and he worked most of its material into his histories of the Norwegian kings from Magnús the Good onwards, though often with improvement of arrangement and style.

Snorri rejects a good deal from his sources, not least some of the miraculous tales associated with the two Óláfrs, and of course it can be a matter of opinion whether he was always right in his choice of material.

It has also been maintained that he did not always improve on *Morkinskinna* – or not as we should like – and sometimes omits things that we would gladly see retained. It has been pointed out, for example, that while *Morkinskinna* tells some curious tales to illustrate the madness from which Sigurðr Jórsalafari suffered in his last years, Snorri makes little of this subject and merely says that the king often suffered from "restlessness" (*staðleysi*). But one does not have to dig very deep to discover why Snorri should avoid any blot on the memory of this famous king: he was the uncle of Jón Loptsson, Snorri's fosterfather at Oddi.

The name *Morkinskinna* – "dark vellum" – was originally bestowed on the volume containing these early kings' sagas, though many Icelandic codexes are blacker, and has since become established as the name of the work itself. The manuscript is unfortunately defective.

The next compilation, *Fagrskinna* – "fair vellum" – got its name in the same way, but we cannot tell with what justification because the codex was destroyed in the great fire of Copenhagen in 1728 – fortunately it also existed in paper copies that have survived. *Fagrskinna* is not only *Heimskringla*'s nearest precursor but is also most closely comparable to Snorri's work in covering the reigns of all the Norwegian kings from Hálfdan the Black (Haraldr Fairhaired's father) to Magnús Erlingsson – Snorri differs only in including *Ynglinga saga* as the prelude to his dynastic history. But in other respects *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* are vastly different. *Fagrskinna* is a mere fraction of the length of *Heimskringla*, and the author was neither outstandingly original nor outstandingly artistic. For the most part he copied older writings without significant alteration: his chief contribution was to abridge his sources and fit them into his framework.

The greater part of *Fagrskinna* is abstracted from Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, the *Oldest Saga of St Óláfr* and *Morkinskinna*, but the choice of matter and the relative proportions of the narrative are very strange. The author is most happily expansive when he comes to describe great battles – yet he completely neglects the most famous battle of all, the battle of Stiklestad, which other sources describe at length. This is one reason why it has been suggested that *Fagrskinna* was put together hastily and unsystematically. But there are also reasons for not taking this view. Elsewhere the author gives the impression of being a realistic and critical historian – much more so than the writers of his chief sources. He completely ignores all their supernatural tales, for example, and often departs from them when he thinks other sources more reliable.

He turns especially often to ancient poetry and cites stanzas in support of his version of events. In this critical, scholarly approach he was a model for Snorri to follow, and one can often see that Snorri in fact prefers his concise narrative to the accounts of other sources – though he seldom fails to brighten and vivify it.

Sagas of rulers outside Norway

Denmark figures in some degree in all the sagas of the Norwegian kings but separate sagas were also devoted to the Danish rulers. *Skjöldunga saga* begins in the mists of time and traces a good twenty generations from Skjöldr son of Óðinn to Gormr the Old (died c. 950). The original text is lost but much of it is preserved in a Latin translation or retelling by Arngrímur Jónsson the Learned (1568–1648), and some matter from it is preserved in other sources. The so-called *Sögubrot af fornkonungum* is thought to be the remnants of a younger recension of *Skjöldunga saga*. Snorri refers to *Skjöldunga saga* in *Heimskringla*, and in his *Edda* he took from it the story of Hrólfr kraki. The saga-author made use of an ancient genealogy of the men of Oddi, who traced their descent from the Skjöldungar. He also used old poetry, including *Gróttasöngr* and *Rígsþula* (pp. 39, 80), and oral narratives. He must have composed his saga about 1200, a pioneer work in Icelandic literature since it is both the earliest "saga of ancient times" we possess and the first Icelandic history of the kings of Denmark – a great pity it is so poorly preserved.

The first Danish historians belong to this same period, but they wrote in Latin. In the 1190s Sven Aggesen wrote his *Brevis historia regum Dacie* as an appeal to Danish patriotism. He began with Skjöldr and ended with the submission of the Pomeranian Duke Bugislav in 1185. His younger contemporary, Saxo Grammaticus, finished his much more ambitious work, *Gesta Danorum*, some time before 1219. He begins his history in the mythical past, devotes the first eight books to the pagan rulers, the ninth to the conversion period in the tenth century, and the remaining seven to the subsequent reigns, ending in 1185, as Sven Aggesen had done. More history and less legend appears from Book X onwards. The prehistoric part has much in common with Icelandic *fornaldarsögur*, and in his prologue Saxo says that he got much material from Icelanders. Some stories told by Saxo cannot be paralleled in Icelandic sources, but that of course need not mean that they never existed among the Icelanders. There is immense variety in traditional

tales and there is no reason to suppose that every story current in twelfth-century Iceland found written record for posterity.

Knýtlinga saga concerns the descendants of a King Knútr – probably not Knútr the Great of Denmark and England (died 1035) but some ancient Knútr named in the lost first part of this saga, where *Skjöldunga saga* was probably a prime source. *Knýtlinga saga* is a much later work than the others mentioned so far, probably not written until c. 1260–70. The extant text begins with Haraldr Gormsson (died c. 986). It ends at about the same time as the Danish histories, i.e. with the conclusion of the Wendish wars, though as a historical source it is naturally much inferior to them. The saga is certainly related to the Danish histories but exactly how is hard to tell. It is thought most likely that the author used the same sources as Sven Aggesen, but he also knew Saxo, though possibly not at first hand. He also takes some material from *Heimskringla* and it was evidently his intention to produce a whole history of the kings of Denmark similar to Snorri's work on the kings of Norway. He consequently gives pride of place to St Knútr (died 1086), just as Snorri devoted a third of his work to St Óláfr. This parallel brings the Sturlungar to mind as likely instigators of *Knýtlinga saga*, and in fact there is a reference in it to Óláfr hvítaskáld Þórðarson, Snorri's nephew, who spent some time at the court of King Valdemar the Victorious. Óláfr, who died in 1259, is thought to have been responsible for much of the matter in the saga and even perhaps its author.

It is customary to count some other sagas with settings outside Iceland among kings' sagas, even though the leading men in them are not royalty. The outstanding ones are *Orkneyinga saga, Jómsvíkinga saga* and *Færeyinga saga*. They are all notable pioneering narratives, written at the end of the twelfth or the beginning of the thirteenth century.

Orkneyinga saga was the first of them, put together just before or about 1200 – it has also been suggested that some of its twelfth-century episodes found record very soon after their occurrence. It is thus both a saga of the past and of the present, and its importance in the development of saga-writing in general depends on the way the author created or shaped stories of the distant past to match the more detailed and elaborate accounts he had of recent events. Connections have been pointed out between the great Orkney families and the men of Oddi and also with the family at Hvassafell in Eyjafjörður, descendants of Þorgeirr Hallason. Like *Hryggjarstykki, Orkneyinga saga* is probably to be

taken to represent the native, layman's mode of saga-making – unlike that of the contemporary Latin authors at Þingeyrar who were more affected by foreign models and a learned style.

Jómsvíkinga saga is a strange work, telling of a tough breed of Vikings who held the Jómsborg fortress in Wendland in the period round AD 1000. The site of this nest of pirates has never been discovered and most of what is told of the Jómsvíkingar is enveloped in legendary glamour. After they had forced Sven Forkbeard, king of the Danes, to agree to their demands, he had a mind to vengeance and consequently invited them to a funeral feast, where he tricked them into vowing extravagant vows. Earl Sigvaldi solemnly swore to attack Norway and either kill Earl Hákon, its ruler, or drive him out of the country – and his comrades followed suit. The centrepiece of the saga is their foray to Norway and their battle with Earl Hákon in Hjörungavágr. At first the Jómsvíkingar had the better of it, but when Hákon sacrificed his son and called on Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr for victory, a great unnatural storm arose and Sigvaldi's men suffered heavy losses. Finally he and many others fled while those who stayed were killed or captured. An unforgettable tale is told of the fate of the captives. The Vikings are bound in a long rope and executed one after another, each making some defiant remark before his death. This grim spectacle is reminiscent of scenes in the heroic poems in the *Edda* or in some of the *fornaldarsögur* written long afterwards – and indeed, *Jómsvíkinga saga* has been called a "heroic lay in prose". Some Icelanders fought on Hákon's side in the battle, and the saga quotes verse by Icelandic poets and cites Icelanders as source-men for parts of the narrative. We cannot test the reliability of such references, but it is reasonable to suppose that Vigfúss Víga-Glúmsson and Einarr skálaglamm, both well-known poets, had much to tell about this bloody battle when they got back to Iceland. What they told was then remembered, embroidered and augmented over more than two hundred years until some brilliant unnamed author wrote *Jómsvíkinga saga* shortly after 1200.

Færeyinga saga was probably the last of these three sagas to be written, though hardly later than c. 1210. The events belong to the distant past, chiefly to the days of the missionary kings, Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson, and we must assume that the narrative is based on Faroese traditions. The central character is Þrándr í Götu, a complex personality, staunchly loyal to the pagan faith and the old laws of the Islanders,

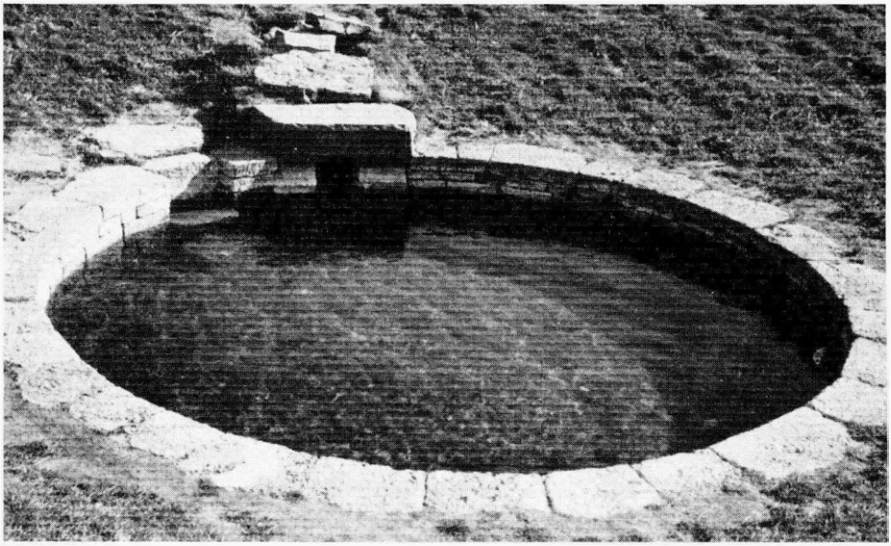
ruthless and ingenious in dealing with the emissaries of the Norwegian king. Glamour surrounds Sigmundr Brestisson who brings Christianity to the Faroes and forces baptism on Þrándr, but it is not long before he is murdered, and other agents from the king meet mysterious ends. Finally the scales are balanced. After his lieutenants are destroyed and his fangs drawn, Þrándr dies – so the saga suggests – from impotent vexation.

Færeyinga saga has several features typical of an early stage in the development of saga-writing, both in composition and style, but it also has many novelties. The author's method is to sow suspicion in the reader's mind, especially suspicion of Þrándr and the web of his cunning, and later saga-writers learnt a great deal from this approach. In fact, *Færeyinga saga* is closer to sagas of Icelanders than to kings' sagas, not so much because Faroese and Icelandic conditions were similar as because evidence is lacking for the veracity of the story he is telling; he refers to no old poetry, no native written sources, no foreign histories. In approaching *Færeyinga saga* literary historians are on the same slippery slopes as they are in approaching *Íslendinga sögur:* fact and fiction, local tradition and the author's imagination, can hardly be told apart.

Fagrskinna must have been written about 1220. By then the Icelanders and Norwegians possessed a large collection of kings' sagas: synoptic or compilatory works, both longer and shorter, as well as separate sagas on individual rulers past and present. But no large-scale work had been composed to compare in scope and detail with these individual treatments. Now a surpassing scholar and author arrives on the stage, who took all the varied work of his predecessors, melted it down and reforged it into a comprehensive history of the kings of Norway from the dim legendary past to the advent of King Sverrir. This author was such a master stylist and such a profound historian that after his time people gave up writing sagas about the past kings of Norway and merely added lives of those who followed Sverrir on the throne in the thirteenth century.

Snorri Sturluson

Snorri was born in 1179 (or possibly in 1178), son of Sturla Þórðarson of Hvammur í Dölum, a *nouveau riche* chieftain who had gained power by using his intelligence and practising ruthless violence. To the great good



Snorri's warm-water pool at Reykholt. "One evening when Snorri sat in the pool there was talk of leading men. They said there was no chieftain like Snorri, and no chieftain could compete with him on account of the kinsmen he had by marriage. Sturla Bárðarson had stood guard over the pool and he conducted Snorri back to the house; he let fly with this verse in Snorri's hearing: 'You have kinsmen by marriage like those the word-wise prince of Lejre got in days of old – injustice always comes off badly.'" – The kinsmen by marriage spoken of were Snorri's sons-in-law, Gizurr Þorvaldsson, Kolbeinn the Young, and Þorvaldr Snorrason of Vatnsfjörður. The "prince of Lejre" in Sturla's verse was Hrólfr kraki, king of the Danes, who fought with his father-in-law, King Aðils of Uppsala, and was later attacked and killed by his brother-in-law, Hjörvarðr. Photo: Gísli Gestsson.

fortune of Icelandic literature, Snorri was brought up in one of the most cultured homes in the country, as foster-son of Jón Loptsson, Sæmundr the Wise's grandson, at Oddi. When Snorri grew to manhood, he entered the stakes for wealth and power, and won both. He ran a magnificent estate at Reykholt in Borgarfjörður, owned many *goðorð* and much land, allied his family by marriage to the leading chieftains in Iceland, had two spells of office as Lawspeaker, and twice spent periods abroad at the court of the Norwegian king and with other magnates in Norway and Sweden. In the conflict between King Hákon and Duke Skúli, Snorri supported the duke, and when Hákon had defeated and

killed Skúli, he looked on Snorri as a traitor and had him assassinated at his home in Reykholt one dark autumn night in 1241. It was a queer trick of fate that, before he died, Snorri had erected a memorial to the Norwegian dynasty grander than any other royal line has ever received.

Snorri's book of kings' sagas has come to be called *Heimskringla*, from the opening words of *Ynglinga saga*: *Kringla heimsins, sú er mannfólkit byggvir, er mjök vágskorin* – "The circle of the world which mankind inhabits has many sea inlets." The work begins with an account of the kings of myth and legend who ruled in Uppsala in Sweden. The dynasty then moved to Norway, and we come closer to real history with the reign of Hálfdan the Black in Vestfold and of his son, Haraldr Fairhaired, the first ruler of all Norway. Each king has a separate saga in due chronological order but the saga of Óláfr Haraldsson, king and martyr, is by far the most extensive – not surprisingly since he was Norway's patron saint and *rex perpetuus Norvegiæ*. The whole work ends with the advent of Sverrir – Abbot Karl's *Sverris saga* made a continuation unnecessary.

Snorri gives some account of his sources and method in his Prologue. He names only one historian – Ari Þorgilsson – and otherwise sets most store by scaldic poetry because it provides contemporary evidence. He says: "It is the way of poets to praise most the man in whose presence they stand. But no one would dare to recount before him as deeds of his what everyone who listened, and he himself, knew to be groundless and fabled. That would be mockery, not praise."

Many of the works used by Snorri are still extant, though some only in later recensions than those he knew. His treatment of them varies greatly. When an existing narrative seems to him sufficient, he makes little or no alteration, but when necessary he has a marvellous way of bringing dead matter to life. But in spite of the sparkle Snorri can add, he remains a far more critical historian than his predecessors were. The qualities of *Heimskringla* were soon recognised, so much so that earlier texts were often neglected in its favour and so lost for ever; and sometimes Snorri's rewritten versions of older texts were used to replace original chapters in those very works – as happened in parts of *Orkneyinga saga* and *Færeyinga saga*, where we cannot now reconstruct what their authors wrote and have some chapters only in Snorri's guise. This means however that we do not always have the comparative material which would show us how Snorri worked.

Snorri first wrote *Óláfs saga helga* which was later included in *Heimskringla* as well as being preserved as a separate work. Snorri's artistic skill as a writer reached its highest point in this saga, which

makes up a third of *Heimskringla,* even though it covers only 15 years of Norwegian history. Óláfr was the most revered of all the Nordic saints and much had been written about him, Snorri's saga providing the climax of a long development. Nowhere are Snorri's narrative powers more expansively employed and nowhere are his characters more varied and real, not only Óláfr himself but also the whole range of people who revolve around him in war and peace.

Snorri's main source was undoubtedly the *Óláfs saga* by Styrmir which, as mentioned above, we know only in fragments. The fragments show that Styrmir, following the fashion of previous saga writers was concerned to present Óláfr as a holy man, a true saint, who was already working miracles in his youth, even when on Viking raids.

The author of *Fagrskinna* was more realistic and down to earth, and discarded all the saintly material concerning Óláfr; Snorri, however, not only tried to follow the sources, but also to establish the historical truth. In his saga Óláfr begins as a warlike Viking, but gradually develops in character, through experience and various hardships, until he emerges as a holy man on the bloody battlefield of Stiklestad. It is noteworthy that Snorri does not let any explicit miracles take place while the king is still alive, though there are marvels suggestive of miracles in Óláfr's later years. On his last expedition to Norway, and especially in the battle of Stiklestad, he is seen more and more in a holy light, and thus it comes as no surprise when a great number of miracles occur immediately after he has fallen.

Snorri sometimes likes to present a portrait of his main characters when ending a narrative episode or saga. He paints such a portrait of Óláfr, but not at the end of his saga, where it would be out of place in the account of his emergence as a saint. Instead Snorri describes Óláfr's character at the end of the saga of his brother, Haraldr the Hardruler, who fell in battle in England in 1066. In order to avoid the responsibility of passing worldly judgment on the saint, Snorri puts the following comment into the mouth of Halldórr Brynjólfsson, "a wise man and a mighty chieftain":

> I was held in high regard by both brothers and I knew the characters of both of them very well. I have never known two men more alike. They were both highly intelligent, very brave and daring in battle, greedy for wealth and power, of domineering temper, aloof, active in governing and stern in punishing. King Óláfr forcibly converted his people to Christianity and the true

faith and harshly punished those who turned a deaf ear. The chieftains would not put up with his justice and impartiality and raised an army against him and killed him in his own domain. That was why he became a saint.

King Haraldr, on the other hand, went to war for fame and power and forced everyone he could to submit to him, and it was in another king's domain that he was killed. In their daily lives both these brothers were careful of their conduct and of their dignity. They were both widely travelled and men of great enterprise, and as such became outstanding and famous far and wide.

Snorri is a realistic saga-writer in comparison with those who had previously written about St Óláfr, although his realism is often only on the surface of the narrative – a feature which, in fact, applies to many Icelandic sagas which relate events of times long past. Snorri totally omits some supernatural descriptions and alters others, adding his own rational explanations. Thus in the *Legendary Saga* the young Viking Óláfr sails straight through a peninsula in the lake Lögrinn (Mälaren) in Sweden, but Snorri has him "dig a canal across Agnafit out to the sea" and lets his ship sail out with the flood. This may seem more probable at first, but in fact it is also a rather far-fetched explanation. Snorri does not totally disregard the supernatural elements in his sources, however. An example of this is the story of the Lappish witch, Snæfríðr, which he adapts from *Ágrip* with only a few changes, or the witty story of Arnljótr gellini, who moves at magic speed on his skis and kills a giantess who like Polyphemus had eaten peaceful travellers.

Light can be shed on Snorri's working methods by comparing *Heimskringla* with various other sources which have been preserved, e.g. Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar,* the *Oldest Saga of St Óláfr* (the

*The inventory of the church at Reykholt (*Reykjaholtsmáldagi*) has entries in several hands, the oldest dated to about 1185. It begins: "The church at Reykjaholt is endowed with all the home-estate and all its produce. 20 cows go with it, a two-year-old bull, 150 ewes." Snorri Sturluson crops up in the inventory: "Magnús and Snorri donate half each the reliquary standing on the altar, and this is church property in addition to what is already listed. The church further owns the bells which Snorri and Hallveig have donated . . ." It has been suggested that this part of the inventory may have been written by Snorri himself. Reproduced here from a 19th century facsimile.*

til kirkio ligr iravkiaholtr heima land meþ öllu landsnytiom
þar fylgia kyr tottogo. gripungr tuevetr. xxx. a. ochundraþ.
þar ligr til fim hluter. grimsar alrar enþriu huer sa undan. nema
þat er munnu telia. þat er hlaupa garþr alr. ocþriu hluter ar enmar fyr
nor þan imþberg. en fiorgongr en huer fr fra. þar fylger oc
fiorþongr haorgl hyliar siþan er settungr er af teken oc ostema
ar raupa vatsose. þar fylgia hestar þriu enge verre an xiii aurar
þar huer fr oc til selfor ikior meþ þovepe þeirre er þar fylger ar
helfninge oc afretr ahrutafiar þar hepe. oc iroc þau er han a. ifyra
dal. oc geitland meþ skoge. Sogr ifandale nipr fra selakkagile umb
scala tofsir. gengr mark fyr nepan or stemo þei er heita klofningar
þeir standa viþ sundalso. ok þar up af ialsbrun. þar fulger oc sogi
i heuerar liþ ar viþa til seli[illegible] ifeur þr ifteinporsstaþa land. Haldr
sæþe nipr fort. her liggia [illegible] hundroþ sex alna aura
iboko oc imesso foto oc i kirkio skrube. sye [illegible] rtan klukkor
þeir ero þar. Magu oc halfstiþr gefa til kirkio roþo kross oc lic
neske þau er standa ufer altara. oc buneng a plenario. þat er kirkio
fe umb framst þar er aþr er talt. kirkia fe folgia tuer merer
vax. oc tottogo. þau liggia lond til kirkio breiþa bolstaþr.
or ravkia land. oc hogende. her fulgia til kirkiofe hrau
oc tuau kugilde bufiar meþ. þvi fe [illegible]
oinage huer [illegible] musere. oc skal salvan til taka er ravkia
holtr þvr. þesse kirkio fe er ero iboko oc imesso foto oc i kirkio
skrube þirðo til sex togo hundraþa [illegible]
ra þeir Giton oc þorþr. oc ketill. her mundar s. oc [illegible]
Skrin þat er stendr a altara meþ helgo dom [illegible] gefa þeir Magnus oc
Suorre ar helfninge huan þeirra. oc er heita kirkio fe umb
am of þat er aþr er talt. kirkia aen ufra klukur þeir er þau
Snorre thalveng leoia til stadar sonc [illegible]
en [illegible] sal mödar aanr en [illegible] þeir naver [illegible] þar med meso [illegible] en
[illegible] þessa relia [illegible] i [illegible] holtr. [illegible]
[illegible] hvalreka ok halfr [illegible] land [illegible] [illegible]
vngr hvalreka [illegible]
hvart toeggia iagoda [illegible]
Ald hundr [illegible] hvalreka. [illegible]

Legendary Saga) and *Morkinskinna*. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson has made a telling comparison of the respective passages in *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* where the brother-kings, Eysteinn and Sigurðr the Jerusalem-farer, compare their achievements – and it is worthwhile for a reader to consider the passages for himself. *Morkinskinna* is lively and entertaining, but Snorri gives the exchange a dramatic tension and shape so that the episode becomes a classic example of his art.

Snorri also makes noticeable improvements to *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and the *Legendary Saga,* and indeed these are more primitive works than *Morkinskinna.* An interesting comparison can be made of the dialogue between St Óláfr and his young half-brothers as presented in the *Legendary Saga,* ch. 27 and in *Óláfs saga helga* in *Heimskringla,* ch. 76. The narrative in the *Legendary Saga* is rather stiff and not particularly memorable, but in the hands of Snorri it becomes a polished piece of prose with various classical rhetorical features. One of these is the pointed build-up of triadic groupings. In the *Legendary Saga* there are only two brothers; in Snorri's version there are three, and the youngest is by far the most courageous and ambitious. In the *Legendary Saga* the episode ends vaguely and lamely, but in Snorri's version the anecdote reaches a telling climax when Óláfr says to Ásta of her three-year-old son Haraldr: "You are bringing up a king here, mother."

Snorri's original creative power is clearly evident in the exchanges between his main characters in which he sometimes gives them long, coherent speeches. Many of these conversations are based to some extent on his sources, but he always gives them a new and more telling significance, making the replies sharper and much more to the point, often letting them give a clear indication as to what will happen later in the saga. Disputes are presented with admirable fairness, every character putting forward his case clearly and logically so that the reader cannot help believing each speaker in turn. The conversations in *Heimskringla* often have a broader background and a wider purpose than is normally the case in the sagas, for they are to explain clashes between opposing factions or nations – kings against powerful landowners, Christianity against heathendom for example. Snorri has great admiration for the wealthy landowner who undauntedly presents the people's case against the king. A good example is Ásbjörn of Meðalhús, who at the Frostaþing speaks against Hákon the Good's proclaiming of Christianity (*Hákonar saga góða,* ch. 15):

We yeomen thought, King Hákon, he says, that when you had

> held the first assembly here in Trøndelag and we had accepted you as king and received from you the title to our ancestral possessions, that we had reached as high as the sky. Now we no longer know whether we have attained our liberty, or whether you are going to enslave us once more, and in extraordinary fashion, by making us reject the faith of our forefathers . . . We are all willing to serve you and have you as our king while any one of us yeomen here at this assembly still lives – provided that you, king, show some moderation and ask of us only what we can give you and what we can rightly do. But if you are so high-handed in pursuing this and use force and tyranny against us, then all of us yeomen have decided to turn from you and take another leader, who will let us choose freely the faith we wish to have. You must make one of these choices, king, before the assembly is over.

Another example is Þorgnýr the Lawman who speaks at the Uppsala assembly and demands that King Óláfr of Sweden should keep peace with King Óláfr of Norway. Snorri ends his speech like this (*Óláfs saga helga,* ch. 80):

> But if you will not do what we say, we shall set upon you and kill you and not put up with hostility and injustice from you. That is what our forefathers have done – at Múlaþing they threw five kings into a well because they were full of arrogance, just as you are towards us. Now be quick and say which choice you want to make.

It is tempting to think that Snorri, himself a great squire, saw himself as the counterpart of these Nordic magnates. Admittedly, as the foremost Icelandic chieftain of his day, he had undertaken to bring Iceland under the sovereignty of the Norwegian king. But he had done virtually nothing to pursue the matter and had indeed expended more effort on bringing the country under his own sway than under that of the king. And in *Óláfs saga helga* (ch. 125) he gives to Einarr of Þverá the most eloquent speech ever made in defence of Icelandic independence. Óláfr had asked the Icelanders to make him a present of "the island or skerry off Eyjafjörðr which they call Grímsey". The Icelanders sought Einarr's opinion – "He seems to us," they said, "to see clearest in most matters." He replied:

> I have been chary of words in this matter because no one has asked me about it. But if I must give my opinion, then I think that what the people of this country should do is not to subject themselves to tribute to King Óláfr and to any such burden as he has laid on the

> Norwegians. We shall be submitting not only ourselves to bondage but, as well as ourselves, all our sons and all our kindred who live in this country, and this land would never be free or rid of that slavery. And even though this king is a good man, as I well believe he is, it will happen, as it always has with any change of kings, that some are good and some are bad . . . As far as Grímsey is concerned, if no food supplies are taken out of the island, it can easily support an army, and if a foreign army sat there and were sailing out in their longships, I think many a cottar would reckon himself under siege.

Snorri undoubtedly used *Sverris saga* as a model for the speeches in *Heimskringla,* especially when he lets a king or commander speak stirring words before battle in the manner of Sverrir. Sverrir's speeches are, it is true, usually more vigorous and sharper, but we can take it that this is because they are based on the recollection of men who actually heard the king's words. The exhortations before battle in *Heimskringla* are certainly sensible and logical, like other speeches composed by Snorri for his characters, but they lack a certain vitality and conviction compared with Sverrir's speeches: they are the calculated utterance of a wise author sitting at his desk and not hasty words delivered in the heat of battle. Snorri's impartiality and tolerant approach are clearly shown by the fact that he puts one of his best and most stirring speeches into the mouth of the Danish Bishop Sigurðr just before the battle of Stiklestad. Having been driven from Norway by the great yeomen of his country, King Óláfr has gathered support in Sweden and returned to regain his throne. It will not be long before he is resurrected as a royal martyr from the bloodsoaked battlefield, but all the same Snorri gives Bishop Sigurðr a powerful speech in which he reminds his audience of all the violent acts of King Óláfr's career:

> And what man of standing can there be here who has not some great injury to pay him back for? Now he comes with a foreign host, most of them outcasts and footpads and other bandits. Do you think he will be soft on you now when he comes with these ruffians, considering the ravages he inflicted even when all his own men tried to stop him? . . . The thing to do now is to march against them and kill off these ruffians for eagle and wolf to batten on, and let them all lie where they are cut down, unless you feel like dragging their corpses among brushwood and boulders!

After that speech by Bishop Sigurðr the reader is indeed persuaded that

it will take martyrdom to save the reputation of this ill-starred tyrant, Óláfr Haraldsson.

From a modern hypercritical viewpoint it is certainly possible to find fault with Snorri's history. He does not look for sociological explanations of the course of events, merely for human ones. He is not at all reluctant to adapt his sources as he sees fit and even to write whole new chapters of his own in order – rightly or wrongly – to clarify connections and make his narrative more alive. But in the eyes of his contemporaries this was how history should be written – and there is a lot to be said for it. And there is no doubt that, along with his imaginative vision and dramatic talent, Snorri also approached his sources with acute critical powers and a deep insight into the logic of cause and effect in the historical process.

Heimskringla has appeared in a number of Norwegian translations during the last two hundred years and become a sort of patriot's Bible in Norway. It was a prime source of inspiration in the Norwegian struggle to break out of the Swedish union in the nineteenth century, just as the sagas of Icelanders inspired the Icelandic independence movement. It was thanks to Snorri more than to any other single person that the Norwegians finally regained their national sovereignty. After five centuries of foreign rule they once more got a king of their own, the Danish Prince Carl. When he ascended the throne he became Håkon VII, taking the name of that predecessor of his who once upon a time had ordered the execution of the great saga-author of Reykholt.

Snorri's *Edda*, the *Prose Edda* as it is sometimes called, is usually regarded as Snorri's first work. It is his only book that we can date with some precision. When he came back from his travels abroad in 1220, he composed a *drápa* on King Hákon and Earl Skúli. The poem is known as *Háttatal,* "enumeration of metres", and consists of 102 stanzas exemplifying 100 different metres and stylistic modes. It was modelled on *Háttalykill hinn forni* (p. 110), although Snorri's sequence is more elaborate and more systematic. It is accompanied by a prose commentary in the fashion of medieval Latin schoolbooks. The factual content of the poem is meagre, even for court-poetry, and its poetic qualities are not such as to impress a modern reader, but of course the poet was constrained both by the requirements of the form and by his pedagogic purpose.

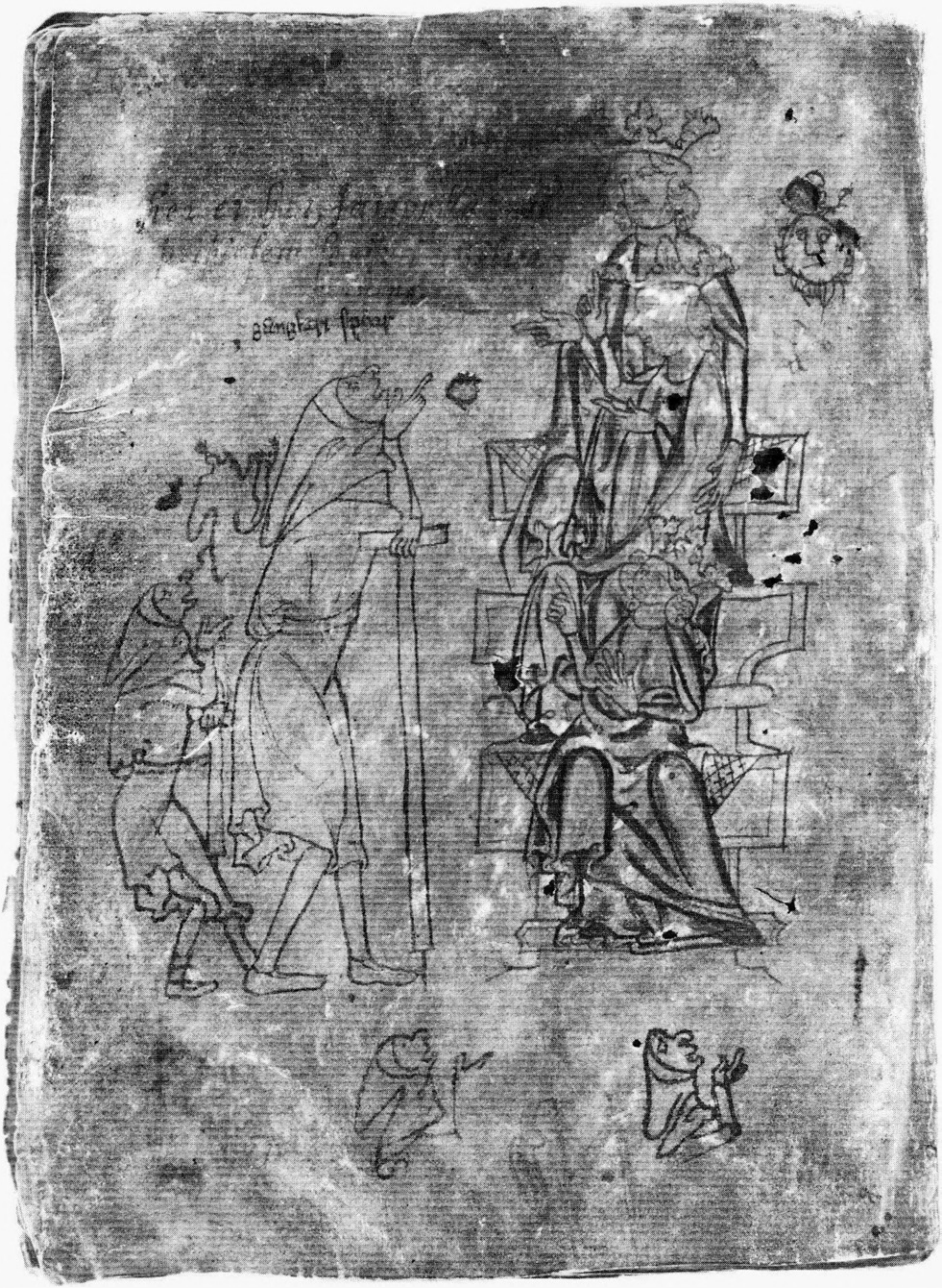
Háttatal was probably the first part of the *Edda* to be composed, with the two preceding sections and the prologue added later. In *Gylfaginning*

Snorri tells the myths that explain the diction of scaldic poetry, though in his delight as narrator and instructor he includes stories not strictly necessary for this purpose. In *Skáldskaparmál* he describes the *heiti* and the kennings, the terminology and figures peculiar to poetry, a good many of which bear some relation to the mythology of *Gylfaginning*. At appropriate moments he introduces new myths and legends, and he quotes many examples from ancient poems in support of his explanations.

The *Edda* begins with a prologue which is thoroughly larded with foreign learning. Part of Snorri's doctrine depends on the etymological equation of *Æsir* (gods – singular *áss*) and *Asia* (the name of the continent). The *Æsir* were mortal men from Asia, great men who emigrated under Óðinn's leadership to found new homes in the North. The idea that gods were deified mortals was known among the Greeks and is especially associated with Euhemerus the philosopher (c. 300 BC), who believed that the Olympians had started life as ordinary human beings.

Gylfaginning tells of a King Gylfi in Sweden. He journeys to Ásgarðr (the residence of the *Æsir*) to learn what he can from the "Asians", arriving in disguise and calling himself *Gangleri*, Way-weary. In Valhöll he finds three kings, sitting on thrones, each one higher than the next. The one seated lowest is *Hár*, High, the next is *Jafnhár*, Equally High, the top one, *Þriði*, Third. These are names of Óðinn who here appears in the guise of the Trinity. Gylfi then puts questions to them, asking about various objects and events in the world of the gods, and the trio give him full answers. This colloquy structure could have been adopted from medieval schoolbooks but it is also reminiscent of mythological poems like *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál* (p. 38), which also provide instruction in question-and-answer form. Snorri's main mythological source, however, was *Völuspá*, in addition to these two; and he occasionally quotes others, including some no longer extant. We must also assume that not all the mythical stories he knew were preserved in verse

Gangleri in Valhöll. "He saw three thrones, one above the other, and three men sitting on them, one on each. Then he asked what the names of those chieftains were. The man who led him into the hall answers that the one sitting on the lowest throne was a king 'and is called Hár, and the next is one called Jafnhár, and the topmost is called Þriði.'" From the Uppsala manuscript of Snorri's Edda, *written c. 1300. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.*



– the entertaining story of Þórr's visit to Útgarða-Loki, for instance, is not supported by any reference to poetic sources.

Snorri uses the dialogue form for two reasons. It gives the narrative the liveliness of a stage-play but, at the same time, it absolves him, as a good Christian, from any responsibility in the propagation of such a tissue of pagan nonsense. It is all a game, an illusion, a trick played on King Gylfi, and at the end he stands deluded and solitary in the open countryside and sees no hall and no citadel.

Snorri originally intended to construct *Skáldskaparmál* in the same way as *Gylfaginning*. It was to be a didactic colloquy between Ægir and Bragi. But the subject-matter was less suitable for this treatment and the two characters are soon forgotten, even though the question-and-answer form is retained for some time. Snorri here explains the inherited poetic diction, the kennings in all their variety and the *heiti* (p. 87). This is the core of the *Edda* as a handbook of poetics, and it was certainly the part which was most assiduously used by later versifiers. But it also has value because of the mythological and heroic tales Snorri brings in here and there. Many stanzas and even whole poems – including *Þórsdrápa* and *Gróttasöngr* – are preserved only here; and if people are not much impressed by Snorri's talent as the poet of *Háttatal*, they can comfort themselves with the thought that he has left us a remarkable anthology of early poetry in his *Edda*.

Snorri's *Edda* is woven of many strands. In intention it is a book of instruction in native poetics and it was used as such in Iceland for centuries. Modern readers who care little for the metrical and stylistic refinements of the *dróttkvætt* tradition now turn to it chiefly for the sake of Snorri's stories of gods and heroes. Those stories will not perhaps satisfy the stern criteria of the source-critic, but Snorri's genius has coloured everyone's ideas of the ancient religion of Scandinavia. And it will be a long time before any who read them, young and old alike, cease to enjoy his tales which combine childlike simplicity and mature reflection, twinkling humour and grave concern.

Contemporary sagas

The kings' sagas cover many ages in an unbroken run from remote antiquity to the time of the authors themselves. But the sequence of sagas that concern events in Iceland is sundered in the middle by a void of virtual silence lasting for a century or so, from about 1030 until well into the twelfth century. The sagas to do with Iceland consequently fall quite naturally into two groups, sagas of the past and sagas of the present. The former group we call *Íslendinga sögur*, sagas of Icelanders, and the second group *samtíðarsögur*, contemporary sagas. The latter again fall into two kinds: *biskupa sögur,* bishops' sagas, and *Sturlunga saga,* the saga – though really a compilation of many sagas – of the Sturlungar. The period in which the sagas of Icelanders are set, c. 930–1030, is often called after them and named the "saga age", *söguöld.* The period dealt with in the contemporary sagas on the other hand is usually called the "Sturlung age", *Sturlungaöld*, after the descendants of Hvamms-Sturla Þórðarson who played such a prominent part in Icelandic affairs in the late twelfth and thirteenth century. One or two *Íslendinga sögur* take us beyond the end of the "saga age" – the end of *Ljósvetninga saga* for example describes events from about 1050 and in fact has some characteristics in common with contemporary sagas (cf. p. 242). Otherwise only two genuine sagas deal with events in this intervening quiet century, *Jóns saga helga* by Gunnlaugr Leifsson (p. 182) and *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða.* Both are usually counted among the contemporary sagas but in reality they fall between the two groups of past and present, written as they were towards a century later than the events they describe.

It is difficult to explain why this gap should exist. The old explanation was that, once Christianity was established in the early eleventh century, it had such good influence that people gave up killing and feuding, with the result that nothing *sögulegt*, nothing worth telling, happened in Iceland until violence returned with the "Sturlung age". People took

note of what is said of Bishop Gizurr Ísleifsson (bishop 1082–1118) in *Kristni saga:* "Bishop Gizurr so pacified the country that there were no major conflicts between chieftains and the custom of carrying weapons much declined." Whereas straightway after his death there was strife between the outstanding men, Þorgils and Hafliði – so the case seemed clear. It was in accordance with this view that the intervening period between the *söguöld* and *Sturlungaöld* was named *friðaröld*, "peace age".

In more recent times this interpretation has been called in question. It has been pointed out that in fact sagas of Icelanders do not as a rule tell of "major conflicts between chieftains" but much more of differences between individuals and between families. Various sources reveal that similar clashes were not unknown in the "peace age" too, while Christianity did not seem to be much of a pacifying influence in the "Sturlung age". I shall not try to offer a new explanation of the dearth of sagas concerning the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, but merely remark that the gap must, it seems, imply that the *Íslendinga sögur,* the sagas of the past, came into being as a branch of literature separate from the *samtíðarsögur*, the sagas of the present, and that the authors of the former ran no risk of being bewildered by the proximity of the events they describe.

Bishops' sagas

We saw above that the first kings' sagas were of two kinds: on the one hand, concise works covering the reigns of many kings; on the other, longer and more detailed works devoted to single monarchs. The sagas of Óláfr Haraldsson and Óláfr Tryggvason stand out in the second group, but then the former was an acknowledged saint and the latter was revered as the apostle of Norway and Iceland.

Something similar can be said of the first sagas of bishops, and it is not a far cry to consider bishops' sagas and kings' sagas as interrelated. The bishops were after all the only permanent dignitaries known in early Iceland. It also happened that the Icelanders acquired their first native saints at just the time when saga-writing began to flourish. These new cults must to some extent have represented a protective measure encouraged by Iceland's leading men in church and state, because invocation of foreign saints naturally meant that votive gifts left the country – though in what quantity we have no idea. Neither of the Icelandic saints suffered the martyr's death that provided a ready passport to efficacious glory, but it did happen that just before 1200

there were hard years in Iceland, and in them men discovered there was some help to be had in invoking the mediation with the Almighty of Þorlákr Þórhallsson, bishop of Skálholt, who had died in 1193. The sanctity of Þorlákr spread benefits over the whole country, and it was not many months before the men of the North Quarter, which made the second diocese in Iceland, found themselves reluctant to go on enriching their southern brethren and discovered a saint of their own to lend them aid in the unseasonable times that continued to plague them. Their advocate in heaven was Jón Ögmundarson, first bishop of Hólar, who had died some eighty years before.

Both saintly bishops soon had accounts of their miracles and lives composed, Þorlákr by an anonymous author, Jón by Gunnlaugr Leifsson, who, having recently finished his *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, now turned his attention from a foreign king and martyr to a native bishop and confessor. The first records of the miracles of the two saints were in Icelandic, but the first lives were in Latin. They were quickly put into Icelandic too – possibly, indeed, Latin and Icelandic versions were produced side by side.

The lives of the Icelandic saints naturally have much in common with established hagiography – a good deal of it known in early Icelandic translation – and not least with accounts of some of the great thaumaturge saints. As we saw, *heilagra manna sögur* came into being in considerable numbers in the latter part of the twelfth century. Although *Þorláks saga* and *Jóns saga* share a common hagiographic inheritance, there are also substantial differences between them. The former is a true contemporary saga, written perhaps ten years after the bishop's death, while the events of Jón's career are seen from nearly a century away. More is made of Jón's miracles – he is supposed to have performed some in his lifetime – than was needful in the case of Þorlákr, whose sanctity was established prior to Jón's and regarded by many as more "genuine". As far as it goes, *Þorláks saga* can be counted a comparatively reliable historical source, and whatever doubts may be felt about the miracles attributed to his intercession, the accounts of them provide attractively fresh and intimate pictures of ordinary Icelandic life at the end of the twelfth century.

Bishop Þorlákr was in dispute with lay leaders over the administration of lands donated to the patron saints of the churches that had been built on them. His attempts to get the disposal of them put into clerical hands failed because of the opposition of Jón Loptsson of Oddi. Another matter at issue between them was that Jón, a married man, also lived

with Ragnheiðr, the bishop's own sister, and had children by her. When Þorlákr's sanctity was established and his miracles and his *vita* recorded, his successor as bishop of Skálholt was none other than Páll, son of his sister Ragnheiðr and Jón Loptsson. It is understandable that this particular scandal was omitted in the first account of Þorlákr's life – which was indeed written as the typical *vita* of a holy man with little attention paid to his involvement in secular affairs. This was put right in a second recension, however, which included an account of the dispute over benefices (*staðamál*) and the other matters of contention between the bishop and Jón Loptsson.

Jóns saga is not known in Latin but in three variant Icelandic versions. Two versions are preserved in medieval manuscripts, the principal texts being AM 234 fol. (c. 1340) and Stock. perg. fol. nr 5 (c. 1360). In the nineteenth century it was thought that the former text was closer to the original, but subsequently scholars reversed that opinion. Now people have reverted to the nineteenth-century view and consider the latinate features of the Stockholm text to be a sign of later origin, characteristic of the "florid style" of the late thirteenth and fourteenth century.

Gunnlaugr Leifsson, monk of Þingeyrar, was faced with problems when he undertook to make a saint's life out of what was known of Bishop Jón's career and to endow him with wonder-working powers – the bishop had left a good name but hardly a reputation as an adept in the "white magic" of the Church nor, as far as we know, was his intercession ever seriously sought for many decades after his death. It is worth noting that Gunnlaugr had similar problems to solve in his life of Óláfr Tryggvason. He may be said to have succeeded admirably but, naturally, at some expense to his credibility. People in consequence have been unwilling to trust descriptions in *Jóns saga* which, if true, would provide extremely interesting and important evidence about life and education at Hólar and in the northern diocese at the beginning of the twelfth century. There are of course conventional elements in these descriptions but we should also bear in mind that Gunnlaugr was in a position to have reliable information about Hólar in Bishop Jón's time, and the fact that there were people alive who could remember those days must have exercised some restraint on him. Would he have ventured to tell what many of his contemporaries knew was pure fiction? Gunnlaugr's anecdotes illustrating life and schooling at Hólar are certainly bright and entertaining, however idealised they may be.

Sarcophagus of Bishop Páll Jónsson of Skálholt (d. 1211), excavated in 1954. Páls saga, *ch. 6, records that Bishop Páll "had a coffin very skilfully hewn out of stone, in which he was placed after his death". Photo: Gísli Gestsson.*

The Norwegian kings with no claims to sainthood were at first treated in cursory synoptic histories, and in similar fashion records of the first bishops of Skálholt were put together in a "compendium". The author chose a name for it himself. "I call this little book *Hungrvaka* – hunger-stirrer – for it will have this effect on many uninstructed and even simple-minded people who read it through, that they will want to know more about the origins and careers of those notable men of whom only a little is told on these pages." He also says that he wants "to attract young men to learn to read our language, what is written in Norse, laws or sagas or genealogical lore." This echoes the *First Grammatical Treatise* but the author here includes an extra branch of literature: sagas.

Something over half a century lies between the *Treatise* and *Hungrvaka* and in that period saga-writing began.

The author of *Hungrvaka* is full of admiration for the pioneers of Christendom in Iceland, but he is also close to Ari and those other learned men who took up the pen to safeguard the preservation of their knowledge. He used *Íslendingabók* and a number of other written sources, including documents no longer extant, and in the manner of Ari he also refers to the testimony of specific individuals. The concise narrative inspires confidence, but the tone is eulogistic and some of the detail included will seem to us of trifling significance.

Hungrvaka can be dated within rather narrow limits. The author refers to Gizurr Hallsson in Haukadalur as if he had recently died – his *obit* is 27 July 1206. The conclusion of the book shows that it was written as an introduction to *Þorláks saga*, which we may presume was newly finished at that time. The author does not, on the other hand, make any reference to the career of Þorlákr's successor, Páll Jónsson, who died in 1211. Páll had a saga of his own written about him, evidently soon after his death, and this saga shares so many characteristics of attitude and style with *Hungrvaka* that they are generally considered to be the work of one man. We may note in passing that his account of Bishop Páll's death and burial was graphically confirmed in 1954 when excavations at Skálholt brought the bishop's stone sarcophagus to light in precise correspondence with what the saga tells us.

The bishops of Hólar who succeeded Jón Ögmundarson in the twelfth century find passing mention in *Hungrvaka* but there was no similar compendium about them and no separate saga on any individual. But at the outset of the thirteenth century a bishop was elected to Hólar who was looked upon as a saint by many people and credited with many marvels long before he died: Guðmundr Arason, called Guðmundr the Good and often known familiarly in Icelandic as Gvendur góði. Bishop Guðmundr became deeply embroiled in conflicts with lay chieftains and not everyone found him saint-like – in any case, the two native saints the Icelanders had just acquired were doubtless enough to meet their needs. All the same, and although no official cult of Guðmundr was ever established, the versions of his saga became more and more works of hagiography.

The first saga written about Guðmundr Arason seems to have been the so-called "Priest's Saga", *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*, on his life up to his consecration as bishop in 1203. It was incorporated in the *Sturlunga*

saga compilation in four sections. There is good reason to believe that it was written by Lambkárr Þorgilsson (died 1249), a pupil and loyal follower of the bishop.

Prestssagan was probably not written until after the bishop's death in 1237. It is odd that it should end just as Guðmundr stood on the threshold of his dramatic episcopate, but it is conceivable that it was Lambkárr's death which prevented the continuation. We should also recall what the so-called "Middle Saga" of Guðmundr says: some men had intended to put together a long saga about him and had written "a mass of documents" (*fjölda bréfa*) in that connection. They were kept in the church at Laufás in Eyjafjörður, but when the church burnt down in 1258 they were all destroyed – "and they will never be written again".

Something was told of Bishop Guðmundr in the other contemporary histories, especially in Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga*, but no continuous life existed and it was to be some time before that lack was made good. Then, probably in the early fourteenth century, three different versions were produced by combining the "Priest's Saga" with material from Sturla's *Íslendinga saga* and from other sources, written and oral. Version A is shortest and is known as the "Oldest Saga" of Guðmundr; version B is longer and called the "Middle Saga" (*elsta saga* and *miðsaga* respectively). Version C is still unpublished but an edition is in preparation. Later again, about the middle of the fourteenth century, Arngrímr Brandsson, abbot of Þingeyrar (died 1361 or 1362) wrote the last and longest *Guðmundar saga*. He had little in the way of novel material but he certainly wrote in the novel style, rhetorically ornate and heavily influenced by Latin in diction and syntax. These and other factors have led scholars to conclude that his work was first composed in Latin, though we now have it only in Icelandic. This need not be the case, however, for such a florid style was the ideal of many vernacular authors in the fourteenth century.

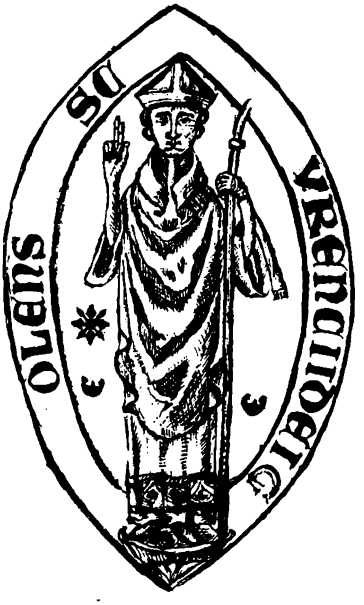
Árna saga deals with the great churchman, Árni Þorláksson, bishop of Skálholt 1269–98. In many ways it is a continuation of *Sturlunga saga* and it has been preserved in the same manuscripts. It ends abruptly in the winter of 1290–91, but it seems more likely that this is because the conclusion has been lost than because it originally ended here. The style of the saga is rather stiff, but that does not affect its value as an important source of Icelandic history in the last part of the thirteenth century. It deals in detail with the *staðamál* (cf. p. 182), the dispute between Bishop Árni and secular chieftains over the ownership and

administration of church property and estates. The dispute ended two years before Árni's death with a compromise between him and the Norwegian king, who had supported the cause of the lay leaders.

Lárentius saga is the last of the contemporary sagas. It more or less takes up the thread where *Árna saga* ends and throws important light on many aspects of Icelandic history in the first thirty years of the fourteenth century. It is more fluent in style and more enjoyable to read than *Árna saga*. Lárentius Kálfsson was ordained priest as a young man and became a great scholar. He was outspoken and determined and sometimes got involved in disputes in consequence, especially in Norway, where he supported Archbishop Jörundr in his violent conflict with the cathedral chapter in Nidaros. For a while Lárentius was imprisoned and badly treated by the canons. His esteem in Iceland did not suffer, however, and in 1324 he was consecrated bishop of Hólar; he died in office in 1331. His saga was written shortly after his death by his faithful friend and pupil, Einarr Hafliðason (died 1393).

It is not inappropriate at this point to mention the early *annals*: annals and bishops' sagas had some mutual influence on each other. *Prestssaga Guðmundar* was constructed on the basis of a set of annals, for instance, while bishops' sagas in turn provided a variety of material fitted into the framework of annal collections.

It is not known when annalistic notices were first made in Iceland: probably they were entries made in the Easter tables kept by priests in their churches, as was the common practice elsewhere in Christendom. This supposition is borne out by the fact that all the oldest Icelandic annals use Sunday and Easter letters to identify the year in which the events recorded took place. Annalistic writing as an independent activity must however have begun by about 1200 or very soon afterwards. We know very little about that activity for the next three-quarters of a century. Then, about 1280, a set of annals was compiled or copied which was to prove very influential – in fact, it appears to have provided the archetypal nucleus for all the early annal collections we now possess. Most of them contain a quantity of foreign information, with external events recorded from the time of Christ's birth or the days of Julius Caesar, including the accession of emperors and popes, plagues, comets, eclipses and so forth. All the annals finish before 1400 with the exception of the so-called *Nýi annáll*, which continues to 1430.



The seal of Lárentius Kálfsson, bishop of Hólar 1324–31. A drawing made for Árni Magnússon by Magnús Einarsson of Vatnshorn at the beginning of the eighteenth century, preserved in AM 217 8vo. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.

This annal marks the end of the ancient history-writing of the Icelanders.

To begin with, annalists took their Icelandic and Norse material largely from Icelandic sources: first from Ari's *Íslendingabók* and later from *Hungrvaka* and contemporary sagas. Some dates are calculated according to sagas of Icelanders – *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Laxdæla saga*, for example – but there are others relating to the settlement and saga age which cannot come from sagas and must be derived from unknown and probably very ancient sources. As records of information the annals are most important in covering the period from 1330 to 1430, when people had given up writing contemporary sagas.

Sturlunga saga

This stage in the development of saga-writing is also represented by a number of contemporary sagas which describe the conflicts of Icelandic

chieftains of the time. They are linked to the bishops' sagas in subject-matter but differ from them in outlook and style. Round about 1300 these sagas were gathered into a great compilation which has come to be called *Sturlunga saga*. The author or instigator of this collection was probably Þórðr Narfason the Lawman, of Skarð on Skarðsströnd (died 1308). When the texts were combined in *Sturlunga saga*, they were modified in various ways, often abridged, for example, not least when the same events were described in two different sagas. We can see to some extent how the editor worked because in at least one case we have independent versions of the saga he adapted. Modern editors of *Sturlunga saga* have generally tried to divide the text up between the separate original sources – not an easy task – and the sagas themselves have various gaps in them.

Sturlunga saga is preserved in two vellum manuscripts of the fourteenth century, one called Króksfjarðarbók (AM 122a fol.), the other Reykjarfjarðarbók (AM 122b fol.). The former is about three-quarters whole, the latter consists only of the remnants of thirty leaves. Fortunately both versions were copied on paper while they were still more-or-less complete.

Sturlunga saga opens with a *þáttr* of Geirmundr heljarskinn, the notable settler of Skarðsströnd in West Iceland and a Viking of royal blood and legendary prowess. It was written late in the thirteenth century, perhaps by the editor of the compilation. The first saga in the collection is *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, which may with some justification be called a contemporary saga (cf. p. 179 above), telling of a feud between Þorgils Oddason and Hafliði Másson in the years 1117–21. There is no reason to doubt that the author worked up his account from a substantial body of oral tradition or to question the historicity of the main events: the author's detailed knowledge of the people involved and their mutual relationships argues strongly in favour of this conclusion. The detailed nature of the narrative has been taken to show that the author was not far distant from the events and even that he wrote his saga as early as c. 1180. But another point of view has been expressed by Jón Jóhannesson: "Notions built on the detail are a delusion, engendered by the way in which the author pads out his narrative with dialogue, topographical and historical references, and his own experience of life."

Þorgils saga ok Hafliða contains the famous description of the wedding entertainment at Reykhólar in 1119 (p. 343). It says there that *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar* was used to entertain King Sverrir, "and he declared that

such lying sagas were the best pastime". That could not have been said before Sverrir sat firm on the throne of Norway, and perhaps not until after his death in 1202. Later in the saga there is a reference to a hall built at Staðarhóll by Þorgils Oddason: "that hall was still sound when Bishop Magnús Gizurarson died" – i.e. in 1237. Most commentators have thought this fix on the bishop's death is an addition or alteration, believing the saga must have been written earlier than that, but Jón Jóhannesson was prepared to accept it as by the author, who consequently must have worked after 1237. Not everyone will be convinced of this, however. One may point to archaic elements in the language (e.g. a comparatively high percentage of preposition *of*, which was obsolescent, ousted by *um*, in the first part of the thirteenth century) and to the rather clumsy composition of the saga as a whole. This problem has not been studied as thoroughly as it deserves, but *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* does give the impression of being a relatively primitive work. If it belonged among the *Íslendinga sögur*, it would in all probability be regarded as one of the earliest of them.

Nevertheless, there is much to commend in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*. It is a unique historical source and the first saga to describe a major clash between chieftains with the men of whole districts arrayed against each other. War is averted and the saga gives the impression that it is an exemplum demonstrating how disputes should be resolved without bloodshed – all the same, the threatened conflict is an omen of the future disintegration and collapse of the Icelandic commonwealth. The author describes ugly encounters with cold realism, sometimes with penetrating humour. Least likely to be forgotten are the words of the priest Skafti when Hafliði claimed eighty hundreds for the loss of the finger Þorgils had chopped off with his axe: "Hafliði whole would cost a lot if every limb went like that."

The narrative of Þorgils' approach to the Assembly in 1121 stirred the admiration of a critic as experienced as W.P. Ker. Bárðr the Black and his son, Aron, rode ahead to spy on Hafliði's movements. Under Ármannsfell they fell in with a crowd of men, and their companions coming up behind them thought they had been captured – they even thought they could make out a fine horse and a gold-inlaid spear which Þorgils had given Böðvarr, his brother-in-law – and their concern grew with the fear that Böðvarr had been seized as well. To quote W.P. Ker:

> The use of all this, which turns out to be all made up of true eyesight and wrong judgment, is partly to bring out Thorgils; for his

> decision, against the wish of his companions, is to ride on in any event, so that the author gets a chapter of courage out of the mistake. Apart from that, there is something curiously spirited and attractive in the placing of the different views, with the near view last of all. In the play between them, between the apprehension of danger, the first report of an enemy in the way, the appearance of an indistinct crowd, the false inference, and the final truth of the matter, the Saga is faithful to its vital principle of variety and comprehensiveness; no one appearance, not even the truest, must be allowed too much room to itself.

The first contemporary sagas that are both close to the events they describe and unmotivated by any kind of clerical attitude or purpose are *Sturlu saga* and *Guðmundar saga dýra*. They undoubtedly depend on ample oral information – something which proves both an advantage and a disadvantage. They are crowded with people and events, great and small, all mixed together: decidedly imperfect as works of literary art but remarkable revelations of life in Iceland at the end of the twelfth century.

Sturlu saga has the upstart Sturla Þórðarson of Hvammur as its main character. In *Sturlunga saga* the work has the title *Heiðarvígs saga*, the saga of the battle on the moor, referring to the chief event in it, when Sturla and Einarr Þorgilsson of Staðarhóll fought on Sælingsdalsheiði in 1171 – Einarr was son of Þorgils Oddason, protagonist of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*. Sturla had the better of it, "and it was said by most men that the battle marked the turning point in the reputations of Sturla and Einarr." Although Sturla is the central figure, the author is by no means a whole-hearted partisan. His verdict is revealed in the famous words attributed to Bishop Brandr: "No one questions your cleverness but they are more doubtful of your good nature." Various flaws can be detected in *Sturlu saga* but it has some excellent narrative passages and some of its sharp-edged dialogue is comparable with the best in kings' sagas and *Íslendinga sögur*. One well-known example will suffice. Sturla and Þorleifr beiskaldi in Hítardalur have been on bad terms but now they are supposed to be reconciled. The story goes on:

> Some time later a great sickness went through the district. It is told that one evening a man arrived in Hvammr who had come in from Snæfellsnes and before that from Borgarfjörðr. He was a day-

labourer. Sturla sat down to talk to him and asked about many things. First he asked about his travels, and the other told him. Then Sturla said, "Is the epidemic bad in the south of the district?" He said it was. "Did you come to Hítardalr?" said Sturla. "Yes," said the traveller. "How was Þorleifr?" said Sturla. "Happily, he was well," said the traveller. "Yes," says Sturla, "so he may be – for all torments are being saved up for him till the next world." Now they stopped their talk. The man goes off in the morning and moves on west into the Fjords through the autumn and returns near winter. And when winter had just begun he arrived in Hítardalr. Þorleifr was free with his questions and asked about many things. "Did you come east from the Fjords?" The traveller says that is so. Þorleifr asked, "How has the season been there?" He says it has been a good year, but a bad sickness was going round there now. Þorleifr said, "Did you come to Hvammr?" "Yes," he said. "How was Master Sturla?" "He was well," the traveller said, "when I went westward, but he was down with it when I came back and hard hit." "So he will be," said Þorleifr; "he will be suffering now but he will suffer twice as much later on."

Guðmundar saga dýra is also called "the Saga of Önundr's Burning", from the chief event in it. Here one is in danger of going under in the welter of people and petty details, even more than in *Sturlu saga*. But in his description of tragic events the author rises to noble heights.

Guðmundr dýri Þorvaldsson lived at Bakki in Öxnadalur; Önundr Þorkelsson lived first at Laugaland and then at Langahlíð in Hörgárdalur. Quarrels between their assembly-men bring these two chieftains into conflict. Ingibjörg Guðmundardóttir was married to Þorfinnr Önundarson but the marriage did little to dampen the hostility. Guðmundr was slow to act under provocation and behaved as if he took no notice when his reputation was injured. "Önundr's men reckoned Guðmundr sat tight on his sanctuary chair up in Öxnadalr, and they said they would build a wall across the valley above and below him and then turf it over and bury his reputation there." On another occasion they compared him to a polled ewe that had lost its fleece.

Finally Guðmundr gathered men in great secrecy and attacked Önundr at Langahlíð. He had ninety followers, Önundr nearly fifty. Önundr asked who commanded the attackers. "The leadership is of little account," answered Guðmundr. "That polled ewe has come down

from the valley with most of her fleece off – and the first sheep of the flock is of no more worth than that. But now she means to do one thing or the other: lose the rest of her fleece or go back with a fleece that is whole." Önundr and his men defended themselves inside the buildings, and when Guðmundr and his allies saw it would be hard to dislodge them, they set fire to the house. Then Þorfinnr said to Guðmundr, his father-in-law, "It is a pity your daughter Ingibjörg is not here." Guðmundr answered, "It is a good thing she is not here, though that would not stop us now." Some men were allowed to come out but Önundr and Þorfinnr and many others died in the fire. This happened in the spring of 1197. It was the first time such an attack had been made in Iceland for nearly two centuries, not since Njáll and his sons were burnt to death at Bergþórshvoll.

After the burning Jón Loptsson's arbitration was accepted. He imposed great sums on Guðmundr and the men who were with him in the attack. But Jón was old and died the following winter. Then there was no commanding figure to see that the settlement was kept, and an endless round of revenge and slaughter began. The author's account of a successful attack on some of the burners at Laufás is deeply moving: in their courage in the face of death they remind us most of the Jómsvíkingar at Hjörungavágr. And the cold-blooded grimness of this terrible time rings in the words uttered by Þórðr of Laufás when he came home and found his sons lying dead and their killers gone: "We have fresh carcases to see to here."

By the end of the saga Guðmundr is the winner and peace has been restored. He did not bask in his triumph for long. He put thoughts of worldly reputation aside and took the cowl at Þingeyrar. Remorse and perhaps the weight of public opinion drove him to seek forgiveness in the merciful bosom of the Church.

The author tends to come down on Guðmundr's side but he can hardly be said to give adequate reasons for his terrible retaliation on Önundr. But to call the saga an *apologia* for Guðmundr, as some people have done, also seems wide of the mark.

There is no doubt on the other hand that *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* was composed in order to enhance the reputation of its hero. Hrafn was put to death by Þorvaldr Snorrason of Vatnsfjörður in 1213, and the author of the saga portrays him as a saintly figure whose death was a martyrdom. He links his story as closely as he can to the career of Guðmundr Arason, and even borrows motifs from the life of St Thomas

of Canterbury. The saga thus has something in common with bishops' sagas and other clerical literature.

Hrafn was also a good physician and the author describes some of his cures in comparative detail. Since the author seems to have been familiar with medical textbooks current in Europe, he may have supplied the account of Hrafn's treatments himself. In that case, they would tell us little about Hrafn but more about the state of medical knowledge in Iceland in the mid-thirteenth century. The narrative is not unlike that of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* and *Jóns saga helga* inasmuch as the author seems to view the events in comparatively remote retrospect. He evidently did not write his account before the death of Þorvaldr in 1228 and probably not for some years after that. Since in the prologue, however, he says that he intends "to write of some events which happened in our days and among people known to us", we cannot put the date of the saga's composition much after c. 1250.

Hrafns saga is the only one in the Sturlung compilation which is also preserved complete and independent outside it – we have it indeed in two variant versions, a longer and a shorter. It is instructive to consider how the editor of *Sturlunga saga* treated it, and to make use of conclusions drawn from the comparison in discussing other sagas he adapted in his collection. The editor only includes the latter part of *Hrafns saga* and makes various changes, sometimes augmenting but more often abridging his source. *Prestssaga Guðmundar* was also abridged by him, as appears from comparison with the version of that text adapted in the so-called *Oldest Saga* (p. 185). He or someone seems to have cut *Þorgils saga skarða* most severely of all – we have independent fragments of this which show that its original form was extremely prolix. We must remember though that *Þorgils saga skarða* was not part of the first Sturlung compilation, but was added in the version represented by Reykjarfjarðarbók (p. 188).

The core of *Sturlunga saga* is Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga*, and when people talk of *Sturlunga saga*, they often mean Sturla's work. It is by far the most extensive saga in the collection and it also covers the most significant period in thirteenth-century Icelandic history and on something approaching a national scale. The art of the contemporary saga here reaches its highest point.

Sturla was born in 1214, son of Þórðr Hvamms-Sturluson and so Snorri's nephew. By temperament he was a man of peace but he could not avoid being drawn into the conflicts of his time. His moderation and

unusual good luck helped him out of many tight corners, even when his kinsmen were being slaughtered on all sides. The so-called *Sturlu þáttr* gives an entertaining account of his first meeting with King Magnús Hákonarson. Sturla had always been an opponent of the monarchy, though he had seen no option but to join the other Icelandic chieftains in swearing oaths of loyalty to King Hákon in 1262. The following year he was forced out of Iceland and into the king's hands. Luckily King Hákon had left Norway on the expedition to Scotland from which he was never to return. Magnús, his son and successor, received Sturla coldly and showed him various marks of royal displeasure. On a voyage with the levy-fleet south along the coast Sturla was on the king's ship and was called on to provide entertainment for his men, so he told the story of Huld the troll-wife "better and with more circumstance than any of them had ever heard it before. Many crowded forward on the deck, wanting to catch it as clearly as they could." The queen noticed the crowd and next day she sent for Sturla and told him "to have the troll-wife story with him". He spent much of the day telling the story to her and the king. Afterwards Sturla recited a poem he had composed in honour of Magnús and another in honour of his father. When that was over, King Magnús said, "I think you recite better than the pope!" Subsequently Sturla and the king became the best of friends and Magnús commissioned him to write the saga of his father Hákon, "following what he himself laid down and the accounts of the wisest men". Sturla's *Hákonar saga* is a source of the greatest value for Norwegian and to a less extent for Icelandic history in the thirteenth century. Later he wrote the saga of King Magnús as well, but sadly it is almost completely lost.

In 1271 Sturla brought to Iceland the new lawbook Magnús had compiled for the Icelanders (*Járnsíða*). He had also been appointed the first lawman under the new dispensation. He died on 30 July 1284, the day after his seventieth birthday.

The name *Íslendinga saga* is used in the *Middle Saga* of Guðmundr Arason (p. 185), which incorporates chapters from Sturla's work, while in the prologue to the Sturlung compilation the name used is in the plural – *Íslendinga sögur*. Sturla takes the death of his grandfather, Sturla of Hvammur, as his starting-point, so his work appears as a kind of continuation of *Sturlu saga*. Where precisely he ended *Íslendinga saga* is a matter of dispute. Most scholars now think he reached at least as far as 1255 (the battle at Þverá). Some believe he went on to 1264 (the execution of Þórðr Andréasson) but only treated the events of the last

years in a summary fashion – providing the materials for a history rather than a full and considered account.

Of older contemporary sagas Sturla appears to have known *Sturlu saga, Guðmundar saga dýra* and *Preststssaga Guðmundar Arasonar*; and of the later ones, *Þórðar saga kakala* and *Þorgils saga skarða* (Þórðr lived in exile from 1250, Þorgils was killed in 1258). As we saw (p. 125), Sturla apparently completed his *Landnámabók* in the later years of his life – after *Íslendinga saga*, that is – but we do not know exactly when he wrote the third work attributed to him, *Kristni saga*, the saga of Christendom in Iceland, which is found as a sequel to his *Landnámabók* in *Hauksbók*. He describes the conversion and the bishops in Iceland down to 1118, using a variety of sources, not all of which now exist or not in their original form. Between them *Landnámabók* and *Kristni saga* took Icelandic history as far as the time of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*. Thereafter the other sagas we know in the Sturlung compilation followed on in succession. Sturla's own saga-writing seems to have been intended to fill in the gaps that remained – some of them large – so that the Icelanders were furnished with a complete history from the settlement down to the time of his own maturity.

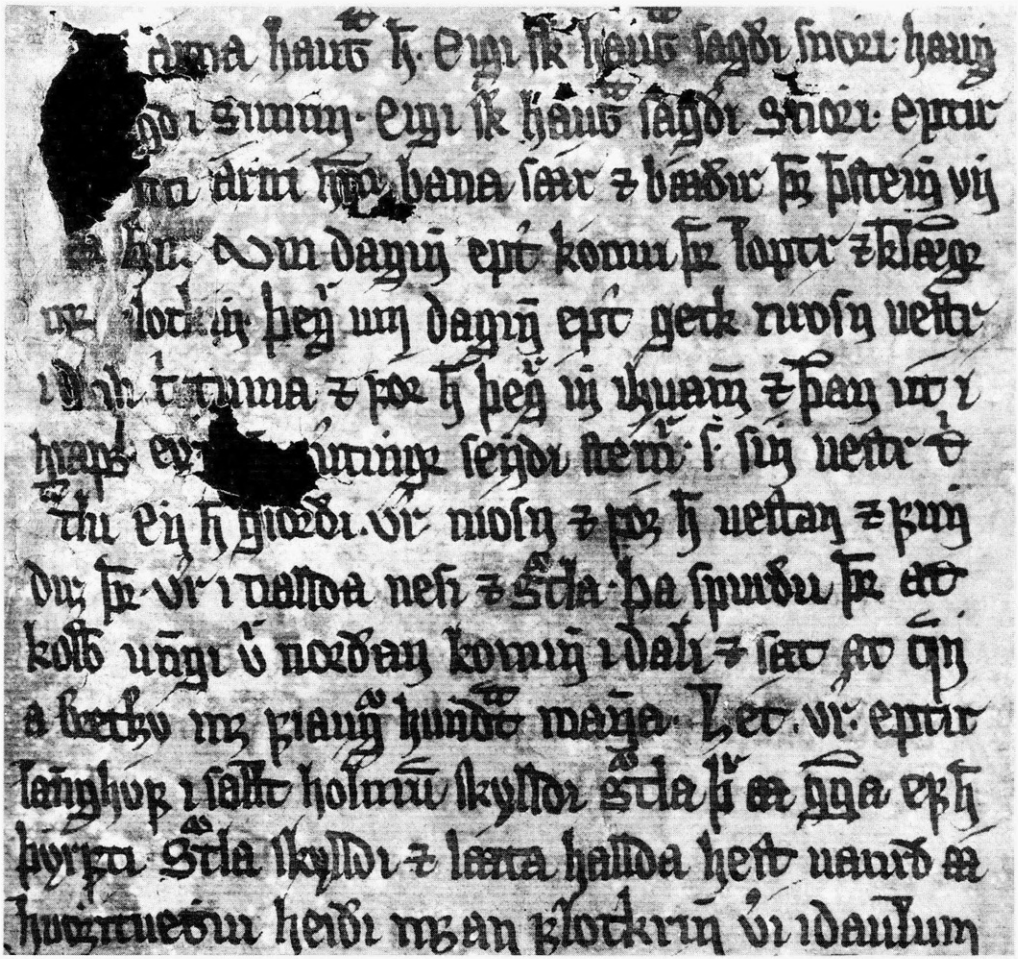
Sturla's impartial recording has long been commended – all the more because of the role that he, his kinsmen and friends played in thirteenth-century affairs. Some of the other sagas in the Sturlung compilation are much more biased in their portrayal of individual men. Some authors seem to lay a misplaced emphasis on the Christian virtues of their approved hero: he is endowed with a zealous piety, and it is not unknown for the author to report some miraculous sign of God's favour revealed to members of the hero's circle. This is true not only of the much-harassed bishop, Guðmundr Arason, but also of a layman like Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson and even Þorgils skarði.

We must however bear in mind that Sturla is often our only reporter of events, and that the two other sagas that chiefly concern the period he describes, *Þórðar saga kakala* and *Þorgils saga skarða*, were also written by partisans of the Sturlungar. The suspicion has sometimes been voiced that under the serene surface of *Íslendinga saga* some degree of partiality lies concealed. It has been argued, for example, that Sturla was in reality hostile to Snorri, his uncle, and portrays him in a worse light than was justified. This seems doubtful, however, for what we know of Snorri from other sources on the whole confirms Sturla's picture of him. There is more reason to suspect bias in the way he presents the open enemies of the Sturlungar, for example in the account of Gizurr Þor-

valdsson in the Örlygsstaðir battle or the account of the sons of Þorvaldr Vatnsfirðingr in the Sauðafell attack. But Sturla's "goodwill towards men" brings him to revise his attitude when these same hard antagonists of his family themselves face death. He takes no pleasure in their predicament and indeed his art as a narrator reaches no higher pitch than in his description of how the sons of Þorvaldr met their end and of the attack by fire on Gizurr at Flugumýri. It is true that by the time of the latter event Sturla had changed his mind about Gizurr to some extent, for they had come to terms and Sturla had married his daughter to Gizurr's son.

The neutral approach is something Sturla could have learnt from the authors of sagas such as *Sturlu saga* and *Guðmundar saga dýra*. He resembles them too in the way he introduces a great crowd of people in his narrative, along with a great mass of minor incident. It is noteworthy that he gives the names of all the men who were killed in or after the battle of Örlygsstaðir, all fifty-six of them, some of them completely unknown to us – though obviously not to Sturla and his contemporaries. In contrast, and unfortunately, he says almost nothing of the literary activities of the Icelanders in his day and age – though they must have been very considerable. Still, we can compare a similar neglect on the part of the classical historians of Rome, who also concentrate on wars and political conflict: we hear much of their great men as consuls and commanders and orators, little of them as authors and poets.

With all his faults Sturla Þórðarson is nonetheless an outstanding historian and a very effective writer. He brings in many details but never loses the essential thread of his narrative. It fell to him to record epoch-making incidents in Icelandic history – the battle at Örlygsstaðir, the assassination of Snorri, the burning at Flugumýri – and he did so with such success that his descriptions are indelibly imprinted on any reader's memory. In the superstition and credulity which led him to see mysterious portents everywhere Sturla was no more than an authentic Icelander. Dreams and omens are commonplace in his accounts – but then they are delusions that flourish best in desperate times and they can add not a little to the atmosphere and impact of the narrative. Sturla's writing is simple, clear, natural. He describes as an observer, allows characters to reveal themselves in words and deeds, but passes no judgment. Only once is he unable to contain himself, after the Flugumýri burning: "and all thoughtful men reckoned this event among the most momentous that have happened here in Iceland – for which God



From Sturlunga saga *in Króksfjarðarbók, written c. 1360. This compilation of sagas telling of events in Iceland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was made c. 1300. The longest text it contains is the* Íslendinga saga *of Sturla Þórðarson (1214–84). The passage shown here describes the death of Snorri Sturluson (Sturla's uncle) in 1241. It begins:* [Simun knutr bað] Árna hauGva h*ann.* Eigi sk*al* hauGva sagði Snor*r*i. haugg [þu sa]gdi Simún. Eigi sk*al* hauGva sagði Snor*r*i. Eptir [þat ve]itti Árni h*onu*m bana sár *ok* báðir þ*e*ir Þ*o*rsteinn vnn[u] á h*onu*m. *"Símun knútr told Árni to hack him down. 'Hack not at all,' said Snorri. 'You hack,' said Símun. 'Hack not at all,' said Snorri. After that Árni gave him a death wound and Þorsteinn wounded him as well." Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.*

forgive those responsible in his great mercy and mildness!" Sturla's literary skill is greatest in reproducing the spoken word. His dialogue is sometimes brisk and cutting, sometimes peaked with scorn, sometimes alive with sardonic humour.

Þórðar saga kakala and *Þorgils saga skarða* both appear to have been abridged and a good deal revised on their incorporation in the Sturlung compilation. It is not entirely plain what their relations were with Sturla's *Íslendinga saga*. The last scholar to discuss the problem was Jón Jóhannesson. He found grounds for concluding that the two sagas were written before Sturla's work was done. Sturla then avoided treating their subject-matter in detail, though here and there he corrected and supplemented their accounts.

Þórðar saga traces the triumphant career of Þórðr kakali in Iceland in the years 1242–50. In accuracy and impartiality the author compares with Sturla himself, but not in narrative skill. The identity of the author is uncertain, but he was closely familiar with Þórðr's activities and movements, especially in the west of Iceland. It fell to him to report many impressive events, including two of the biggest battles ever fought in Iceland, the sea-fight in Húnaflói (1244) and the affray at Haugsnes (1246), the bloodiest of all Icelandic battles: but his descriptions are neither as clear nor as moving as Sturla Þórðarson's account of comparable scenes.

As noted above, *Þorgils saga skarða* is only in the Reykjarfjarðarbók recension of *Sturlunga saga*. It is chiefly concerned with the years Þorgils spent in Iceland, from 1252 when he returned from Norway until his death at Hrafnagil in Eyjafjörður in 1258. There is much to be said for attributing the work to Þorgils' brother-in-law, Þórðr Hítnesingr – a man who is in fact only known to us from the pages of this saga. The author is very well-disposed to Þorgils and indeed comes close to making his death a martyrdom. One can see however from the saga that Þorgils, especially in his younger years, was a truculent bully and a willing tool in the hands of the Norwegian king.

Þorgils saga is even more detailed and elaborate than the rest of *Sturlunga saga*, and it was originally a good deal longer (cf. p. 193) – longer, indeed, in proportion to its time-span than any other text in the compilation. At a critically dangerous stage in his early career in Iceland, the ambitious young Þorgils is said to have expressed fears that no saga would be told about him. His fears were unfounded.

Svínfellinga saga tells of strife between Sæmundr and Guðmundr, sons of Ormr Jónsson of Svínafell, and their uncle, Ögmundr Helgason of Kirkjubær á Síðu. The beginning of the story was probably changed when it was included in *Sturlunga saga*, and possibly the account has been mangled by severe abridgment elsewhere; an unusual measure of disagreement between the main manuscripts adds to our difficulties. The author seems intimately acquainted with the facts of the narrative, but comparison with other sources reveals an occasional mistake, and this suggests that he wrote long after the events and his memory might sometimes fail him. He describes tragic scenes and conveys their pathos with more sensitivity than is usual in the contemporary sagas.

Ögmundr was married to Steinunn, sister of Ormr Jónsson Svínfellingr, and Guðmundr Ormsson was fostered by his aunt and uncle after his father's death. Brandr Jónsson, brother of Ormr and Steinunn, was at this time abbot of the Augustinian house at Þykkvabær (later bishop of Hólar, 1263–4). It seems to have been the elder brother, Sæmundr Ormsson, who was the chief cause of the trouble – in *Þórðar saga kakala* it says that he was "rather pushing and thought to have the makings of a great leader". He cast envious eyes on Ögmundr's wealth and popularity: it was after all he, Sæmundr, who was born to command in that district and whose family *goðorð* gave him authority over Ögmundr's neighbours. Sæmundr now married Ingibjörg, daughter of Sturla Sighvatsson (died 1238), and so came to have ties with her uncle, Þórðr kakali Sighvatsson, who was then the most powerful man in Iceland. At the same time, when he thought his brother Guðmundr was old enough to serve his ambitious plans, he got him away from his foster-home with Steinunn and Ögmundr.

Sæmundr made an abortive attack on Ögmundr at Kirkjubær and then forced through a sentence of outlawry on him at the Alþingi. In this he was backed by Þórðr kakali, even though Ögmundr had previously had a friendly reception from him when in need of help. But Þórðr then went abroad that same summer, never to return – "and people say that he left this case in a parlous state behind him," says the saga.

Ögmundr was in hiding while this went on, but Mistress Steinunn wept when her nephew Sæmundr came to carry off the farmstock from Kirkjubær in execution of the sentence of outlawry. A woman said it was understandable that she should feel this was a great loss. Steinunn replied, "You will be thinking I am crying over these cattle they are driving away, but not so – I weep for what I fear will happen later on."

She went to the church and prayed for them all. "She prayed God that there would be no trouble between them as long as she lived."

Abbot Brandr went to Sæmundr, his nephew, to try to arrange a reconciliation and Sæmundr welcomed the proposal. Ögmundr came out of hiding and went back to Kirkjubær. "A complete truce was now established between Sæmundr and Ögmundr and full pledges given, building on the goodwill and counsel of Abbot Brandr and Mistress Steinunn and Álfheiðr, Sæmundr's mother, and the intervention of many other good people."

Ögmundr is a man of peace, not easily stirred – his popularity is clearly conveyed by the saga. But as can happen with such men, deep down his resentment is all the more fearsome. Quietly and with the utmost duplicity he prepares his revenge. Abbot Brandr trusts him completely. Sæmundr is at first suspicious but takes heed of Ögmundr's words in a friendly letter he sent him the following winter. The letter said: "Move about the district with not too many followers for the present, for there is great dearth now at dead of winter and provisions and hay both hard to come by."

Then at an opportune moment Mistress Steinunn fell ill and on the Easter Saturday she died. "Her brother, Abbot Brandr, officiated at her grave and there were many more people there, for she was dear to everyone as long as she lived." Now we know that what must be, will be. On the Friday after Easter Sæmundr and Guðmundr rode from home with two companions to visit Abbot Brandr. Ögmundr and his sons and household-men were lying in wait for them in a hollow a little to the east of Kirkjubær. "What does this ambush mean, Ögmundr?" asked Sæmundr. "I thought we were reconciled." "You shall die, and your brother Guðmundr too," said Ögmundr. There were three priests in the household and the brothers were shriven. Sæmundr was executed first and meanwhile Guðmundr recited the penitential psalms with the priests – "and no one could see that he was at all moved at what was happening, only he pronounced the words rather harder than he had been doing. He was then eighteen." When they had finished the psalms, he said to Ögmundr, "It would still be good to live and I would ask for quarter, foster-father." Ögmundr looked away and said, "We do not dare do that now, my foster-son." He was as red as blood. Then Guðmundr was executed like his brother, and the priests attended to the bodies.

After this Ögmundr at once sent word to Abbot Brandr and put the whole matter into his hands and the hands of other men of note. Pride

and the flint-hard standards of his time had driven him to deeds of shame. He accepted without a murmur the judgment imposed on him. In the spring he moved west to Dalur under Eyjafjöll and lived there from then on, a poor man.

Arons saga Hjörleifssonar deals with events that fall within the Sturlung age but, as far as we can tell, it was not written in time to be included in the first Sturlung compilation (p. 188). It was probably not put together until about 1350. We have a vellum fragment from about 1400, but as a whole it is only known in paper copies derived from the codex represented by the fragment. *Arons saga* is customarily included in *Sturlunga saga* editions.

Aron (died 1255) was a supporter of Bishop Guðmundr Arason and Sturla Þórðarson tells something of his exploits in *Íslendinga saga*. When *Arons saga* was written, oral traditions about him were a good century old and it is instructive to compare its narrative with Sturla's "contemporary" account. We find that chronology is confused, some details are forgotten, others are magnified, anecdotes are improved. It is more surprising, however, to discover that some of the stories are remarkably similar, even in phrasing. The possibility must of course be conceded that oral tales about Aron were influenced by the written narrative of *Íslendinga saga*, and that this influence then comes out in *Arons saga* – assuming, as seems quite likely, that the author of the latter did not know Sturla's work at first hand. Still, there is no doubt that *Arons saga* bears plain witness to the existence of oral traditions living on into the fourteenth century – though not exactly to their reliability.

Arons saga reminds one of the sagas of the past, the *Íslendinga sögur* that have their setting in the tenth and eleventh century. The author makes use of stanzas drawn from three poems on Aron: a memorial *drápa* by Óláfr hvítaskáld (p. 130; died 1259) and two poems by the priest Þormóðr Óláfsson (who lived in the first half of the fourteenth century) – Þormóðr composed on Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi as well. Aron was a bold and venturesome character and the saga has much to tell of his skill at arms. He was outlawed in 1222, "of forfeit immunity, not to be given passage, not to be given any saving advice," and then survived in his outlawry for some time in Iceland, even making a stay in Geirþjófsfjörður where Gísli Súrsson had had his hide-out long before. Various resemblances have been pointed out between the adventures of these two outlawed heroes, but how the parallels are to be explained is not entirely clear.

And there is no tragic end to *Arons saga*, for the author had to respect his sources. Aron lived through all the dangers that beset him, escaped to Norway, and even went on pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. In the end he had no enemies left, and died of disease in Bergen in 1255. Aron was *hirðmaðr*, a sworn retainer, of King Hákon and the king himself attended his funeral and spoke at his grave: "We shall make this our final word," said the king, "that here has died one of the best fighting-men among all our subjects."

Sagas of Icelanders

Introductory

These sagas are so called because they tell of Icelandic men and women who belonged to the first generations of our people, from the time of the settlement to about 1030. These brilliant narratives have outshone all other kinds of sagas. It is because of them that the period from c. 930 to c. 1030 has been called the "saga age", and when people talk of the "Old Icelandic sagas" or simply "the sagas" they are referring specifically to this group of stories. They have meant much to Icelanders of later generations, medieval and modern, and they merit all the attention we Icelanders of the present day can devote to them. The best of the kings' sagas and of the eddaic poems are also great works of art – and one would not like to have to judge the relative merits of any of this literature – but these are not as close to our hearts as the sagas of Icelanders are: their settings are foreign and their characters alien. We still have the physical background of the *Íslendinga sögur* before our eyes, landscape and place-names are still there. We can even trace our ancestry to the great men of valour and wisdom, though seldom to the scoundrels, who people the sagas.

Sagas of Icelanders have given rise to an enormous body of critical literature but many problems remain unresolved. There are indeed extraordinary difficulties in the way of coming to critical grips with them. We cannot identify the author of a single saga, despite more-or-less plausible attributions to named men proposed by scholars in modern times. Neither do we know for sure when and where sagas were written, although again various conjectures have been offered, both of a particular and a general kind. We do not know what matter in them comes from oral tradition and what from the imagination of the authors. And although we assume the existence of oral traditions, we do not know what they were like: detailed or bare, immutable or variable in

content, factual or fictitious, fixed or free in form? But it is in fact natural to think that events and reactions to events were confused and exaggerated in various ways in the course of long oral transmission.

Saga-authors will remain nameless for ever but, all the same, close reading and careful study enable us to learn a good deal about these invisible men who created such masterpieces, about their ideas and attitudes to life. And although the academic problems I have just mentioned will not soon be solved, we can at least observe the artistic methods employed by the authors to achieve their marvellous results. It is true that these methods differ from one saga to another, and that some of the narrative techniques of the sagas of Icelanders are also found in other kinds of sagas, particularly in those kings' sagas that are set in the far past.

Saga origins. Fact and fiction

We do not know what Icelanders of earlier centuries thought about the origins of *Íslendinga sögur*, but we may be confident that most people accepted them as valid history – as they have continued to do to our own time. The doubts occasionally expressed by earlier scholars about the historicity of some sagas – *Króka-Refs saga*, for example, and even *Njáls saga* – did not have much impact.

In the nineteenth century the theory was launched – and lasted long in favour – that these sagas were created and fully formed as oral narratives, which were subsequently recorded unaltered just as they were told. The sagas did not have authors in our customary sense of the word. They were the stock of oral story-tellers who learnt by rote and, when the time came, dictated them to scribes. There were two circumstances – or two elements of wishful thinking – which were especially responsible for eliciting this theory. If the sagas really represent archaic tradition and fixed oral transmission, they at once become that much more reliable as historical sources. They are moreover anonymous – and does not that imply that they came into being "on the lips of the people"?

The Norwegian Rudolf Keyser (1803–64) was among the first to formulate this theory in his discussion of kings' sagas, and it was fully developed by Andreas Heusler in *Die Anfänge der isländischen Saga*, published in 1914. Heusler called it the *Freiprosalehre*, "free-prose theory" – in Icelandic it has been called *sagnfestukenning* ("theory of fixed tradition"), which makes more transparent sense than the German

or its English gloss. An influential supporter of the theory was the Norwegian folklorist, Knut Liestøl (1881–1952), as was also to a great extent Finnur Jónsson (1858–1934), professor in Copenhagen and a prolific scholar. But none of these went so far as to deny that scribes and authors played some part in shaping the sagas, especially the longer ones.

Views different from those of the free-prose theorists are now in favour, and they too have a respectable history. Konrad Maurer was a pioneer in the field with his monograph on *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, published in 1871, and he was followed by Björn Magnússon Ólsen (1850–1919), the first professor of Icelandic Studies in the University of Iceland, founded in 1911. Björn published a number of articles and in the years 1914–17 gave some important lectures on saga literature in the University, not all of which have yet been printed. According to him, sagas of Icelanders were composed by creative writers on the basis of all sorts of material: old poetry, oral traditions, written sources, literary models, even contemporary events which the authors transmuted to the credit or discredit of saga-age men and women. In these respects, sagas of Icelanders become comparable with those kings' sagas which are set in a distant past and which were also being composed at the same time as the first *Íslendinga sögur*.

Ideas of a long fixed oral tradition are naturally linked to notions of the value of sagas as sources about the past, their historicity. It is hard to make definitive pronouncements on the nature and development of Icelandic oral traditions. Earlier it was assumed that oral traditions from the saga age had slowly decreased and died out as time passed and as the stories worth recording had been given their written saga form. But now it is clear that oral traditions need not necessarily decline or become more scanty with the passing of time. On the contrary, it is just as likely that stories expand and thrive and become folk-tales which can live for a very long time. This is especially the case with so-called supernatural events. In the matter of the actual literal truth of traditions, however, the case is just the opposite, for this must inevitably decrease in the course of time. No one nowadays would expect to find much history in those *Íslendinga sögur* that were written in the later stages of the genre's evolution. But sagas written in the early stages have customarily been regarded as reliable historical sources, almost to the present day. It is in fact evident that they were written as history – according to the standards of the time – and when Sturla Þórðarson lifts material from them in his *Landnámabók*, he is simply taking them at

their face value. Now historians have put them aside and for the most part ignore them as historical sources. For Icelandic history that rejection means a vacuum for the tenth and eleventh century. We can believe that this is going too far in a nihilistic direction, and the real source-value of this colourful literature is a problem still to be grappled with.

Rather than count sagas of Icelanders as sources for the saga age, c. 930–1030, some scholars have tended more and more to regard them as a reflection of the contemporary world of the authors. Others again have argued that sagas are simply a legitimate offshoot of the literary culture of medieval Europe, and even that they were written to instil Christian ideas and moral values. Finally, there are literary gentlemen who, while paying some attention to the cultural currents of the age in which the sagas were written, are fundamentally only prepared to consider them purely as works of literary art and artifice. Any of these vantage points may give rewarding glimpses into the nature of sagas, but the vision will certainly be warped that takes a narrow view from only one of them – no less distorted than that of the myopic believer in sagas as historical documents. The authors of the sagas did not set about their task as if they were independent moralists or artists. They were always hobbled by the purpose of the story they were telling and by sources that were at the disposal of many people besides themselves: oral reports of what was traditionally told, verses and anecdotes, complete poems, earlier writings. The author was not totally free – and neither is the critic. The historical element in sagas is both a weakness and a strength. The story is sometimes weighed down by dry information, genealogies, people and places are introduced in bewildering number and detail. The main thread may be interrupted by loosely linked digressions. Stanzas are introduced in a clumsy way and disharmony between prose and verse results. But the historical element – whether real or operating as a control over the imagination – is also a compelling source of narrative strength. However much may be well and wisely said about the art of sagas, it can never compensate the reader for the loss incurred by stripping from them their panoply of truth. It has been said that biblical criticism produced a generation of agnostics and atheists, and one may perhaps say something similar about modern saga criticism. Rude feet have trodden on hallowed ground, the radiance has been dimmed, innocence lost. Readers will prefer to accept "what proves to be more true" – as Ari put it long ago.

Subject-matter and narrative method. Characterisation

The term "family saga" (or its equivalent in a variety of languages) has often been used outside Iceland to describe the *Íslendinga sögur*. It is not always appropriate and distinguishes them less than adequately from sagas of other kinds: "contemporary" sagas and kings' sagas are as much "family sagas" as the sagas of Icelanders are. Now it is the fashion almost everywhere to follow the Icelandic practice, as is done here, and to use *Íslendinga sögur* or sagas of Icelanders as the general designation of the genre.

Some sagas are, it is true, a chronicle of several generations – *Vatnsdæla saga*, for instance, or even *Egils saga*. But in the latter case, although much is told of Egill's forebears and kinsmen, and Þorsteinn, his son, appears on the scene at the end, it is most natural to regard the saga primarily as Egill's life-story. Other sagas, *Hallfreðar saga, Gunnlaugs saga, Grettis saga*, for example, are also justly termed biographies rather than "family sagas". In other sagas again – *Njáls saga* is an outstanding instance – the chief parts are divided among a host of characters, and they can be thought of neither as the saga of a family nor as the saga of an individual, even though it is the links between kindred people and events that bind the narrative together.

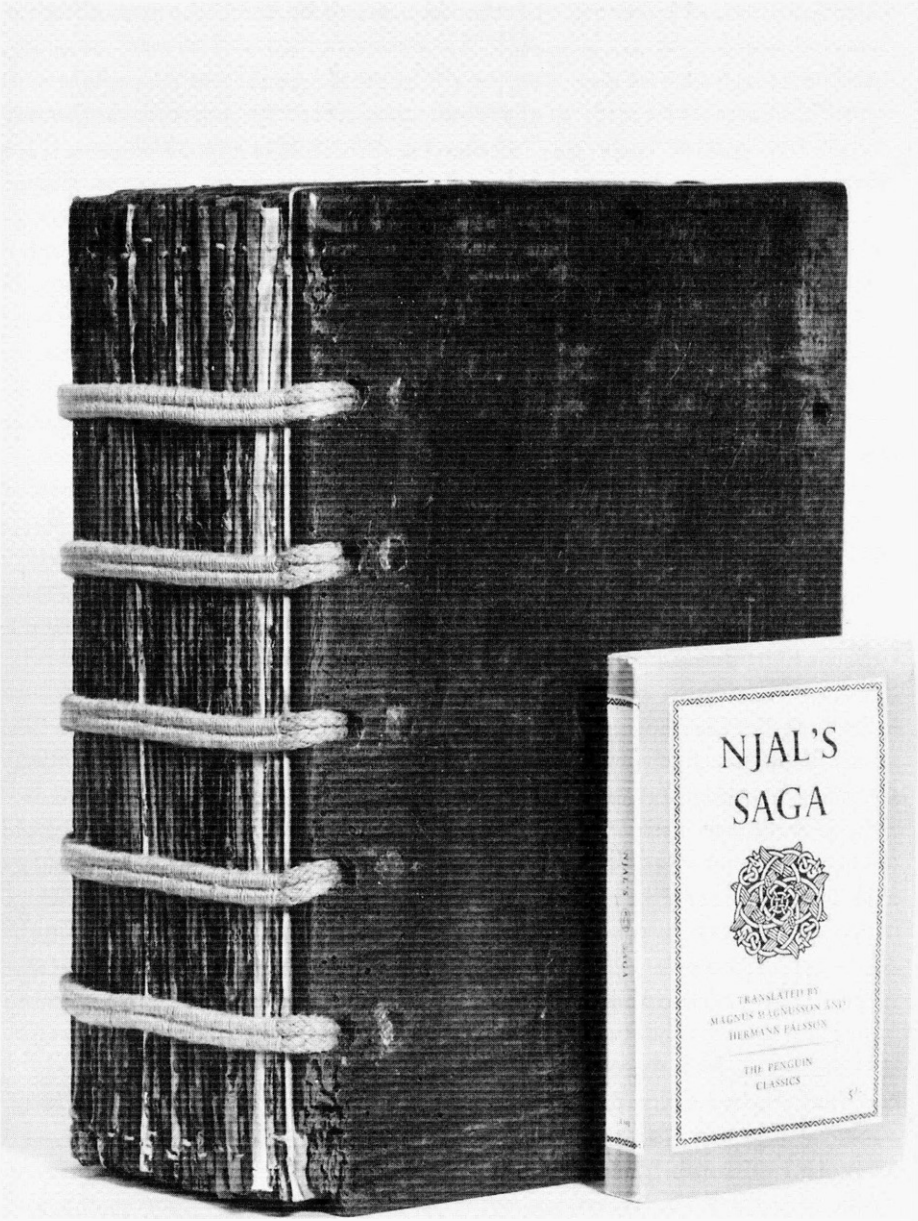
Sagas are terse in style and full of meat: incidents follow in swift succession, many characters appear on the scene. Sometimes it is hard to know precisely what is going on. But the style never becomes telegraphic, and the best sagas have a steady, weighty flow, with an occasional slackening among shallows to relieve the concentration.

People often remark on the "objectivity" of sagas. When characters are introduced, the author often spends a few words on a description, both of appearance and temperament. After that they are allowed to reveal themselves by their words and deeds – just like people in real life. We are almost never told what a saga-character thought. Sagas are like stage-plays but the author is behind the scene, exercising remote control over his characters. We learn only what can be seen or heard, either immediately or from eye- and ear-witnesses. The author does not intrude his own judgments of people's behaviour: at most he says, "This deed was ill spoken of," or something similar. Because of this sagas make a very realistic impression, even when the incidents described are far from plausible. But if the exaggeration is not carried too far, a fascinating tension is created between the surface realism of the presentation and the imaginative power shaping the events.

This objectivity is doubtless rooted in the origins of the sagas themselves: people were at first putting together oral reports about real men and women and about events that had recently happened. In consequence everything had to be seen through the eyes of witnesses, heard through the ears of people present at the scene. This appears obvious where reports of contemporary events are at issue, but the method was transferred and applied to the reporting of past events as well. And gradually the method becomes so engrained that the way of telling a story is the same whether a traditional oral report actually lies behind the account or not.

The characters introduced in most European literature of the early middle ages are cast in simple moulds. They represent this or that aspect of human nature, pasteboard figures set up to complement or contrast with each other, and often intended to convey a religious or moral lesson. Incidental characters and "extras" who appear with

The picture shows Möðruvallabók (AM 132 fol.) and gives some idea of the appearance of a medieval vellum codex. Such a volume was made up of quires, usually of four folded leaves, one placed inside the next, making sixteen pages in all. The quires were sewn together on tapes or cords, like the gatherings of a modern book, as can be seen in the photograph. The end-boards are of wood, which was the commonest form of binding. — Möðruvallabók is thought to have been written c. 1350. It now contains 200 folios, each c. 34 × 24 cm, eleven of which were written in the seventeenth century to make good earlier losses. There are eleven Íslendinga sögur *in the volume, arranged topographically:* Njáls saga *first and then, moving clockwise round the country,* Egils saga, Finnboga saga, Bandamanna saga, Kormáks saga, Víga-Glúms saga, Droplaugarsona saga — *but the last four break the order:* Ölkofra þáttr, Hallfreðar saga, Laxdæla saga, Fóstbræðra saga. — *Some of these texts are known complete only in Möðruvallabók. — At the end of* Njáls saga *there is a note which says: "Have* Gauks saga Trandilssonar *written here. I am told Þorgrímr owns it." The rest of that quire was then originally left blank, though it has been scribbled on since. But* Gauks saga *was never included in the vellum and has been lost for ever. — The first known owner of the book was Magnús Björnsson, Lawman, of Munkaþverá (c. 1595–1662). He wrote his name in it while at Möðruvellir in Eyjafjörður on the feast of the Invention of the Cross (3 May) in 1628. His son gave the book to the Danish scholar, Thomas Bartholin, in 1684, and after Bartholin's death Árni Magnússon acquired it in 1690. The codex came back to Iceland on 16 July 1974. — Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.*


NJAL'S
SAGA
TRANSLATED BY
MAGNUS MAGNUSSON AND
HERMANN PÁLSSON
THE PENGUIN
CLASSICS
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limited functions in sagas of Icelanders are often not dissimilar. But the chief characters in the best sagas are always composed of many strands, and although one quality may be dominant, others exist alongside it to give balance and depth to the characterisation: as a result the *persona* often becomes a "problem" character who whets our curiosity. This feature may also be explained in terms of saga-origins. Human beings are complex and their words and actions are sometimes hard to understand, sometimes even contradictory, not least when they are in a disturbed state or impelled by circumstances beyond their control. In telling how people behaved, it is usually the elements that make a striking story that are dwelt on – elements of pathos and tragedy or, in contrast, of absurdity and comedy. So the people in our written sagas become – as it were, of their own volition – as complicated and as incomprehensible as they were or might be in real life.

Two examples – there are many more – may be taken to illustrate this. For twenty years Víga-Glúmr was the greatest chieftain in Eyjafjörður, and for twenty years after that he had his equals but was surpassed by none. Under his leadership there is peace and equilibrium in the district, and he can arrange marriages for kinsmen and antagonists alike. But the sky is not all unclouded. He achieved his position by killing Sigmundr, the husband of a kinswoman of his – striking him down in front of her and after she had spoken conciliatory words to him and done him a service. Glúmr tries to lay the blame for a killing likely to breed vengeance at the door of an inoffensive youth, and then swears an ambiguous oath in an attempt to clear himself of the charge. And when his deeds have finally come home to roost and he is driven out of his inheritance, then – old and blind as he is – he tries to trick his two chief opponents into visiting him, letting it be known that he wants to be reconciled to them – "and I shall not invite them simply to feed them." When they refuse the invitation, he is disappointed – "I had thought that if I went to meet them, I wouldn't have failed to get one of them" – he had a dagger drawn under his cloak.

The central figure in *Eyrbyggja saga* is Snorri the Chieftain. He is no sort of fighting man but takes advantage of superior numbers and superior cunning in dealing with enemies. He seizes an opportunity to attack Arnkell the Chieftain when the latter is alone, unprepared and heavily outnumbered. Every one of Snorri's undertakings edge him towards success until finally he is in a dominant position on Snæfellsnes and can even exert influence – peaceful influence – in other neighbourhoods. But the sympathies of the author, and of many of his readers,

tend to be more engaged by the luminous though less successful personalities in the story, by Arnkell and by the swashbuckling poet and lover, Björn Breiðvíkingakappi. Or so it seems, for there are also critics who have maintained that Snorri genuinely represents the author's ideal of a wise and successful leader who deservedly overcomes all his rivals.

Thus, verdicts on the complex characters in sagas vary in the same way as opinions about people in real life. When it was the custom to read sagas aloud as evening pastime on Icelandic farms, the people who sat with their handwork and listened used to talk about the characters of the story, and argue about them, just as if they were living in the next valley.

An admirable feature in some sagas, and one that is generally rare in early literature, is that a character is not portrayed as static but as under development. The author of *Hrafnkels saga* is well aware of the lesson adversity taught Hrafnkell and conveys it clearly in his story. Hreiðarr "the foolish" comes from the isolated depths of the Icelandic countryside and is awkward and ridiculous: but out in the world and in the company of kings, he becomes a man among men. His adventures teach him nevertheless that there are two sides to things, and in the end his good sense directs him homeward again. In the so-called *Legendary Saga of St Óláfr* (cf. p. 159), the hero is a holy paragon from youth upward. But Snorri looked more dispassionately at what was known of Óláfr's early years and saw that he had not started that way. In his saga of St Óláfr the king's noble qualities develop as he progresses from a Viking leader who makes a successful bid for the throne of Norway to the king who is ready to win a martyr's crown and fall in battle at Stiklestad (cf. p. 169). A downward path is trodden by Óspakr in *Bandamanna saga*. He is a capable man and not a bad sort while he is in charge of Oddr Ófeigsson's property and chieftaincy, but when their relations turn sour – with some fault on both sides – he becomes a malevolent scoundrel.

Nowadays we expect to find that characters portrayed in novels and plays undergo some alteration as the story unfolds, but in classical and medieval literature as a whole authors seldom saw the need for such change. Good examples of this kind of mutation of personality might be found in some of the Roman emperors who began as mild and benevolent rulers and turned into crazy tyrants under the poisonous influence of power. But Roman historians seem not to have viewed them in this way. As far as they were concerned, a man's inner being remained the same from start to finish.

Saints' lives, on the other hand, do offer many examples of people who change from base and wicked to noble and good, but it is seldom the result of gradual development, rather of sudden conversion from heathen error to Christian truth – with St Paul as the illustrious prototype. But we cannot rule out the possibility of external influence on the portrayal of saga-characters who evolve in the course of the story. That influence might stem partly from general Christian views of human personality, and partly from specific instances of growth and change to be found in hagiographic literature.

Language and style. Dialogue

The language of the *Íslendinga sögur* is as much akin to natural Icelandic speech as it is different from the imported learned style. One can easily convince oneself of this by comparing a chapter of *Njáls saga*, for instance, with any well-told tale recorded directly from a story-teller of today. Despite the seven centuries between them, the differences are remarkably small. Even so, doubt has been cast on the idea that saga style has direct genetic relation to Icelandic speech. It has been pointed out that early texts, *Sverris saga* and *Heiðarvíga saga* for example, have less of a colloquial stamp than those of later date, like *Laxdæla saga* and *Njáls saga*. It has also been argued that we must not pay too much attention to comparison with modern Icelandic speech-habits, because it is precisely from sagas that Icelanders have learnt how to tell stories – and the similarities reflect literary influence on speech rather than the reverse. Of course, there must be some element of truth in this claim, but it is a wild exaggeration to suggest that ordinary Icelandic speech is in some way derived from a literary saga-language. What we may safely postulate is some degree of mutual influence.

Development from a form of language with a pronounced literary flavour to one with colloquial ease and vigour can be explained in various ways. The first sagas written in Icelandic were saints' lives translated or adapted from Latin. Although their diction appears to be a natural Icelandic, it is affected in many ways by Latin – the "book language", as it was called. Sometimes it is difficult or impossible to decide whether a given feature of saga-style is authentically native or the result of imitation of Latin. What are we to say about starting a sentence with a verb, for example? It is common enough in sagas but is now unknown in unaffected Icelandic speech. Is this a Latinism or have the Icelanders changed their habits?

Remembering this foreign element in the first literary language, we need not be surprised that the evolution was in the direction of a more purely native mode of expression. Since saga-authors were interested in promoting a realistic illusion, it was only natural that they should make their narratives more and more like tales that were told, not written or read: they wanted to make them sound like traditional oral accounts, whether they had any background in such transmission from the past or not. Finally it may be noted that, while saga-style was being perfected in the course of the thirteenth century, authors were also busily writing "contemporary" sagas: most of these were firmly based on word-of-mouth reports and their transfer to written record must have given the writers a constant touchstone – authentic native anecdote and story rang in their ears.

A saga-author does not know what his characters are thinking, and he is not allowed to guess at their disposition or mood. But he hears their words, and these make manifest their thoughts and opinions. Sagas usually contain much direct speech and dialogue. These both reveal and illuminate the mental world of the personae and fill out the narrative, carry it forward and give it life.

Direct speech in the usage of saga-authors can be seen to have a variety of characteristics and a definite development. In some of the oldest sagas, like *Guðmundar saga dýra,* there is very little direct speech. In other old sagas people make what amounts to set speeches, long or short, in a mode that may equally well be of foreign as of native origin. A protagonist utters at a fateful moment – at an assembly or when a battle is to be fought. Naturally, men did make speeches on just such occasions – as Þorgeirr the Lawspeaker did at the time of the Conversion (p. 147). We need not doubt that King Sverrir was a brilliant orator, but at the same time we can observe that the great speeches he makes in his saga have models and parallels in the works of the classical historians of Greece and Rome. Probably a literary link was forged between these examples of Icelandic and classical rhetoric by medieval writings with which the Icelanders were certainly familiar – typified by *Trójumanna saga*, based on Dares Phrygius and other authors, and *Rómverja saga*, based on Sallust and Lucan, where short speeches and formal orations are frequently allotted to the principal characters.

Gradually speeches in sagas become shorter and colloquial exchange and authentic conversation become commoner. This art of dialogue becomes supremely effective in the polished *Íslendinga sögur* of the later thirteenth century. In them dialogue serves to reveal what is happening

both on the surface and deep down in the being of the speakers. The spoken exchanges turn the story into a stage-play; the words enable us to penetrate to the heart of the people involved. When Hrafnkell is about to kill Einarr Þorbjarnarson, he puts his thoughts into words – and thereby throws light both on his own and on Einarr's personality: "I would have forgiven you one such offence if I had not sworn so great an oath. But you have owned up to it bravely." If we come to know Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir or Skarpheðinn Njálsson, it is largely because of what they say. It is no accident that *Laxdæla saga* and *Njáls saga* have such a large percentage of direct speech.

Skilful dialogue could also have had foreign models. There is no need to look far afield, for saints' lives usually contain many exchanges between their principal actors. Consider the texts in AM 645 4to, from the early part of the thirteenth century (pp. 137–8 above.). They have a good deal of direct speech, cut-and-thrust dialogue which *mutatis mutandis* is quite comparable to the dialogue we find in sagas of Icelanders. But another influential factor in the creation of the dialogue style of the *Íslendinga sögur* must have been the "contemporary" sagas, based as they were on reports of actual events and authentic speech.

As soon as something has happened, people fashion it into an anecdote or report, often with a memorable remark or speech at the centre of it. Then, with each re-telling, that utterance is improved, made still more forceful or mordant: "I can hear the archbishop's command"; "I don't like the look of that frowner"; "I am for Iceland"; "Hafliði whole would cost a lot" – crisp rejoinders like these and a host of others recorded in "contemporary" sagas are in no way different from laconic remarks uttered in sagas of Icelanders. And although the latter must for the most part have been invented by the authors, some were doubtless inherited from oral tradition: it is not at all inconceivable that some of them represent words actually spoken by a saga-hero centuries before they were shaped as written letters: "Vitazgjafi never failed yet"; "That was payment for the grey lamb"; "It will always be thawing if this is a thaw".

Verse in sagas

Many *Íslendinga sögur* contain solitary verses, verse sequences, even whole poems. It is of vital importance for many kinds of saga research to know whether such verse is old or new, whether the attribution is right or wrong. If the verse is old, it supports the authenticity of the account

and shows the narrative is based – ultimately at least – on traditions transmitted orally – explanatory anecdote must normally have accompanied the verse from the start. Even if we are chiefly interested in the literary art of a saga or its value as a source of information about the author's contemporary background, the origin of the verse remains a matter of crucial importance.

It has long been realised that in sagas written late in the development of the genre the ascription of stanzas to named poets cannot be taken seriously. A conclusion is straightforward if the verse shows linguistic characteristics that reflect changes that took place after the period in which the saga is set. Even in sagas that are counted among the earliest we find some stanzas of dubious authenticity. In recent years serious doubt has been cast on the attribution of the verse in a saga as old as *Kormáks saga* and even in *Heiðarvíga saga*, one of the most archaic sagas we have. A very plausible case has been made for regarding the stanzas of *Gísla saga* as twelfth-century composition, made a long time before the saga was put into written shape and intended as an accompaniment to an oral story about Gísli's life and death.

It is extremely difficult to find reliable criteria by which to judge the date of scaldic verse in sagas: is it from the time of the actual events, from the time when the saga was written, or from some date between the two (which then gives us two or three centuries to play with)? Ancient metres remained long in vogue, the distinctive poetic diction changed but little, pagan imagery and reference lived on into the Christian period even though markedly pagan allusions were avoided in the more "official" poetry made in the first generation or two after the Conversion. Ancient word-forms prove little one way or another because generation after generation of poets borrowed from their predecessors, partly to meet the strict demands of the *dróttkvætt* metre. If young word-forms appear in a stanza and are evidently there for prosodic reasons, then the verse as preserved must itself be young. On the other hand, we must assume that a stanza transmitted orally over a long period is likely to undergo some alteration – memory and tongue make their slips – so the core of a verse may be old even though it appears in updated language.

The stanzas in *Gísla saga* and in some other *Íslendinga sögur* show that story-tellers readily inserted verse into the tales they were offering. Authors of written sagas accepted such verse as authentic or, rather, as an important, even integral, part of the traditional material they collected and shaped as literature. It is also conceivable that verse was

made for inclusion in sagas as they were being written. Some stanzas in *Njáls saga* and *Grettis saga* certainly originated in that way. Authors come to insert verse in deference to literary fashion, following older models. But did the authors of early sagas also feel free to make stanzas to fit into their stories? Reasons can be found for answering both "Yes" and "No" to this question.

As I said earlier, sagas of Icelanders can be regarded as the offspring of kings' sagas. In the latter verse was used as an important source. Verse citation then became a literary convention which it was natural to keep in *Íslendinga sögur*. But some distinction can be made between the use and disposition of verse in the two kinds of sagas. In kings' sagas stanzas are quoted as straight source-material, as an addition to the prose narrative: "Kormákr Ögmundarson mentions that in the *drápa* on Sigurðr"; "And Hallfreðr also tells of these events". In *Íslendinga sögur*, on the other hand, stanzas are not normally extraneous to the narrative but are made part of it, put into the mouth of the actor on stage at the moment: "Then Egill spoke a verse . . . and again he said in verse . . ." Even so, it is often quite unlikely, even inconceivable, that the stanzas quoted were actually made in the purported circumstances. Verse used to substantiate the narrative is only cited when it comes from poems by named poets, and these are then referred to with some identifying detail: "Þorgeirr was fifteen winters old when this killing took place, as Þormóðr said in Þorgeirr's memorial lay"; "About all these events . . . Þormóðr Trefilsson made this stanza in *Hrafnsmál*". These are exceptional instances and may suggest that the stanzas in question originated in a different convention from most of those quoted in *Íslendinga sögur*. As a rule, the immediacy of the verse and its close relationship to the narrative suggest that in some way both verse and prose were generated together, whether that was in an oral stage or when the saga was written.

Discrepancies between verse and prose or the fact that stanzas include matter not utilised in the story have been taken to prove that the stanzas antedate the saga. Bjarni Einarsson has considered this problem in relation to *Kormáks saga*. He explains both poetry and prose as the work of one man, arguing that the "discrepancies" disappear as soon as one reads the stanzas as part of the whole and not as extrinsic to the saga narrative.

There are however factors which suggest that many stanzas are antique and their ascription genuine. They are often attributed to characters who are known as poets in other sources – kings' sagas,

Snorri's *Edda, Skáldatal.* In his *Edda* Snorri sometimes cites verse which is also quoted in sagas – verse by Egill Skallagrímsson for example – and it is hard to reject his testimony. Sometimes too the archaic language of a stanza interlocks so intimately with the rhyme or alliteration of the metrical form that the antiquity of the composition seems assured.

When were the sagas written?

A critic may turn to sagas in search of information about the history of the tenth and eleventh century, or for evidence of the ideas and values of the writers' own time, or he may be primarily interested in them as works of literary art freely created by their authors. Whatever his attitude, it is clearly of the utmost importance for him to discover when they were written – and that has proved a hard puzzle to solve. Try as we will, our attempts are usually fumbling: the authors are anonymous while the manuscripts are almost all much later than the original works and in any case difficult enough to date or locate with great precision. We deal in conjectures and probabilities, backed by evidence that ranges from the shaky to the strong.

There is much to suggest that the first *Íslendinga sögur* were written about 1200 or at the outset of the thirteenth century. It is usually assumed that the last were written about the middle of the fourteenth century, so that the genre as a whole spans about a century and a half. In fact, little serious work has been done on dating the youngest sagas and it may be that in future their chronology will be revised and the whole period extended. There is also some doubt as to which sagas among later productions should be counted as *Íslendinga sögur*: they are texts which have been neglected and need further study.

In 1958 Einar Ól. Sveinsson published a monograph called *Dating the Icelandic Sagas*; a slightly amplified version of it appeared in Icelandic (*Ritunartími Íslendingasagna*) in 1965. In it he discusses various methods of investigating a saga's date of origin. In a survey like ours we need only consider those points that are of prime importance and have general application.

1. The dating of manuscripts. On the whole it is impossible to date manuscripts of Icelandic sagas with perfect accuracy, and estimates can very often have margins of error of several decades. Many sagas are only preserved in manuscripts which must be much younger than the original versions. However, manuscripts can sometimes give important indications as to the date of the composition of the sagas. The oldest

fragment of *Egils saga*, AM 162 A ϑ fol., is considered to be from the middle of the thirteenth century, but it is not the original version which, accordingly, must have been somewhat older. *Njáls saga* is extant in five manuscripts or fragments which are all dated to the beginning of the fourteenth century; this is an important point, because as there are so many manuscripts they could hardly all be dated very incorrectly, and thus the original saga cannot be younger than from the end of the thirteenth century. *Finnboga saga* is extant in Möðruvallabók, the large codex containing many Icelandic sagas, which is dated to around 1350. The saga is thus at least as old as this even though it is full of exaggeration and has other rather young features.

2. Literary relations. *Íslendinga sögur* make a rather special genre, not closely related to other literary kinds. Sometimes it is possible to detect direct influence from other works (e.g. kings' sagas) which can be dated with some precision. Not every saga can be profitably compared with works outside the genre, but relations can be established within the corpus of *Íslendinga sögur*: then some sagas can be dated with relative confidence and these provide fixed points on the time-scale. This method of dating sagas is the most reliable at our disposal as long as it is used with caution and is not built on superficial similarities.

3. Artistry. Sagas were written over a long period and their modes of composition naturally underwent substantial change in that time. I discussed earlier the development of direct speech in sagas and surveyed their literary evolution (pp. 213–214). The chief period of change seems to have been the second half of the thirteenth century. By then the tenth- and eleventh-century settings of the sagas had grown remoter, the quantity of reliable traditional material was diminished, and its lack was made good by the creative fantasy of the authors.

Of course, the changes were not swift or radical. Links with ancient reality were not suddenly broken, and the evolution of saga-art is not a straight unbroken line. Primitive features may be found in works of late date; some authors are more conservative than others in their narrative methods and general style. Some sagas which are thought to be late compositions and whose stories are quite implausible nevertheless have all the external features of the early sagas. There are other very late sagas which do contain ancient reminiscences – though these are usually explained away by postulating the existence of old lost sagas which have been revised to give them their extant shape.

In general, however, we can perceive gradual changes taking place in the substance and style of sagas. Lifelike matter and presentation are a

sign of age: fantastic and bombastic elements become more prominent as time goes by. The experienced reader comes to have an awareness of such changes and his notion of a saga's age will depend on his response to them. Some specific features and motifs are of course demonstrably young.

The greatest changes were caused by the influence of the imported "sagas of chivalry" (*riddara sögur*), first translated in Norway, and the indigenous "sagas of ancient times" (*fornaldarsögur*) that came in their wake. *Riddara sögur* were translated at the instigation of King Hákon the Old, the first king to gain sovereignty over Iceland, so it is not purely accidental that the influence of such sagas on *Íslendinga sögur* more or less coincides with the end of the Icelandic commonwealth. We cannot say exactly when they first made an impact but various pointers make approximately the second quarter of the thirteenth century the likely period. Courtly ideals made strong headway in Norway during King Hákon's reign from 1217, when he came to the throne as a lad of thirteen, till his death in 1263. He and his advisers made a conscious effort to civilise Norwegian culture and court-life by adopting European modes. One step in this policy was to commission translations of French *chansons de geste* and romances. King Hákon is said to have had *Tristrams saga* translated by Brother Robert in 1226, and this is generally reckoned to be the oldest of the Norwegian "sagas of chivalry". Five such sagas are expressly said to have been made at King Hákon's instigation but scholars are inclined to think that this did not amount to the sum of his patronage. He also inspired the composition of *Konungs skuggsjá* (King's Mirror), a didactic work which is entirely in the same courtly tone. Judging by works preserved in *Sturlunga saga*, it was from about 1240 onwards that notions of knightly conduct made a serious impression in Iceland. As a representative of the new attitudes Þórðr kakali Sighvatsson is a key figure. He returned to Iceland in 1242 with a mind brimfull of chivalrous ideals.

In the light of all this we can see that influence from translated *riddara sögur* could conceivably have been exerted as early as c. 1230, but it more probably belongs to a slightly later period, about 1250 and later. It seems safe to assume that *Íslendinga sögur* that appear deeply influenced by *riddara sögur* or *fornaldarsögur* were not composed until after the middle of the thirteenth century.

Space does not permit a full discussion of the complex strands of these literary influences, but we may examine some typical features.

In sagas affected by the new fashions we find that the appearance of

heroes is described with more pomp and circumstance than previously. Kjartan Óláfsson "was the handsomest of all men ever born in Iceland. He had well-marked features and a pleasing countenance, the finest eyes of any man, and fair colouring. He had an abundance of hair, silky bright and falling in curls . . ." Dress matches physical beauty. Bolli Bollason sat "on a gilded saddle . . . [he was] in a tunic of fine red cloth and had a gold bracelet on his arm, a band of gold lace tied round his head." When Kári first met the sons of Njáll, he was wearing "a silk coat and a gilded helmet; his hair was abundant and fine; this man had a gold-inlaid spear in his hand." Skill in the use of weapons and athletic prowess also make notable advances. As we can tell from his saga, Egill Skallagrímsson was undeniably a good man to have on your side if it came to battle and manslaughter, but there was nothing very chivalrous about his methods – or indeed about his personality altogether. It is rather different when we are introduced to Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi in *Njáls saga*: "He was a man of great stature and strong, best skilled in arms of all men. He could strike equally well with either hand, and shoot with either too if he chose, and using a sword he smote so swiftly that it looked as though three were in the air at once. He was the best shot with a bow of any man and he always hit whatever he aimed at. Wearing all his war-gear he could jump more than his own height and he could jump no less far backwards than forwards. He swam like a seal and there was not a sport in which anyone need try to compete with him."

Emotions are constantly concealed or played down in the earlier sagas, but now authors permit their characters – especially the women – to reveal their feelings openly at moments of stress. The older stories spend few words on love, and love's sorrow is suffered in silence, but now Icelandic women give vent to grief and feelings of desolation in the manner of grand ladies in the romances. Helga the Fair could never forget Gunnlaugr even after his death and her second marriage: "It was Helga's chief pleasure to spread out the cloak Gunnlaugr had given her

Manuscripts of Íslendinga sögur *are not usually finished with much illumination, less so than law-books and religious works. The picture here is from Kálfalækjarbók (AM 133 fol.), a manuscript of* Njáls saga *written c. 1300. Ninety-five leaves remain, but the whole book is in poor condition. In the bow of the initial H (in minuscule form) at the start of chapter 100 we see a mounted man-at-arms. – Photo: Arne Mann Nielsen.*

and to gaze long upon it." On her deathbed she asked for her lover's gift to be brought to her: "And when the cloak came to her, she sat up and spread the cloak out before her and gazed at it for a time, and then she sank back into her husband's arms, and was dead."

It is more difficult to find concrete evidence of the influence of written *fornaldarsögur*. The problem is twofold. On the one hand, they are much closer in setting and substance to sagas of Icelanders than *riddara sögur* are; and on the other, these stories, or stories resembling them, were in oral circulation in the period when the older *Íslendinga sögur* were written. Some motifs that especially belong to *fornaldarsögur* – single combat with a berserk, for example – are thought to have been first introduced in sagas of Icelanders under the influence of such sagas in an oral stage. Their literary influence is most evident when we find motifs in *Íslendinga sögur* that are otherwise more-or-less exclusive to the written *fornaldarsögur*; or when *fornaldarsaga* elements appear in demonstrably young *Íslendinga sögur*. Among such motifs are fights with dragons and other monsters, breaking into burial mounds, and struggles with undead grave-dwellers. Occasionally it is possible to demonstrate with some plausibility that a specific *fornaldarsaga* passage is the immediate source of a description in one of the sagas of Icelanders, and that of course can provide an important clue to the date of origin of the latter.

The characteristic features of saga-writing and its evolution that have been described here should, if possible, not be confused with those other narrative elements whose presence or absence is rather to be associated with the general advance – or decline – of saga-art. Romantic and fantastic tendencies can co-exist with saga-narrative that is superbly effective and restrained – as *Njáls saga* shows best of all. But it is only with the greatest caution that we should give a verdict on the age of a saga based on some generalised opinion of the level of its artistry. The primitive and the decadent are not always easy to tell apart: and what is archaic to some scholars is bright novelty to others. It is no less important to remember that some authors are more adroit than others – and that was as true in the middle ages as it is today. Artistic advance is not a smooth and straight progression – as one soon sees if one tries to put modern novels into chronological order on the basis of their literary merit.

When we look at the whole range of sagas, we can certainly observe a steady change, and it is perfectly legitimate to attempt to give each individual work its rightful place. The artistry of a saga may be taken into consideration but only as a hint – no more – of its age. It is true

that scholars have been by no means reluctant to draw chronological conclusions from artistic "merit" – understandably sometimes when other evidence is virtually non-existent.

In his introduction to the volume of *Vestfirðinga sögur* in Íslenzk fornrit VI (1943), Björn K. Þórólfsson talks about "amateurish flaws" in *Gísla saga,* "despite the artistry of the author", and adds: "When faults of such a kind occur in a saga which otherwise shows the author had great talents, it may be considered doubtful whether the writer had read such masterpieces as *Egils saga* and *Laxdæla saga.*"

A good example of the misuse of this method is found in Björn M. Ólsen's comparison of the A and C versions of *Ljósvetninga saga.* He says: "If we compare the versions, there is no concealing the fact that the text of A is in general older and more original than the text of C. For example, the plans of Guðmundr [ríki] and Einarr Konálsson which begin this section are much clearer and better told in A than in C." But when he turns to what follows this part, Björn reverses this entirely: ". . . the narrative here is rather confused in A, smoother and neater in C, but precisely this fact seems to me to show that the narrative is more original in A."

Many *Íslendinga sögur* exist in different recensions, two or more, some complete, some known only as fragments. Often the difference lies in the fact that one text is more elaborately worded than another, although the two show no real discrepancy in the substance of the story. Shorter recensions then generally appear more polished in style and free of many of the encumbrances that hamper the longer versions. There was a time when it was usually thought that the shorter text was closer to the original – an original which had then been spoilt by the needless prolixity of a later reviser. This was in conformity with the view that the older the saga, the better it must be: saga-writing was born perfect, we might say. But the studies of recent years have shown the reverse to be true: longer recensions, almost without exception, are older and more original than shorter ones. The following well-known sagas, for instance, are all preserved in two versions, of which the shorter – and usually the better-preserved of the two – is the younger: *Droplaugarsona saga, Víga-Glúms saga, Gísla saga, Egils saga, Eiríks saga rauða, Bandamanna saga, Fóstbræðra saga.* Sometimes of course, as we had occasion to note earlier, older recensions have disappeared altogether.

Individual sagas

In the past literary historians have generally grouped sagas topographically, and then as far as possible considered each group chronologically. In his survey of the development of saga-writing Sigurður Nordal tried another method, considering first its inception at the monastery at Þingeyrar (as he believed), then its continuation in the west of Iceland, and finally its spread over virtually the whole country. I shall keep more or less to the traditional approach – for various reasons. Nordal's method is certainly attractive but in our present state of knowledge it is impossible to regard it as securely founded. Dating most of the sagas is still conjectural and the way in which saga-writing evolved to become a national pursuit is still a mystery. On the other hand, sagas that tell of events in the same district are often closely related to each other, and within their confines we can move from one saga to the next with some confidence. But obviously saga-composition was not a discrete and isolated activity in each of the major Icelandic regions, so I shall jump with alacrity over boundaries of district and Quarter if need arise.

Heiðarvíga saga is often counted the earliest of all *Íslendinga sögur*, though it is in fact as difficult to date as any other. It seems in various ways to be imperfect and primitive – and, as far as that goes, archaic. The writing is stiff, often downright clumsy, repetitious and ponderous. The sequence of events is very complicated, and people crop up in the story without any word as to their origin or connection with the action. The saga's relations with other sagas also suggest that it belongs to an early period, for wherever we can assume a connection the influence appears to come from *Heiðarvíga saga* and not the other way round. One of the sagas in which borrowing from *Heiðarvíga saga* is patent is *Droplaugarsona saga*, which is also one of the most ancient texts we know. All things considered, it seems possible to conclude that *Heiðarvíga saga* was written in the last decades of the twelfth century and in any case not later than shortly after 1200.

The saga tells of hostilities between the men of Húnaþing and Borgarfjörður at the beginning of the eleventh century. They fought their decisive battle on the moorland separating the two districts, the *heiðr* – whence the saga's name. This is preceded by a series of contributory killings and other events. The story has a kind of grandeur. There are many actors in the drama – though not with as much

characterisation to match for only the principal figures are rounded and consistent. Some of the descriptions have a kind of barbaric magnificence which may remind us of scenes in the most archaic eddaic poems. Let us take a single example. Barði Guðmundarson, the leader of the northerners, killed a Borgfirth man. The dead man was carried home by his brother. When they meet to do battle on the moor, Barði taunts that brother and his father, goading them to seek vengeance. "How is it, Ketill, do you – or the pair of you, you and your father – think you have nothing to avenge on us? I remember that it was but a short time ago that you came home, Ketill, bearing a burden on your back as a present to your father. Now, if you do not remember, here is a witness – this very sword: his brains are not dry on it yet" – and he shakes the sword at him – "Do you think you have nothing to avenge, Ketill? Look here and see that his brains are not dry" – and then he shakes the sword at him again.

The preservation of *Heiðarvíga saga* is an instance of the fateful hazards to which Icelandic manuscripts have been subject. In the seventeenth century it existed in a vellum manuscript which, along with others, came to Sweden. The opening part of the saga – it is not certain how much – was already missing. Árni Magnússon then got part of the vellum on loan in order to have the saga copied in Copenhagen – it covered the middle part of the text – but both the original and the copy were destroyed in the great Copenhagen fire of 1728. Jón Ólafsson from Grunnavík, Árni's amanuensis, then wrote out this part of the saga from memory – this is what we have now and it is certainly better than nothing. It chiefly tells of Víga-Styrr and his deeds of violence, which finally bring just retribution – Jón Ólafsson in fact called this part the "saga of Víga-Styrr". Part of the vellum had stayed in Stockholm – thanks to the ignorance of the man who was supposed to forward it to Árni Magnússon – and there it was re-discovered in the late eighteenth century. One leaf was missing, however, and various conjectures were made as to its contents. But we can stop guessing now because a few years ago the lost leaf – in rather poor shape, it is true – came to light in the National Library in Reykjavík.

Some of the action of *Heiðarvíga saga* belongs to Húnaþing. Two other sagas that also appear to be of some antiquity come from the same region. These are *Kormáks saga* and *Hallfreðar saga*, similar in some ways, very different in others.

The outline of the story in each is so similar that one summary will

serve for both. The hero is a poet and his verse is woven into the narrative. He falls in love with a beautiful girl but is unwilling to marry her. She is subsequently married to someone else, and the hero feuds with her husband. He then goes abroad to seek fame and fortune, wins the friendship of king or regent in Norway, and composes poems in their praise. As soon as he makes land again in Iceland, he meets his old sweetheart in a remote spot and they spend one night together. When they part, she refuses the keepsake he wants to give her. The poet makes insulting verses about her husband, and the two men try to worst each other in various ways. The poet is forced to pay atonement for his improper behaviour and his libellous verse. He goes abroad again and sails restlessly from country to country. Finally he is so badly injured or wounded in the side that death must follow: he dies with a verse on his lips.

Einar Ól. Sveinsson edited these sagas in Íslenzk fornrit VIII in 1939. In his introduction he assumes that the stanzas attributed to Kormákr and Hallfreðr are mostly ancient and rightly ascribed. Since the verse contains in concentrated form much of the narrative matter, this too could be accepted as ancient and substantially accurate. On the basis of these conclusions, he explains the similarities between the two stories as follows. The careers of the two poets had been alike in various ways. Oral reports about the pair had a mutual influence and what was most alike in their stories came to be remembered best. One could also expect minor characteristics to shift between them. But Einar Ólafur also thought it most probable "that the author of *Hallfreðar saga* had some knowledge of *Kormáks saga*, and some of the similarities between the sagas result from that."

Scholars recognised long ago that some of the stanzas attributed to Kormákr bear the marks of late composition. In some we find similes that are paralleled in classical and continental verse of various ages. The most striking parallel that has been adduced is between the *impossibilia* of *Kormáks saga*, stanza 61, and of Horace's *Epode* 16:

Heitask hellur fljóta hvatt sem korn á vatni, enn em ek auðspöng ungri óþekkr, en bjöð sökkva, fœrask fjöll in stóru fræg í djúpan ægi,	The rocks will threaten to float, lightly as corn on water – I am still displeasing to the young land of riches (i.e. woman) – and the world will sink. The great, glorious hills will move into the deep ocean,

auðs áðr jafnfögr tróða
alin verði Steingerði.

before a pole of riches so fair as Steingerðr shall be born. (G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, 1976, p. 49.)

sed iuremus in haec: simul imis saxa renarint
vadis levata, ne redire sit nefas;
neu conversa domum pigeat dare lintea, quando
Padus Matina laverit cacumina,
in mare seu celsus procurrerit Appenninus . . .

But let us swear to this: So soon as rocks shall rise from Ocean's depths and float again, then let it be no sin to return! Nor let us be loth to shift our canvas and trim it for the voyage home, when the Po shall wash the Matinian heights, when the lofty Apennines shall jut out into the sea . . . (C.E. Bennett, *Horace. The Odes and Epodes*. Loeb Classical Library, 1914, revised 1927, pp. 410–11.)

In 1961 Bjarni Einarsson published his book, *Skáldasögur*, and in it came to quite different conclusions about the genesis of *Kormáks saga*. In his view it is a purely literary creation and the stanzas in it, or most of them, were made by the author. He maintains that the love-longing that finds voice in Kormákr's poetry is unknown in Icelandic literature before the advent of the influence of French *amour courtois* in the years round 1200. He thinks therefore that *Tristrams saga*, the most celebrated love-story of the age, was the prime inspiration of *Kormáks saga*. Earlier critics had found frequent discrepancies between verse and prose in the saga and took them as a sign of the author's clumsiness in fitting ancient poetry into his story, but Bjarni considers verse and prose to make one unity. The stanzas are not sources utilised by the author but an inseparable part of the saga's totality. They add matter to what we are told in the prose, but if we read the whole dispassionately, we find the discrepancies between verse and prose dwindle to insignificance.

Einar Ól. Sveinsson returned to the problem in a paper published in 1966 (in English in *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* XVII 1 and in Icelandic in *Skírnir* CXL). He enumerates various antique features of language and metre in the verses attributed to Kormákr, and he gathers in many parallels from all over the world to the similes and to the

impossibilia of stanza 61, mentioned above. He concludes that these figures of speech are very ancient and, so to say, universal. They cannot therefore prove anything about the age of the stanzas ascribed to Kormákr, and there is no reason why they should not be from the tenth century. It is notable that in the Latin and the Icelandic we find the same pair of *impossibilia* – though admittedly they are not exactly the same and Horace's superb irony has nothing to do with love.

I have spent so much space on this controversy because it concerns matters of great significance for any consideration of the origins of *Íslendinga sögur* and because it shows how far we are from achieving definitive results. Arguments exist on either side but final conclusions are hard to draw. I suspect that, in spite of Bjarni Einarsson's benevolent admiration and respect for the author of *Kormáks saga*, many readers will find it difficult to believe that in this case verse and prose can possibly be from the same period and by the same man. This is not the place to delve deeper into the problem, but I may mention a conceivable solution, as a friendly gesture towards the next enthusiast who tackles the subject. The suggestion would be that the suspect stanzas were composed neither by Kormákr nor by the author of the saga, but by a man of some learning who wanted to add spice to oral tales that were current about the tenth-century poet. An analogy could be found in the stanzas of *Gísla saga* and indeed in those of a number of other sagas, as we shall see below. Einar Ól. Sveinsson half opened the door to this solution in his paper on Kormákr and his verses, though he was personally inclined to think that a large part of the poetry was rightly attributed to him.

The correspondences between *Kormáks saga* and *Hallfreðar saga* are so many and so close that a direct literary relationship between them seems given. Most things indicate that *Kormáks saga* is the older of the two. If *Hallfreðar saga* preceded *Heimskringla*, put together c. 1230, *Kormáks saga* can hardly have been written later than c. 1210–20. Most people find the narrative rather primitive and unskilful, and the absence of any patent literary connections with other sagas of Icelanders also suggests an early date of composition.

Hallfreðar saga could have been written quite a long time after *Kormáks saga*, although we tend to bracket the two together because of their similar stories. One certainly has the impression that the art of saga-composition had made notable strides in the interim. The prose pas-

sages in *Kormáks saga* are like ligaments attached in some process of reconstitution of the skeleton provided by the verse, but the stanzas of *Hallfreðar saga* are an adornment to an integrated body of prose narrative: a body quite capable of standing on its own feet. There are some indications, however, that it is not only the substance of these stories that is related but that connections exist between the verse as well. Both poets make poems in praise of their mistresses and poems of tender sorrow at parting. Both make insulting verse on their rivals. At the end of their lives both complain of a clamping pain about the heart and on "the heart's side". Postulating a connection between the stanzas in this way naturally lends support to Bjarni Einarsson's theories, for he has come to a similar conclusion on both *Kormáks saga* and *Hallfreðar saga*. In his opinion, the latter too is a purely literary piece, composed with *Kormáks saga* as its chief model but also with motifs drawn from other written sources.

Whatever conclusions we come to about oral traditions and the authority of the stanzas, *Hallfreðar saga* is undeniably a work of literary art. The narrative is simple and clear, the sequence of events progressive and unbroken. Hallfreðr is in love with Kolfinna. Ávaldi, her father, is willing to make a match between them but Hallfreðr does not want to marry. But when Ávaldi marries her to Gríss Sæmingsson instead, Hallfreðr's love blazes up again – as the way is – and he takes every opportunity after that to show Kolfinna his love and to pick quarrels with Gríss and his friends. Óttarr, Hallfreðr's father, wants to make peace between them and he gets Hallfreðr to go to Norway. The second part of the saga takes place abroad. When Óláfr Tryggvason comes to the throne of Norway, he stands sponsor for Hallfreðr at his baptism and has him instructed in the Christian faith. But Hallfreðr remained attached to the old gods even though he accepted the new. A man called Kálfr, no friend of Hallfreðr, accused him of carrying an image of Þórr in his pouch and of sacrificing in private. On one occasion Hallfreðr went east to Götaland and met great adventures. He married a heathen woman there and was highly honoured. "The most he did in the way of Christian observance was to blow a cross over his drink before drinking, but he did not say many prayers." On the point of death he recalls his youthful impetuosity and in the last verse attributed to him expresses fear for the fate of his soul:

Ek mynda nú andask,	I would now die carefree if I
ungr var ek harðr í tungu,	knew at the same time my soul was

senn ef sálu minni
– sorglaust – vissa ek borgit.
Veit ek at vætki of sýtik,
valdi Guð hvar aldri
– dauðr verðr hverr, nema hræðumk
helvíti – skal slíta.

saved – young I was sharp of
tongue. I know I grieve not at
all – each man must die – except
I fear Hell – let God decide where I
shall wear out my time.

In the author of *Hallfreðar saga* we can detect a blithe spirit, a relaxed and cheerful entertainer. The author of *Kormáks saga* observes strict propriety: when Kormákr and Steingerðr meet, "each of them lay on their own side of the bed-panel" – but the author of *Hallfreðar saga* describes shameless flirting. Kolfinna is newly betrothed to Gríss but Hallfreðr takes her on his knee with everyone watching, "draws her towards him and then a few kisses passed." There is no panel between them when they sleep together in the shieling, and the author reports of Hallfreðr's companions, "it is said that each of them got himself a woman for the night." One outstanding story tells of the mission Hallfreðr was sent on by King Óláfr to blind Þorleifr the Wise as punishment for refusing to become a Christian. Hallfreðr went so far as to blind Þorleifr in one eye, and he also gouges out one eye of Kálfr, his arch-enemy. When the king is presented with an odd-coloured pair of eyes, he understands what Hallfreðr has been about and tells him to go back to Þorleifr and complete his mission. "There I am not willing to go," says Hallfreðr, "but I will go to Kálfr and gouge out his other eye." King Óláfr said they should call a halt there. Hallfreðr then enjoyed great esteem from the king.

Bandamanna saga is almost unique among *Íslendinga sögur* in being set in the period about 1050, i.e. after the "saga age" proper. It is also exceptional because here we have a "little" man – a farmer of small means – pitting himself against the greatest chieftains in the country – and winning.

Oddr Ófeigsson was brought up with little love from his father. At an early age he left him and finally became a very wealthy trader and landowner. Before going abroad on one occasion he entrusted his farm and chieftaincy to Óspakr, his steward and friend. Óspakr is described as difficult and assertive and, when Oddr returns, he avoids handing over the chieftaincy until Oddr finally has to retrieve it by a show of force. Óspakr leaves him and gets his own back by stealing sheep from Oddr's stock. When Oddr goes with his men to summon him, Óspakr kills Váli, Oddr's foster-brother. The case against Óspakr comes to the

assembly but has small prospect of success because Oddr has made a procedural error which can invalidate it. Then old Ófeigr, his father, comes to his assistance and by persuasive words and judicious bribery gets the judges to sentence Óspakr to outlawry. Other chieftains cast covetous eyes on Oddr's wealth and eight of them band together against him. Their intention is to prosecute him for the bribery used in the case against Óspakr. Things look black for Oddr until his father returns to the fray. He succeeds in setting the confederates at loggerheads with each other and nullifies their threat. He strengthens his hand by securing the daughter of one of the confederate chieftains as Oddr's wife.

Bandamanna saga is usually regarded as virtually complete fiction. *Eyrbyggja saga* refers to Óspakr Glúmsson "who contended against Oddr Ófeigsson in Miðfjörðr". Since *Eyrbyggja saga* must be older than *Bandamanna saga*, we have to assume that some tradition existed about a central theme in the latter, the quarrel between Oddr and Óspakr. We also know an independent *Odds þáttr*, found in *Haralds saga harðráða* in *Morkinskinna* and other sources. This could have supplied the author of *Bandamanna saga* with some of Oddr's characteristic features and with knowledge of his seafaring. He is in conformity with the *þáttr* in setting his drama in the time of King Haraldr and he chooses known men of that period as his actors – even though it is hardly likely that the careers of the confederates so overlapped that they could all have been parties to one lawsuit. Most of them appear in other sources, but some of the author's genealogical information is not obviously derivative and it often contradicts what we are told elsewhere.

But the author's most important source was doubtless *Ölkofra þáttr*. In this we find the model for the disputed cases at the General Assembly, and the two works show many parallels in matters of detail. Two of the band of chieftains are chosen to fix the terms of the settlement and they divide the task between them – one is to announce the terms, the other is to be ready to answer the reproaches of the allies they are betraying. They then decide on a trifling cash award. The other chieftains respond angrily and then bandy words with the one who opted to face them out (Broddi Bjarnason in the *þáttr*, Egill Skúlason in the saga).

It used to be generally thought that the saga was the forerunner of the *þáttr* because it is more detailed and better worked out: as we have seen before, the older the work, the more perfect it was likely to be. But in his introduction to the saga in Íslenzk fornrit VII (1936) Guðni Jónsson showed that the precedence of the *þáttr* is beyond doubt. The *þáttr* is

beautifully told and very entertaining, but the saga is still more accomplished, brilliant both in matter and manner. It has much dialogue and many speeches, and the dispute at the Alþingi comes over like a live stage-performance. One may criticise the author for a certain inconsistency in the presentation of Oddr Ófeigsson. In acquiring his early wealth and prestige, he shows great energy and prudence, but then he slumps and is helpless when balked in the lawsuit against Óspakr. The character of Ófeigr is all the more convincing in contrast. His feeble frame and ragged dress conceal a man who has sovereign intelligence and a wonderful way with words. He winds the confederates round his little finger. He plays them to the top of his mocking bent.

Bandamanna saga is preserved in two medieval manuscripts, Möðruvallabók from the mid-fourteenth century (p. 208) and the so-called Konungsbók, written c. 1450 (Gl. kgl. saml. 2845 4to, Royal Library, Copenhagen). The texts of these two sources are widely different and there has been controversy as to which is more original. The Íslenzk fornrit edition prints both texts but with K preferred and given pride of place on the page. Before that, however, Björn M. Ólsen had argued that whenever either manuscript had a fuller text than the other, it should be regarded as superior: in most cases this means preferring M to K. A similar conclusion was reached by Hallvard Magerøy in his detailed investigation, *Studiar i Bandamanna saga*, published in 1957.

Bandamanna saga is younger than *Ölkofra þáttr* which again must be younger than *Vápnfirðinga saga* and was hardly written before c. 1250 or perhaps later still. It is often assumed that *Bandamanna saga* reflects the author's attitude to the chieftains of his own time or the recent past, the age which saw the final decay and dissolution of the Icelandic commonwealth. They are corrupt and unscrupulous, bickering among themselves, avaricious, some of them impoverished. Not long after the middle of the thirteenth century, when the old oligarchy was in the throes of disintegration, might seem a reasonable date for the composition of *Bandamanna saga*.

If that is so, then *Bandamanna saga* was written at about the same time and in the same locality as *Vatnsdæla saga* – despite the inordinate differences between them in theme and treatment. There is also some reason to believe that the first *fornaldarsögur* were put into written shape in the same period (though possibly a little later). Within the same timespan must also be set the "contemporary" sagas of Sturla Þórðarson (died 1284) and the "florid" *Jóns saga baptista* of Grímr Hólmsteinsson

(died 1298). The variety of saga-literature is fully evident when we can observe so many different currents flowing side by side, mingling occasionally but not overmuch, mostly running in their own channels, clear and fresh.

Vatnsdæla saga has a better claim to the name "family saga" than most *Íslendinga sögur*. It traces the history of the men of Hof in Vatnsdalur from their beginnings in Norway until after the Conversion in Iceland. It is not irrelevant to mention the Conversion in the same breath as this saga, for Christian ideals are much to the fore in it, and it also includes a separate section on the missionary efforts of Þorvaldr the Far-travelled and Bishop Friðrekr.

Destiny compels the patriarch and settler, Ingimundr the Old, to sail to Iceland, even though he had "made up his mind never to visit . . . those desolate wastes". He was a pious heathen, as may be seen from the fact that he built a temple and called his homestead after it, Hof. At the same time he was *anima naturaliter christiana* – "a soul Christian by nature" – as early churchmen called well-disposed pagans. The author makes much of the *hamingja*, or luck, of the family, and that notion can be called the saga's *Leitmotif*. Indeed, for much of the time all goes prosperously; the family chieftaincy is in the hands of outstanding men: Ingimundr the Old, Þorsteinn Ingimundarson, Ingólfr Þorsteinsson, and finally Þorkell krafla, grandson of a daughter of Ingimundr. But sometimes this family luck seems more a matter of talk than a matter of fact. Ingimundr is killed by a villainous scoundrel, Guðbrandr Þorsteinsson falls at the hands of a hired assassin, Ingólfr dies of wounds inflicted in a fight against outlaws. But considered more closely, the "luck" can be seen to be there nevertheless. Ingimundr dies a sacrificial death in trying to make peace between Hrolleifr and his sons and conceals his mortal wound to give his killer a chance to escape. Ingólfr frees his neighbourhood from a plague of predators and shows supreme valour in his struggle against these bandits.

Although the successive generations of the Hof chieftains give the author of *Vatnsdæla saga* a serviceable narrative thread, the construction is rather loose, and the work falls into a series of tenuously linked sections. A great many characters are introduced but the author is not unpartisan and tends to divide them into types: some are sagacious and magnanimous (Ingimundr, Þorsteinn), some unrelievedly wicked (Hrolleifr). Neither is the author reluctant to express his own opinion of

their virtues and defects. He also has some tendency to an ornate style, where influence from both works of learning and chivalric sagas can be detected.

All this indicates that the saga was written comparatively late, but since some parts of it are re-told in Sturla Þórðarson's *Landnámabók* (and taken up from there by Haukr Erlendsson in his), it obviously antedates Sturla's death in 1284, though not necessarily by many years. It has been surmised that there was an older version of *Vatnsdæla saga* and it was this which provided the material in *Landnámabók*. Comparison shows, however, that the text used in *Landnámabók*, as far as it goes, was very close to the extant saga. Influence from *Vatnsdæla saga* is further seen in *Kristni saga* (p. 195), which has also been attributed to Sturla, but nothing suggests that influence was exerted by an older recension than the one we possess. The theory of an older version may thus be dismissed. It is another matter that the manuscript used by Sturla, obviously much older than any of our extant copies, naturally had a superior text.

Parts of *Vatnsdæla saga* show a generic similarity to *fornaldarsögur* and are particularly reminiscent of *Örvar-Odds saga*. Some scholars have thought the author of *Vatnsdæla saga* knew the latter in written form. It is a problem which needs further consideration. It seems doubtful whether *Örvar-Odds saga* in its present shape can be old enough to have influenced *Vatnsdæla saga*.

Grettis saga. Grettir Ásmundarson was the most famous of all Icelandic outlaws both because of his strength and courage and because he survived longest as an outcast, nineteen winters according to his saga. Stories about Grettir were in oral circulation and various written sources refer to him, even though his saga was not put together until the fourteenth century – at least, not in the form we know it. This great saga gave rise to notions about other outlaws living their lives in the desert parts of the country and fortified people's faith both in their existence and in the existence of "secret places and shadowed dales", remote and hard of access but lovelier and greener than our ordinary settled valleys.

Grettir is referred to in stanza 17 of Haukr Valdísarson's *Íslendingadrápa* (p. 110), where the poet says he killed Þorbjörn öxnamegin in vengeance for his brother. Snorri Sturluson attributes half a stanza to Grettir in his *Edda* (stanza 63 in the saga, lines 1–4). This citation by Snorri is important, for the general tendency is to regard all the verse in

Grettis saga as late composition, even made at the same time as the saga itself. Grettir's pedigree appears in *Landnámabók* (and in other sources), and reference is made there to two stanzas by him (57 and 58 in the saga). The text is rather fuller in Hauksbók than in Sturlubók. By way of introduction to the verses, the former says: "Ormr was a son of Þórir of Garðr. Grettir Ásmundarson murdered him [i.e. killed him in a shameful way]. Grettir composed this on Þórir." It is generally held that this comment comes from an old *Landnámabók* and that it was omitted by Sturla on purpose. If he did, the reason must have been that Sturla was interested in Grettir – had probably written something on him – and had reached a different conclusion as to the nature of his dealings with the son (or sons) of Þórir.

In *Grettis saga* there are three references to Sturla Þórðarson. We are told that the spear Grettir lost when he killed Þorbjörn öxnamegin had been discovered late in Sturla's lifetime, "no earlier than the recollection of people alive now". When Grettir went to Drangey, "he had been under sentence for fifteen or sixteen winters, according to what Sturla Þórðarson has said." At the end of the saga Lawman Sturla is cited as saying that no outlaw had been a man of such prowess as Grettir the Strong, and the three reasons Sturla gave in support of his verdict are quoted. It is probably now generally accepted that these statements refer to a written work by Sturla, though we cannot tell whether it was a short summary chiefly to do with chronology and the bare facts of Grettir's career or, as Sigurður Nordal thought, a proper saga, an older recension of the saga we know. Whatever one's opinion, it must be agreed that the first reference offers a good clue to the saga's age. The spear was found late in Sturla's lifetime – he died in 1284 – a time still remembered by people who were alive when the saga was written. If they were children at the time of the spear's discovery, that suggests a date c. 1320–30 – perhaps a little earlier, perhaps a little later.

Whether Sturla wrote much or little about Grettir, one thing that is certain is that the author of the extant *Grettis saga* made unsparing use of Sturla's *Landnámabók*. He takes long passages of narrative and genealogy from it, especially in the first part of the saga, but he adds other material to the stories that redound to the credit of Önundr Woodenleg, Grettir's grandfather.

Grettir is mentioned in a number of *Íslendinga sögur* and he was obviously a very well-known man. In *Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa* it is said that he spent a winter with Björn, living in *Grettisbæli*, "Grettir's lair", below Vellir. It is told that they swam down the river and were a match

for strength. *Gísla saga* says that Gísli "survived longest of all in outlawry except for Grettir Ásmundarson". *Fóstbræðra saga* tells how Þorbjörg the Stout saved Grettir from hanging; and the Flateyjarbók text of this saga has an account of the stay of Grettir and the foster-brothers at Reykhólar. The author of *Grettis saga* knew these sagas and other records besides. His *Fóstbræðra saga* was a version related to the Flateyjarbók text but containing the Vatnsfjörður episode which Flateyjarbók lacks. Comparison with *Bjarnar saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga* gives a good insight into the author's methods. He turns succinct narrative into an expansive account, with new words and new matter spun from his own mind. The saga is a great fiction constructed from many different materials. Sometimes place-names spark a story – though there is no doubt that the saga itself has given rise to place-names too. Sometimes the author invents a connection with other sagas – when he brings in Barði's refusal to have Grettir's help in the Heiðarvíg, for example. In *Heiðarvíga saga* itself there is no mention of Grettir and what the author of *Grettis saga* does is to put his hero in the place of Þorvaldr of Sléttadalur – and embroider it all in his customary fashion.

But it is not only to older sagas that the author turns for matter or ideas. He introduces a number of motifs of foreign origin and some episodes are analogues of famous pieces of European literature. This comes out clearest in the story of the vengeance taken for Grettir's death by his brother, Þorsteinn drómundr, out in Constantinople, and of Þorsteinn's romance with the Lady Spes. There is obvious influence from tales about Haraldr the Hardruler's service with the Varangians in Byzantium, but connections can also be traced with *Tristrams saga*, with a story in *Disciplina clericalis* (of the twelfth century), and with a widespread tale of a dimwit husband who is tricked by his wife and her lover. Grettir's struggle with Glámr, and still more his encounter with the trolls in Bárðardalur, have many resemblances to Beowulf's fights with Grendel and his dam in the Old English epic. The exchange between Grettir and the servant girl at Reykir is reminiscent of a bawdy story in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Other examples could be mentioned. Boccaccio wrote too late to have had any influence on the author of *Grettis saga* (assuming the date of the saga given above is acceptable), and we do not know how the ideas for this and other scenes reached him. Some probably came straight from books we know – from Brother Robert's *Tristrams saga*, for example – but others again from literary sources that are lost and from oral story-telling.

There may not be much historical truth in *Grettis saga* – except in passages reproduced from older sources – but the saga has an inner truth, an imaginative truth, of its own. Apart from the first and last sections (the stories of Önundr and of Spes), it is Grettir's saga through and through – everything revolves around him. He is a brave man and a bonny fighter, he is handsome and intelligent, with a quick tongue to match – yet he is condemned to live half his life as an outcast from society. Jökull, his uncle, fearful of the outcome of Grettir's meeting with Glámr, says, "Good luck and good parts are different things." Grettir's lucklessness, which especially seems to follow from Glámr's curse, is certainly in the forefront of the author's mind, but there is more to it than that. His lot is determined not only by malevolent fate but by elements in his own personality. As a youngster he is already headstrong and wilful, and as he grows up, his awareness of his own strength and bravery makes him overweening. After his first voyage abroad, "Grettir's pride was so swollen that he thought nothing beyond him." When he tries to retaliate for Barði's refusal to accept his help, Barði says, "Now your arrogance knows no bounds." In the church in Nidaros Grettir strikes a boy who taunts him, and King Óláfr then calls him "a man of ill luck" and goes on to speak of his impatience. The two factors – bad luck and arrogance – come tragically together in his greatest exploit when he destroys Glámr. From then on his bad luck is inescapable and his pride shattered. For the rest of his life he roamed the country as an outlaw, so tormented by fear of the dark that he did not dare to be alone when night fell.

There are clear signs in *Grettis saga* that the art of saga-writing is in decline. The characters do not have the individual depth and variety of those in *Njáls saga*, for example. There is a superfluity of extravagances: monsters, trolls and half-trolls boldly occupy the scene. Most of the people are ciphers who serve to set off Grettir in some way. Women appear to give Grettir and others an opportunity for dalliance, from the skipper's wife on Grettir's first voyage to the servant girl at Reykir, not forgetting Spes, Þorsteinn's playmate in Constantinople. The only exceptions are Ásdís, who is a model of a loyal mother, and the spirited Þorbjörg in Vatnsfjörður – and she is lifted from *Fóstbræðra saga*, where she is one of several outstanding women.

Grettir, however, is not only the character of whom most is told, he is also the character who is most skilfully drawn, and it is his portrayal which keeps the saga together. Some critics have detected some inconsistency in him, find him swinging between poles, now harsh, now kind,

now irritable, now moderate, now energetically active, now dully passive. But this is to misread the situation. A single man can easily compass the contrarieties described in Grettir – and he becomes more human, more real, precisely because of them. And even though the author may not be a versatile master of characterisation, he has other admirable qualities. He is humorous and fond of fun – and he mostly lets Grettir keep the humour alive. It makes a counterweight to Grettir's desolate fate and shoots entertaining gleams through the saga's tragic gloom. The author has a special predilection for proverbs, most of which he allots to Grettir. Folktale motifs give him pleasure too, and he is probably chiefly responsible for linking them to Grettir, though of course some of the connections may have been made before him – that he was capable of creating his own legends cannot be doubted. There is no doubt either of his skill as a narrator and as a fabricator of lifelike scenes – as when Hallmundr draws the reins from Grettir's grasp and Grettir is left looking at his empty hands. As sheer lighthearted entertainment the description of Grettir's dealings with the berserks on Háramarsey is superb, while a scene of bitter tragedy is conveyed when Illugi, Grettir's brother, young and loyal and brave to the end, is taken away to be executed on Drangey. But the art of the author excels most of all in the description of Grettir's meeting with Glámr, an unforgettable episode, full of tension and terror.

Finnboga saga is in Möðruvallabók and cannot therefore have been composed later than the first half of the fourteenth century. Finnbogi the Strong is named in *Landnámabók* and must have lived about the middle of the tenth century. For the most part his saga is a concoction of material adapted from written sagas, folk-legends and *märchen*. The episode concerning the dealings of Finnbogi and Bergr the Brave with the sons of Ingimundr is paralleled in *Vatnsdæla saga*, but the differences between them are remarkable. We can ascribe them partly to variant oral traditions and partly to the partisan attitude of the authors – with the writer of *Finnboga saga* showing particular zeal on behalf of his hero. Whether the author of *Finnboga saga* used an older written source or whether he was familiar with unrecorded oral traditions about the men of Víðidalur and Vatnsdalur of long ago cannot perhaps be finally decided, but in view of his methods generally, the former postulate seems much more likely.

Þórðar saga hreðu exists in two versions, one complete, the other

fragmentary (the Vatnshyrna text). Various suggestions have been made to account for the large differences between the versions. The latest editor, Jóhannes Halldórsson (in Íslenzk fornrit XIV, 1959), inclines to a theory previously advanced by Björn M. Ólsen. This explains the two versions as independent compositions, each fashioned round a kernel of historical fact which came to the authors from oral tradition. But in either version the saga appears to be almost pure invention, not on the model of *fornaldarsögur* or *riddara sögur*, however, but as an imitation of older sagas of Icelanders. Þórðr is a great champion who defends himself against the simultaneous attack of many enemies. He is chiefly famous however for his skill as a woodworker and builder, the craftsman who made the halls at Flatatunga and Hrafnagil and many other houses.

Sagas from Eyjafjörður and Þingeyjarþing are connected in various ways because the districts are in such close vicinity. The oldest of them might be *Víga-Glúms saga*. The only complete text of this is in Möðruvallabók and represents an abridgment. Two fragments written c. 1400 have a fuller and more original text (AM 445c 4to and AM 564a 4to). On the other hand, the saga as we have it contains some parts which appear to be interpolations or at least have a different origin from the main narrative. These are the story of Ingólfr (the Hlöðu-Kálfr episode), the account of Glúmr's dealings with Víga-Skúta, and the *Ögmundar þáttr dytts* (only known in the fragmentary version). Still, as the saga stands in Möðruvallabók, it makes a firm unity, and the extrinsic episodes are not greater digressions than may be found in a good many other sagas.

In style and narrative art *Víga-Glúms saga* is comparable with *Vápnfirðinga saga*, and both might be from the first half of the thirteenth century. It is one of a group of sagas in which the biography of a single character is traced from childhood to life's end. Most such sagas are sagas of poets, with the narrative buttressed by stanzas attributed to the hero. *Víga-Glúms saga* may be said to belong with these for the text contains a good many verses ascribed to him, but otherwise it most resembles *Egils saga* for here, as there, the hero lives as the leading man in his district and finally dies at a great age, blind and feeble.

Víga-Glúmr came of distinguished families on both sides. His paternal great-grandfather was the settler, Helgi the Lean, and his maternal grandfather was Vigfúss *hersir* of Voss in Norway. Þverá in Eyjafjörður was his inheritance, the site when the saga was written of a monastery

and a great centre of learning (hence the modern name, Munkaþverá). But as a youth, Glúmr is a backward "coal-biter" type, and his mother suffers from the bullying and grasping ways of her kinsmen by marriage, Þorkell the Tall from Mývatn and his son, Sigmundr, who have moved into Þverá. Glúmr leaves to make a name for himself on a visit to his grandfather Vigfúss in Norway. He succeeds so well that on parting Vigfúss gives him three heirlooms, cloak, spear and sword. He declares that as long as Glúmr keeps these objects his honour will not suffer, "but if you part with them, then I fear what will happen."

When Glúmr comes home, he "gets up onto his feet", as the saga puts it, and kills Sigmundr on the cornfield called Vitazgjafi, "the reliable giver". He follows up his victory with unmitigated severity and drives Þorkell the Tall out of Þverá. For twenty years he is the outstanding chieftain in Eyjafjörður, and then for another twenty years he has his equals but is surpassed by none. Finally he overreaches himself in a piece of duplicity and is exiled from the district, while Einarr Eyjólfsson, later called Einarr Þveræingr, comes into Glúmr's family estate.

The saga is full of incident and the narrative concentrated, so that it may seem rather hard reading at first. It tends to divide into self-contained sections, and this not only where we may suspect passages to be interpolated or of discrepant origin. But the saga is free of exaggeration and every part is nicely balanced. Glúmr's antagonists get a fair deal from the author – he even calls them "lawskilled men and bold-hearted". Vigfúss Víga-Glúmsson is known as a great warrior from accounts of the famous battle of Hjörungavágr, fought between Earl Hákon of Hlaðir and the Jómsvíkingar (cf. p. 165), but in the saga here he not only turns out to be morally inferior to Bárðr Hallsson, his rival, but in the end can only defeat him in single combat with the aid of his companions.

Gods and destiny are introduced as the arbiters of men's lives and actions. In a dream Glúmr sees the family fetch walking up the valley to Þverá: "She was so big that her shoulders touched the mountains on either side." Visible symbols of the family luck are the three objects given him by Vigfúss in Norway. When Glúmr parts with them, his defeat is at hand. Luck turns her back on him, and the god of his ancestors has also withdrawn his favour. But the reader is not persuaded by all these supernatural explanations – and in reality the saga-author is not either. If we look closer, we can find explanations to account for the course of events in the nature and conduct of the people themselves. Is it not Glúmr's own duplicity rather than Freyr's anger

Plate 12

Beginning of the Saga of St Óláfr by Snorri Sturluson. The illustration looks forward to the end of the saga and shows the king's death at Stiklarstaðir in the year 1030. From the manuscript Flateyjarbók, late 14th century. – Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.

Plate 13

Drangey. "And when they got onto the island, Grettir found it a pleasing sight, for it was covered with grass but had steep cliffs that could nowhere be climbed except where the ladders were fixed, and if the upper ladder was pulled up, it was beyond anyone's ability to get onto the island. It was also a great fowling place in summer time. Eighty sheep were on the island then, owned by the farmers, mostly wethers and ewes intended for slaughter. Grettir settled down there in peace and quiet." Grettis saga, *ch. 69. – Photo: Hjálmar R. Bárðarson*

Plate 14

Hrafnkelsdalur, with Snæfell in the background. "Hrafnkell made a habit of riding over the moors in summer time. Jökulsdalr was then fully occupied up as far as the bridges. Hrafnkell rode up over the Fljótsdalr moor and saw where an uninhabited dale went in from Jökulsdalr. It looked to him a more promising place to live than the other dales he had seen up to then." Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða, *ch. 2. – Photo: Sveinbjörn Rafnsson.*

Plate 15

"Þórólfr [Mostrarskegg] called the headland between Vigrafjörðr and Hofsvogr Þórsnes. A great hill stands on this headland. Þórólfr had such reverence for that hill that no one should look towards it with unwashed face and neither people nor animals should be killed there. He called that hill Helgafell and believed that he would go into it when he died and all his kinsmen on the headland" (Eyrbyggja saga, *ch. 4). – The picture shows Helgafell. – Photo: Hjálmar R. Bárðarson.*

Björn loves Oddný eykyndill, "loveliest of women and a lady of high spirit". She is to wait three years in her betrothal to him while he is abroad. But his neighbour, Þórðr Kolbeinsson, wins her by underhand means while Björn is performing feats of derring-do in distant lands. He overcomes the champion Kaldimarr who has been ravaging the realm of the king of Russia, and while in England with Knútr the Great he slays a winged dragon. These tales are totally fantastic and relate to *fornaldarsögur* and even *riddara sögur*. Our thoughts go back to *Tristrams saga*: Tristram defeated the champion Mórhold and later destroyed a winged dragon in Ireland.

The tone changes when Björn comes home and we are lifted from a foreign fairy-tale world into Icelandic reality. The swashbuckler who had led Viking forays at the head of two hundred men now goes to stay with Þórðr, his rival, at Hítarnes "with three four-legged possessions, two horses and a dog; he rode one horse and had the other on a tether." Then come rather lengthy and repetitive accounts of the taunts exchanged between Björn and Þórðr; insulting verses fly between them, some of them not at all seemly. There is a gap in the middle of the saga – exactly how big we cannot tell. When the text resumes, Björn is married and living up the valley at Vellir. But the ill-feeling between him and Þórðr is as strong as ever, despite the distance between them. Finally Þórðr gathers many men and attacks Björn, who falls after a brave defence.

Most scholars assume that the author of *Bjarnar saga* made great use of oral tales, and regard that as the reason for the saga's poor organisation and its patches of feeble narration. But the inadequacies of the saga can hardly be blamed on a glut of oral sources – and the best parts should be put down to the author's credit. His finest achievement is his description of Björn's death, and its prelude and aftermath, where he brilliantly conveys the stark, savage forces at work in that drama.

To explain the inferior parts of the saga one might perhaps suggest that the author had too much old poetry at his disposal and was reluctant to ignore it and not fully competent to utilise it. In this case, the fewer the verses, the better the story-telling. The verse is undoubtedly older than the saga and it was taken on trust by the author, even though nowadays people doubt whether it is all correctly attributed – in this saga as in other sagas of Icelanders.

The study of the stanzas in *Bjarnar saga* is made all the more difficult by the poor preservation of the text as a whole. The greater part of it exists only in paper manuscripts, and probably only one of them has

independent value. The vellum it was copied from was defective – the gap in the middle was mentioned earlier and the beginning of the text, up to the point where Þórðr marries Oddný, is also missing. The loss is partly made good by an extract from the opening chapters, copied from a manuscript now lost, which was included in the Bergsbók recension of *Óláfs saga helga*.

Two other manuscripts of *Óláfs saga* have a short passage on Björn which cannot have been derived from *Bjarnar saga* itself, although similar matter is found there. It tells of a hose-garter which King Óláfr gave Björn and which accompanied Björn into the grave. Later, when the churchyard at Vellir was dug up and the bones removed to the churchyard at Hítardalur, the garter was found as good as new in the grave. Elsewhere in *Bjarnar saga* the author reports that Björn built a church at Vellir, dedicated to Thomas the Apostle: "and Björn composed a good *drápa* about him – so Runólfr Dálksson (miswritten Dagsson in the manuscript) said." Runólfr Dálksson is named in the list of priests made by Ari fróði in 1143 (p. 123), and in *Sturlu saga* he is mentioned in connection with events that took place about 1170 – he is there called "a high-born cleric". Sigurður Nordal made the plausible conjecture that the information about the church at Vellir and the passage about Björn in *Óláfs saga helga* both came from some short record made by Runólfr. Possibly that was a work which supplied the author of *Bjarnar saga* with other material as well.

A new world dawns in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*. The emotions of the people involved in the story are revealed far more openly than in any of the other sagas so far described. At first sight this might seem a sign of late composition, for there is no doubt that, as time went on, saga-authors conveyed more and more frankly a wide range of sentiment and sentimentality. But in the case of *Gísla saga* it seems more likely to be a peculiarity of the author, for its relations with other works suggest that it must be one of the older *Íslendinga sögur*.

The saga both benefits and suffers from the strong passions displayed in it. There is poignant tragedy in the tangled situation: as in the heroic poems of the *Edda*, we find friends and foster-brothers, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, all set at hostile odds. But it is a tangle difficult for an artist to deal with, those passions are hard to control. Sympathy and antipathy can become bias, emotional involvement can lead to extremes that are either too harsh or too delicate.

The description of Gísli's night-killing of Þorgrímr at Sæból will not

be forgotten by anyone who has read it, but critics find blemishes in it all the same. Gísli's ill-explained actions in tying cows' tails together and fixing the door so that it cannot be opened from the inside seem to be reminiscences of the killing of Helgi Ásbjarnarson in *Droplaugarsona saga*. In those days when girls read sagas in Iceland, Gísli was a favourite hero (cf. the famous novel by Þorgils gjallandi, *Upp við fossa*, published in 1902), but some were shocked by his coldblooded approach to the sleeping Þorgrímr:

> Gísli now goes on through the room to the bed-closet where Þorgrímr and Þórdís, his sister, slept, and the bed-closet door was ajar. Gísli goes up into the closet and gropes about. He touches her breast and she is sleeping on the outside. Þórdís spoke: "Why was your hand so cold, Þorgrímr?" – she thought he had put it on her. Gísli then warms his hand in his shirt and stands there on the bed-closet floor meanwhile. And now he feels for Þorgrímr's neck and wakes him. Þorgrímr spoke: "Do you want me to turn towards you, Þórdís?" – and he thought she was waking him. Gísli then pulled the clothes off him with one hand and with the other he stabs the spear through him and down into the bed.

Or what are we to make of the way Gísli fools his slave, Þórðr the Timid, by getting him to change clothes with him, with the result that Þórðr is taken for Gísli and gets a spear through him? Did the author have such a lordly contempt for slaves that he thought their lives worthless? That does not seem the answer when we come to the episode with the slave-woman, Bóthildr, on Hergilsey: she gave Gísli staunch help and was to be given freedom in reward.

Manuscript texts of *Gísla saga* contain a number of brief comments which are not strictly necessary for the narrative. They have been a stumbling-block to editors, who have mostly wanted to excise them and have sometimes fancied they could find warrant for their surgery in the manuscript stemma they believed in. The saga is known in two versions, a longer and a shorter. They differ most in the opening chapters, much less as the story progresses. The general view has been that the shorter version is closer to the original; the longer version has been revised and expanded for the worse by a later editor. Most recently, however, it has been argued that the reverse is true: the longer version may contain a few interpolations but in general represents the original more authentically.

Naturally enough, there is more of the kind of stuff an editor might

like to excise in the longer version – the redactor of the shorter version had the same kind of aversion to it as modern critics tend to have. But there have also been modern editors who want to cut this or that from the shorter version too – sometimes with the excuse that a passage is unparalleled in the longer version – but then we find that they by no means agree on what should be deleted. Obviously the whole approach is unacceptable. Whether we like it or not, what one text has in the way of small extras over the other must generally be assumed to come from the original version of the saga.

The story begins with a Norwegian prelude, after which Gísli's family move to Iceland and settle on land in Haukadalur in Dýrafjörður. In the first main section of the saga events then lead inexorably to the killing of Vésteinn, followed by Gísli's revenge on Þorgrímr. Gísli understands the way things are going and tries to stave off disaster, but in fact his attempts to prevent it only bring it closer. At the same time they give the reader an ominous inkling of what is to come. After the secret killing of Þorgrímr, Gísli betrays his guilt in a half-riddling stanza, and is prosecuted and outlawed.

The shorter version of the saga – which is the text everyone usually reads – does not say who killed Vésteinn, but most people have unhesitatingly identified Þorgrímr as the culprit. It has also been proposed, however, that Þorkell, Gísli's brother, did the stabbing – it was he after all who had the personal grudge against Vésteinn. Since it was impossible for Gísli to raise a hand against his own brother, vengeance had to fall on Þorgrímr. This novel solution, however attractive, must be discarded. We must not forget that the killings are foreshadowed in the abortive ceremony of fosterbrotherhood, when it is Þorgrímr who refuses to bind himself to Vésteinn, and Gísli who refuses to bind himself to Þorgrímr. And the longer version of the saga says explicitly – and so does *Eyrbyggja saga* – that Þorgrímr killed Vésteinn.

The second main part of the story tells of Gísli's career as an outlaw. He survived longer in outlawry than anyone except Grettir Ásmundarson – for eighteen winters, according to the longer version of the saga. The first years are passed over rapidly, the last seven treated in some detail. This concentration seems chiefly due to the author's use of verse attributed to Gísli. From these stanzas and the accompanying prose, we learn that Gísli has attendant dream-women – "and one is good to me and always gives me flawless counsel, but the other always tells me what seems bad to me and forebodes me nothing but evil." In his dream he entered a house, where he recognised kinsmen and friends who sat there

*"And when it is least expected, Gísli turns about and runs up to the bluff called Einhamarr and away from the cliffs. There he makes a stand and defends himself. This took them by surprise. It seems to them their job is getting much harder – four men dead and themselves wounded and tired. There comes a lull in the attack. Then Eyjólfr eggs them on very hard and promises them big rewards if they get Gísli. Eyjólfr had picked men with him for bravery and hardihood" (*Gísla saga Súrssonar, *chapter 35). – Photo: Vilmundur Jónsson.*

drinking. There were seven fires, and his better dream-woman told him that these seven that were still alight signified how many winters he had yet to live. She promises him bliss in the next world and takes him into a well-furnished house, with cushioned seats. But as the story goes on, the worse dream-woman comes to Gísli more and more often and splashes and pours blood over him. Gísli is racked by thoughts ever more troubled and fearful, and comes to be so afraid of the dark that he cannot stay alone in his hiding-place – "as soon as he closes his eyes, the same woman always appears to him." Because of the torment he endures, his life seems already at an end by the time his last battle is to be fought. He defends himself manfully and dies as a hero should, with a verse on his lips:

Vel hygg ek þótt eggjar
ítrslegnar mik bíti,
þá gaf sínum sveini
sverðs minn faðir herðu.

Fain am I though finely
Forged bright edges bite me;
My sire's true sword-temper
Shows in his son's life-close.
(George Johnston, *The Saga of Gisli*, 1963, p. 58.)

The prose and verse together give such a convincing impression of a real man in a real predicament that a single reading of the saga may well leave us fully persuaded of the authenticity of the poetry attributed to Gísli. But as soon as we stop to think, doubts crowd in. To believe in Gísli's dream-women requires a fair dollop of superstition. Christian influence and scriptural echoes are found in the dream-stanzas, hardly plausible in the mind of a tenth-century pagan, even if he had been prime-signed in Denmark. On the other hand, there are no valid grounds for attributing the verse to the author of the saga: the stanzas are not perfectly integrated into the narrative, sometimes even at odds with it. The explanation that remains is that they were composed in connection with oral stories told about Gísli, most probably in the twelfth century. We must note however that we cannot be sure that all the stanzas were the work of one poet or one period, or tell whether their oral contexts were precisely the same as in the saga. It is conceivable that the dream-stanzas made a self-contained unit in a pre-literary stage, needing only brief descriptive comment to explain them.

Auðr, Gísli's wife, supports him with unflinching loyalty in his outlawry and fights by his side at the end. Her strength never fails, despite Gísli's disturbed mind and the blandishment and intimidation of enemies. The antithesis of this staunch pair are Gísli's brother, Þorkell, and the woman he marries, Ásgerðr. The almost frivolous expression Ásgerðr gives to her preference for Vésteinn is the fateful cause of the tragedy that follows. Þorkell is a man of idle hands and moody mind, who manipulates black magic and murder from behind the scenes, and who lacks the will and courage to stand by his brother when he is in desperate need. But he is flesh and blood all the same – he loves his brother as far as his nature permits, kicks his snowy shoes under the bed to hide his guilt, and is bold and adroit in warning him of Börkr's attack. And Þórdís, Gísli's sister, is no less human in the violent way she swings from one passion to another: first she denounces her brother in revenge for the death of her husband, later she tries to kill Eyjólfr the Grey in revenge for the death of Gísli.

One of the weaknesses of the saga is that the author does not make

more of Gísli's antagonists. Börkr and Eyjólfr are little more than faceless straw-men, and when they are on stage, they are played down as blustering cowards. The result is a lack of balance in the story, and Gísli's own stature is diminished when he is locked in strife with enemies who are not made to appear worthy of him.

Gísla saga is thus not one of those *Íslendinga sögur* that have all-round claims to artistic success. The narrative is sometimes loosely linked, some episodes seem illogical, the people are not always clearly portrayed and occasionally appear inconsistent. The saga seems full of contrasts: at once primitive and modern, realistic and exaggerated, cold and emotional, deadly serious and crassly humorous, colourfully adventurous and deeply ironic. But it is these very ambiguities that affect us so powerfully, creating doubt and tension in our minds as we read. It is impossible to put down this little book unmoved or ungrateful to the author who undertook so ambitious a theme, even if his creative powers were not totally equal to the task.

The author of *Eyrbyggja saga* refers to Gísli's death and to other events in his story in such a way as to make it plain that he knew his saga as a written work. Verbal correspondence is greater between *Eyrbyggja saga* and the longer version of *Gísla saga*, one sign among several that this version is closer to the original text.

In other respects the two sagas are very dissimilar. The author of *Gísla saga* tells of tragic events and is keenly interested in the psychology and mental strife of his characters. The author of *Eyrbyggja saga* has a scholarly bent – his interest lies in resurrecting truth and establishing chronology. The saga belongs to Snorri's "school" and was probably written in his neighbourhood and possibly in his lifetime. Sturla Þórðarson had a high regard for *Eyrbyggja saga*, as he had for *Egils saga* too, and fattened his *Landnámabók* with a lot of material from both.

Relations between *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Laxdæla saga* are more problematic, and the question as to which of them was written first has caused much discussion. The sagas are set in the same part of Iceland and to some extent concern the same people, yet they have remarkably little material in common. We badly need a definitive textual edition of *Eyrbyggja saga* for without it we cannot be entirely sure of our answers to these problems. But even so, we cannot avoid some consideration of them.

We must first note that the last chapter of *Eyrbyggja saga* refers to *Laxdæla saga* by name, and in the same breath as *Heiðarvíga saga*,

mentioning that Snorri the Chieftain figures in both of them. But this chapter, which compresses information about Snorri into a few paragraphs, rather distances itself from the main part of the saga and could well be a supplement – or the reference to *Laxdæla saga* could be an addition. This reference will not suffice on its own to prove how the sagas are related.

Einar Ól. Sveinsson has consistently argued that *Eyrbyggja saga* is older than *Laxdæla saga*. He maintains that it is more antique in every way, and it shows no sign of the influence of *riddara sögur* such as can be seen in *Laxdæla saga*. He thinks the latter was written around 1250, and he believes that the author of *Eyrbyggja saga* could not possibly have been as well supplied as he evidently was with orally preserved information if he was writing after that date, at some time in the second half of the thirteenth century. There are some particular resemblances between verse in *Eyrbyggja saga* and stanzas cited in *Sturlunga saga* that were made in the 1220s: Einar thinks these were influenced by a written *Eyrbyggja saga*. Finally, he believes that a passage in Hauksbók proves that *Eyrbyggja saga* was used in Styrmir's *Landnámabók* – which was certainly not made after 1245, the date of Styrmir's death.

Other scholars have declined to accept Einar Ól. Sveinsson's arguments. The influence on stanzas quoted in *Sturlunga saga* – if it exists – could have been exerted at an oral stage. The passage in Hauksbók is explained as a combination of material from Styrmisbók and Sturlubók – which is the normal source of Haukr's text. But the point which is regarded as most important is that the author of *Eyrbyggja saga* passes quickly over matter which is to be found in *Laxdæla saga*.

It might of course be possible to turn this round and argue that it was the author of *Laxdæla saga* who avoided repeating what was already told in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Why, for instance, does he not introduce Snorri the Chieftain in the ordinary way or tell us anything about his earlier years? The reason might be that this had already been thoroughly done in *Eyrbyggja saga*.

Snorri the Chieftain is the character who binds together the separate parts of the narrative in *Eyrbyggja saga*. His portrayal is one of the most brilliant we find in any saga. It is outstandingly successful because the author knows him so intimately and understands him so well but, at the same time, has no great affection for him. The rest of the characters are disposed around him – and a remarkable portrait gallery it is – most of them with distinctive, individual lineaments. Þórarinn of Mávahlíð, the man of peace who is forced into bloodshed and whose stanzas on his

predicament were a source for the author. Arnkell the Chieftain, a born leader who abhors violence and pays with his life because there is not room on Snæfellsnes for two such leaders as him and Snorri. Björn Breiðvíkingakappi, something of a swaggerer but as charming as he is bold, on good terms with Þuríðr, Snorri's married sister, mistress of Fróðá, who bears Björn's child and is the subject of his longing love-poetry. Steinþórr of Eyri, the best fighting-man you could find but not one who always plays quite fair, as is seen in the Álftafjörður battle. Þórgunna from the Hebrides, whose capacities are of no ordinary kind and whose mysterious death is the root of the terrifying marvels at Fróðá that follow. The other women are either furies or angels of peace – like Auðr of Mávahlíð who is so anxious to prevent further bloodshed that she tells no one that her own wrist has been severed in the fighting. But the slaves in the story act despicably and reap their reward – the author was a true-blue aristo.

On the surface *Eyrbyggja saga* seems cold-blooded enough – it has none of the sentimentality of *Gísla saga* or *Laxdæla saga*, but underneath we detect a firm sense of humour which may sometimes dissolve into ironic derision. In effect *Eyrbyggja saga* is a "regional" history of Snæfellsnes from the settlement down to the beginning of the eleventh century. Manuscripts record its full title as "the saga of the men of Þórsnes, Eyrr and Álptafjörðr" – and justly so. *Eyrbyggja saga* is merely a convenient abbreviation. The saga falls into separate sections in consequence – "every farmstead has its history" – and its piecemeal nature makes it difficult for a reader to take it in as a unity and keep it all clear in mind. But individual episodes are superbly told and, given the way the work was conceived and its strands interwoven, its whole composition must be counted a masterpiece.

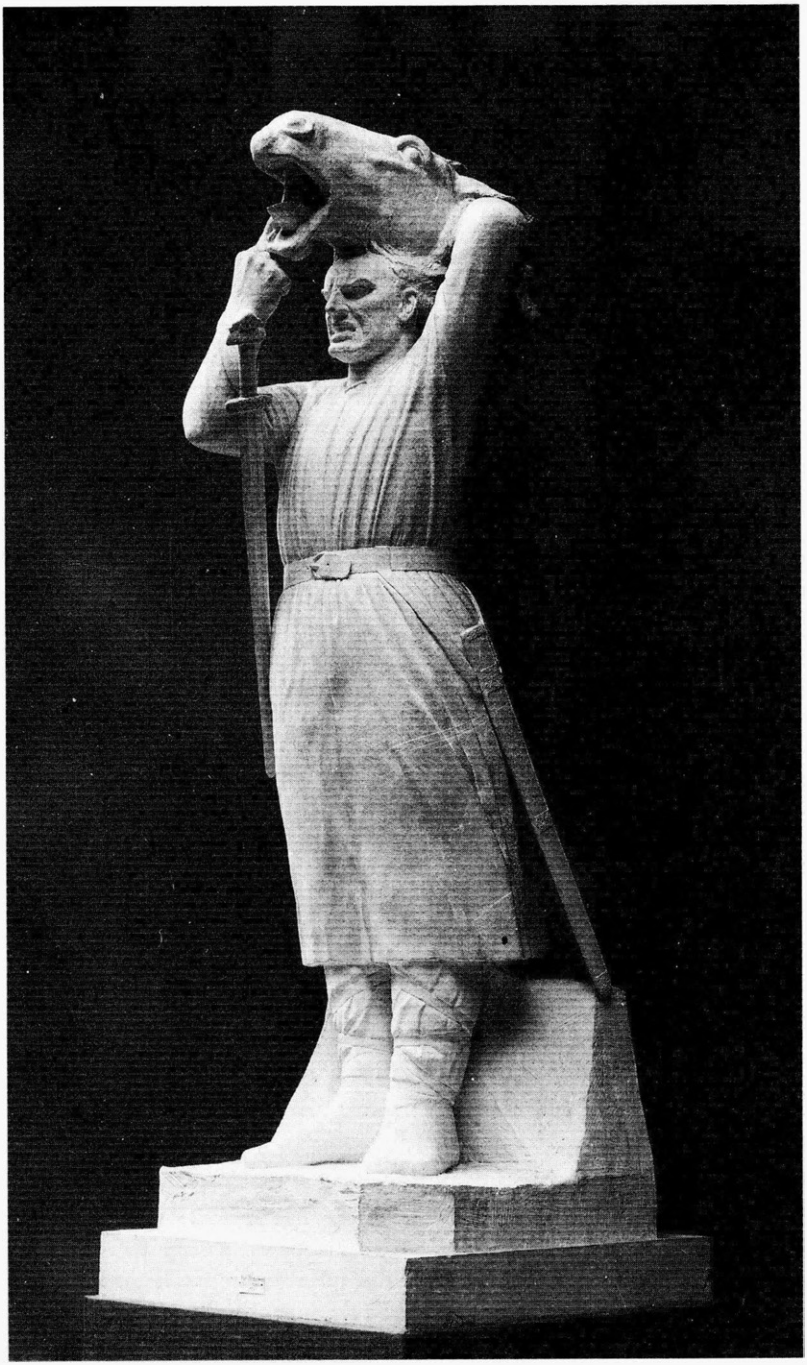
Of all sagas of Icelanders *Egils saga* is most closely related to the kings' sagas in its subject-matter, while its narrative art is very like that of Snorri's *Heimskringla*. A lengthy section at the beginning of the saga is set in Norway and tells of the dealings of Kveldúlfr and his sons with King Haraldr Fairhaired. In the end the king destroys Þórólfr Kveldúlfsson, because of the slanders of the sons of Hildiríðr; Kveldúlfr and his second son, Skallagrímr, wreak what vengeance they can and set sail for Iceland. Skallagrímr becomes one of the first settlers, taking land in Borgarfjörður, all of it that lies between the rivers that flow to the sea there, and he lived at Borg. But that was not the end of dealings between his family and the kings of Norway. Þórólfr Skallagrímsson was on

friendly terms with Eiríkr Bloodaxe and became his retainer, but Egill, his brother, fell foul of the king and killed a few of his followers for him. The brothers fought for King Athelstan of Wessex in a great battle in Britain at a place the saga calls Vínheiðr – it is usually identified as the battle fought in 937 at Brunanburh (wherever that was – probably in Lancashire). Þórólfr fell in the battle. Egill subsequently married his widow, Ásgerðr, and returned to Iceland. He was householder at Borg after his father and died an old man.

Many stanzas are cited in the saga – most of them attributed to Egill – and three longer poems ascribed to him are also preserved in conjunction with it (pp. 100–103). The attribution of these poems – at least, of *Sonatorrek* and *Arinbjarnarkviða* – is generally regarded as valid, and most scholars are prepared to accept the majority of the occasional stanzas as by Egill too. Some stanzas however do appear to be the work of following generations but, as we have seen, such later verse-making is a factor to be reckoned with even in the earliest sagas.

Any opinion as to the value of the saga as a historical source will naturally depend to a large extent on how far we credit the attribution of the verse to Egill. The stanzas contain a quantity of factual information which, if accepted, will vouch for the truth of the saga-narrative. *Egils saga* makes a realistic impression, resembling those kings' sagas which preserve a fair balance between the desire to tell a good story and the desire to maintain a critical standard. But it is a long span between the events and the time of writing – about three hundred years on average – and things go astray in a shorter period than that. The author doubtless needed to eke out his material, and we can in fact see that

Egill Skallagrímsson raises a "shame pole" against King Eiríkr Bloodaxe and Queen Gunnhildr. "He took up a pole of hazel and went onto a jutting rock which faced into the country. Then he took a mare's head and stuck it on the top of the pole. Then he pronounced a curse and said this: 'Here I set up a shame pole and I point this shame to fall on King Eiríkr and Queen Gunnhildr' – and he pointed the mare's head towards the mainland – 'I point this shame to fall on all the spirits who inhabit this land, so that they all lose their way, and may none of them find or hit on his habitation until they have driven King Eiríkr and Gunnhildr from the country.'" From Egils saga, *ch. 57. In the following spring, after the return of his brother, Hákon, fosterson of King Athelstan, King Eiríkr fled from Norway and never came back. The statue pictured here is by Gustav Vigeland. Photo: Vigelandsmuseet, Oslo.*



various bits of his narrative parallel what is found in earlier literary works. Behind the realism of the presentation there are many signs of an active creative imagination.

The story is full of highly-charged drama, contrasting characters are carefully juxtaposed, causes are attacked and defended with spirited oratory, while some of the chief people – and those in whom the author evidently takes most delight – act at given moments with a barbarity hardly paralleled in other *Íslendinga sögur*. In these features the similarities to *Heimskringla* are distinctive, and, as is well known, it has long been conjectured that Snorri Sturluson was the author of the saga as well as of his great set of *konunga sögur*. But there is a scholarly see-saw in this as in other matters, and as soon as one critic finds reason to reject Snorri's authorship of *Egils saga*, along comes another with new evidence to support it. A similar style and vocabulary, a similar grasp of historical logic, a similar ability to get inside the skin of a character, a similar gift for drama, a similar skill in presenting powerful antagonisms and contrasts, a similar willingness to see both sides of a case: these are all equally present in both *Heimskringla* and *Egils saga*.

The sons of Hildiríðr slander Þórólfr Kveldúlfsson – who was "popular with everybody" – and King Haraldr believes them – as we may be inclined to do ourselves because they make their case so plausible. And they are so successful in achieving Þórólfr's downfall that in the end his own actions may even be said to lend some weight to their accusations.

To take another example. Egill is at odds with Eiríkr Bloodaxe, he erected a "shame-pole" against him and killed one of his sons. Eiríkr is forced to leave Norway and retires to England. He rules in York with his queen, Gunnhildr, and in his retinue is Arinbjörn *hersir*, an old friend of Egill's and a kinsman of Ásgerðr, his wife. Gunnhildr's witchcraft rouses the storm that wrecks Egill's ship at the mouth of the Humber. He has no alternative but to throw himself on Eiríkr's mercy. Gunnhildr, full of malice, brings up all the charges there are against Egill and urges Eiríkr to have him killed out of hand. But Arinbjörn skilfully defends his friend and at the end does not hesitate to turn his pleading into a threat: "No one will call Eiríkr a greater man if he kills a peasant's son, a foreigner, who has put himself into his power. If he does want to grow great from this, then I shall grant him that satisfaction by seeing to it that these events will be rather thought worth the telling, for Egill and I will now stand together so that in meeting one you will meet both. You will buy

Egill's life at a dear price then, king, if the terms are that we are all laid low, my men and I."

Arinbjörn advises Egill to make a poem in praise of King Eiríkr, and in the course of the one night's grace he has, he composes a twenty-stanza *drápa* in a brand-new metre. Next day he recites it before the king and gets his head as a reward. The poem was afterwards called "Head-ransom".

Egill Skallagrímsson is portrayed with a spectacular grandeur which makes him unrivalled among all the great men we meet in the sagas of Icelanders. He is like his father and grandfather in appearance, big, with harsh irregular features, bald at an early age; and his ferocity and the supernatural strength that frenzy can lend him are also inherited. But inside his morose and craggy exterior he also has the nobility of the two Þórólfrs – his uncle who fell at the hands of King Haraldr Fairhaired himself and his brother who died fighting for King Athelstan at Vínheiðr. The call to adventure out in the world rings in Egill's ears and is slow to fade. Óðinn has bestowed on him the craft of poetry which brings him relief after the death of brother and sons. Under his cloak he dreams of the lovely lady who had been the wife of his dashing brother, Þórólfr, and in the end he wins her. He appears an extraordinary mixture of god-given inspiration, human sensitivity, and brutish coarseness and greed. No such personality ever emerged, of his own accord as it were, from the story-telling of generations. Only a genius of the stature of Snorri could have created so savage a portrait of so admired a character and still made him into a man who looms, erect and compelling, high above all others.

Whether Snorri wrote *Egils saga* or not, its connections with *Heimskringla* are plain. An explanation that has gained currency in recent years is that *Egils saga* was written before *Heimskringla*, which means not later than in the 1220s. On the other hand, there is some evidence to suggest that *Heimskringla* was the earlier work – though that need not upset the theory that Snorri was the author of the saga. In fact, Snorri's career allows a convenient space to which the composition of *Egils saga* might be assigned, that is the year or two between his return to Iceland in 1239 and his murder in the autumn of 1241. He lived quietly in that period, and it is hard to believe he was unoccupied. In attempting to refute the attribution of *Egils saga* to Snorri, some scholars have maintained that there is a notable difference between the presentation of the kings of Norway in *Heimskringla* and the saga: they are

glamorised in the one, blackened in the other. But in his last years we recall that Snorri was an opponent of the Norwegian king, and this might account for a change in his attitude. We could – if we felt like it – fancy that Snorri's hostility to King Hákon led him to recall the tenth-century dealings of his ancestors with that same king's forebears – and that he was in no mood to see the early members of the dynasty in a favourable light.

Grænlendinga saga is preserved in Flateyjarbók. The beginning is lost, and the opening part provided in modern editions is put together from passages in the expanded *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (p. 158) and *Landnámabók*. The lost beginning told of the discovery and settlement of Greenland, while the sequel concerns voyages to Vínland the Good and other places. *Eiríks saga rauða* tells of the same people and events but very differently. A principal difference is that *Eiríks saga* makes Leifr the Lucky the discoverer of Vínland, while *Grænlendinga saga* credits the discovery to Bjarni Herjólfsson. *Eiríks saga* was commonly regarded as the more authentic and trustworthy account, not least because it agreed with other texts that were highly esteemed as reliable sources, such as *Heimskringla* and *Kristni saga*.

This established view was first questioned by Sigurður Nordal (*Sagalitteraturen*, Nordisk Kultur VIII:B, 1953, pp. 248–9): "These two sagas . . . are so independent of each other that the most natural explanation seems to be that they were written at about the same time but in different parts of the country. *Eiríks saga* takes the view, which can be traced back to Gunnlaugr Leifsson and is also taken by Snorri in *Heimskringla*, that it was Leifr Eiríksson (the missionary!) who had the honour of discovering Vínland, while *Grænlendinga saga* gives instead the name of the otherwise unknown Bjarni Herjólfsson, which, in spite of some implausible points, may well be the older and more genuine tradition."

Jón Jóhannesson made a closer study of the problem in an essay in *Nordæla* (1956; in English in *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* XVI 1, 1962). He observes that *Eiríks saga* must have been written after 1264 because Brandr Sæmundarson figures in a genealogy in it as Bishop Brandr "the first", plainly in order to distinguish him from Bishop Brandr "the second": the former was bishop of Hólar 1163–1201, the latter, Brandr Jónsson, just for the two years 1263–4. This would suit the assumption that the author of *Eiríks saga* made use of Sturla Þórðarson's *Landnámabók*. In *Grænlendinga saga*, on the other hand, Bishop Brandr is referred to

Christianity came to Greenland from Norway in the opening years of the eleventh century, about the same time as it came to Iceland. The Greenlanders built many churches and established a cathedral at Garðar in Einarsfjörður. The picture shows the ruins of a large monastery, dedicated to St Óláfr and St Augustine, built in Ketilsfjörður. Photo: Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen.

without any qualification – and it is certainly the first Bishop Brandr who is meant. The natural conclusion is that this text was written before the second Bishop Brandr was consecrated, i.e. before 1263, and *Grænlendinga saga* is consequently older than *Eiríks saga*.

Jón then discusses the tale told in *Eiríks saga* of how Óláfr Tryggvason sent Leifr Eiríksson to preach Christianity in Greenland. On his voyage he discovered Vínland and saved some shipwrecked sailors and got his nickname, Leifr the Lucky. Similar accounts are found elsewhere, notably in *Heimskringla* and *Kristni saga*, but in all probability they all stem from the same source, the *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* by Gunnlaugr Leifsson (p. 157), as Nordal suggested. The *Grænlendinga saga* account is evidently unrelated to Gunnlaugr's work and its derivatives. But if the author of the saga was not familiar with Gunnlaugr's version – which rapidly became well known and was accepted by the foremost scholars of the thirteenth century – then it is natural to conclude that he wrote before Gunnlaugr, whose *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* was composed about 1200. In that case, *Grænlendinga saga* is one of the oldest sagas we have, written while Brandr Sæmundarson was bishop, between 1163 and 1201.

The author of *Eiríks saga* elected to follow Gunnlaugr's account and that choice necessitated a number of deviations from *Grænlendinga saga*. The differences between the two can be traced to this. We should on the other hand not rule out the possibility that the author of *Eiríks saga* had other written sources at his disposal besides *Grænlendinga saga* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* either as Gunnlaugr wrote it or in some related version.

There are some weak links in Jón Jóhannesson's chain of argument summarised here.

1. We cannot be certain that Gunnlaugr included an account of Leifr's mission to Greenland and discovery of Vínland, because Gunnlaugr's *Óláfs saga* is lost and its reconstruction largely conjectural. *Heimskringla* is the earliest text with this story in it – though we may be sure Snorri did not invent it.

2. Even if the account was in Gunnlaugr's work and the *Grænlendinga saga* was made at a later date, the author of the latter need not have been familiar with it. He could have been writing before the Leifr story became common knowledge in the course of the thirteenth century. Alternatively, if he was familiar with it, he could nevertheless have had reason to depart from it for his own purposes. There are many instances of comparable deviation – it is what Jón Jóhannesson thinks the author of *Eiríks saga* did in his treatment of *Grænlendinga saga*.

3. We can attach no significance to the reference to Bishop Brandr without any qualification in *Grænlendinga saga*. The name could have come straight from an older written genealogy which the author repeated without a second thought. Jón Jóhannesson assumes the author of *Eiríks saga* did just the same sort of thing in different contexts.

4. *Grænlendinga saga* and *Eiríks saga* have many passages that are both alike and unlike. It is difficult to dispel the thought that these represent separate notation of traditional accounts that had diverged in their oral existence, and that this is the chief reason why the two sagas have such differences.

5. Jón Jóhannesson notes that there is only one instance of direct verbal correspondence between *Grænlendinga saga* and *Eiríks saga*, but this is an extraordinary dearth if in fact the one saga was an immediate source of the other. Jón cites the A and C texts of *Ljósvetninga saga* as a parallel (cf. p. 241), but though these vary, they have many more examples of literal correspondence than this.

6. Last but not least, one might stand Jón's conclusion on its head and argue that *Grænlendinga saga* was derived from *Eiríks saga*. In the former we find a report of discoveries of new lands by Bjarni Herjólfsson *and* a report of the way in which names were bestowed on the new-found countries. The account of the naming seems undeniably related to the narrative of *Eiríks saga*, and in that case it might be plausibly maintained that the author of *Grænlendinga saga* was attempting to cobble sources together. Bjarni finds the new countries but is oddly reluctant to explore them (was this to leave something for Leifr to do?). Later Leifr undertakes their exploration and gives them names (like Karlsefni and his companions in *Eiríks saga*), and then comes across the shipwrecked sailors on his way home – and "was afterwards ("ever afterwards" in *Eiríks saga*) called Leifr the Lucky", as it says in both sagas.

Laxdæla saga is commonly regarded as the first of the *Íslendinga sögur* to show the influence of the courtly ideals and chivalrous literature which flourished in Norway under King Hákon (died 1263) and his son, King Magnús (died 1280). Pomp and splendour are more evident in it than in sagas usually regarded its precursors: pomp in arms and armour and dress, splendour in physical beauty and manly prowess. Kjartan Óláfsson "was the handsomest of all men ever born in Iceland. He had well-marked features and a pleasing countenance, the finest eyes of any man, and fair colouring. He had an abundance of hair, silky bright and falling in curls . . ." Bolli Bollason "was so great a dandy . . . that he would

only wear fine cloth and satin and all his weapons were gold-adorned." (For further instances cf. p. 220). In *Laxdæla saga* this love of chivalric show is most pronounced in chapter 63, when a shepherd boy describes to Helgi Harðbeinsson the appearance and gear of his attackers in such detail that Helgi can identify each of them from his tale. Courtly influence is also revealed in a novel feeling for love between man and woman – and especially for the sorrow love can bring. Hrefna only lived a little while after Kjartan's death "and people say she died of a broken heart". Guðrún's words to Bolli, her son, are best known of all. He asked which man she had loved most and she answered, "I was worst to him I loved best." Such magnificent outward show and such tenderness of feeling are not to be found in the sagas we have so far discussed, and not in any of the kings' sagas either, whether by Snorri or his predecessors. "Contemporary" sagas suggest that courtly influence began to make itself felt in Icelandic society from about 1240 onwards. This gives a terminus for *Laxdæla saga* but it does not imply that it must have been written soon after that date or in that first decade.

And despite its chivalric features, *Laxdæla saga* is not to be regarded as a saga of chivalry. It firmly belongs among the *Íslendinga sögur* and has a rightful place with the sagas so far considered. The courtly elements are there as spice, not substance. The narrative divides into two main parts. In the first part the author gathers his material together and weaves various strands which will contribute to the design of the second major part: this represents a neighbourhood history from the settlement down to the end of the tenth century. When Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir appears on the scene, however, everything begins to revolve around her and the different strands start to come together. But not all at once, for it is only when the foster-brothers, Kjartan and Bolli, are introduced that the narrative finds the theme which will engross it until the end of the story.

From Laxdæla saga, *ch. 78. It begins:* fra þv*i* er sagt eit*t* hu*er*t sin*n* at B(olli) ko*m* t*il* Helgaf(ells) þ*v*i at G(uðrunu) þotti avallt gott e*r* h*ann* ko*m* at finna h*ana* – *"It is told that on one occasion Bolli came to Helgafell, for Guðrún was always pleased when he came to see her." In the following lines Bolli asks her which man she had most loved. She replies with remarks on her four husbands. He tells her she has not answered his question and, when he presses her, she finally makes her famous admission (lines 17–18):* þei*m* v*ar* ek vest e*r* ek vn*n*a mest – *"I was worst to him I loved most." Árni Magnússon Institute, Reykjavík: AM 132 fol. (Möðruvallabók). C. 1350. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.*

þ þ ê sagt eit hiur sinn at b. kõ t̃ helgar þ
at. G. þorri a vallt gott ê hi kõ at ýtna ha
b. sat hia modur sinni longu ȝ vð þeim
talat. þa mli b. munu segia mr þ moðer
at mr ê þoumrni a at vita. hiuu hef þu
mann mest vnt. G. s. hik v̊ þi riki ætt ȝ
hoðungi mestr. en engi v mr ȝuliger
en bolli. ȝ albert at s. þðr mgunar. s. v
mr vitr ætt þra. ȝ lagam̃ mestr. hvallðe
get ek at engu þa s. b. skul ek þrugiæ
la hvat þu segr mr þ þ hufa hiuu v þa
rit bænda þina en hit vðr en ecki sa
gt hiuu þu vnir mest. þar þru mu ec
ki at leyna þ lengr. G. s. þast skorar hv
þta sonr minn s. G. en ek ætl þ nockru
ru segia þa mun ek þik hellzt velia
t þ. G. bað hana s ga. þa mli G. þei v
ek vest ê ek vna mest. þ hyggnu v. s.
b. at nu sie sagt allernarð lega ȝ vð ha
na vel hafa goet ê hi sagði þra ê hi þa
vitnaði. G. vð gomul kona ȝ ê þ sagn

In this structure *Laxdæla saga* resembles a number of sagas of Icelanders. An author has two sorts of material: on the one hand, remote and shadowy tales from the first settlements, genealogies, legends connected with place-names; and on the other, younger and more detailed accounts of moving events. The ancient stuff makes a natural introduction and foundation for what is to be the main story, but the preliminary matter in *Laxdæla saga* is set against a wider background, and its component parts are consequently more varied and extensive, than in earlier sagas. It can happen that a reader finds his interest faltering and his grasp of all the threads slipping until the story of Guðrún at last begins.

Laxdæla differs from all other sagas in the prominence it gives to women in the story. Unnr djúpúðga reigns like a queen over her followers and allots them land with prudence and precision, a benevolent figure for all her stateliness and authority. Melkorka in her slavery keeps her thoughts to herself, pretends to be dumb but chatters to her little son in secret. Blue-blooded Þorgerðr Egilsdóttir feels no need to conceal her scorn when marriage to that same boy grown to manhood is proposed to her – her father cannot expect her to accept "that slave-woman's son". And she is fierce and hard when she later urges her sons to take vengeance for the death of Kjartan, their brother. The author knows *Egils saga* inside out and finds it fitting to make Þorgerðr take after her father in such obvious ways. A complete contrast to her is Hrefna Ásgeirsdóttir, who fades away like a plucked flower when she hears of the death of her husband.

But Guðrún stands lofty above them all. Once on the stage, then the centre of it is her only place – if she had been a man, the saga would probably be named after her. She is the greatest of all the women portrayed in the sagas. The major chapters of her life are foreshadowed in the four dreams which Gestr the Wise interprets for her. She is described like this: "Guðrún was the most promising girl of all who were then growing up in Iceland, both in looks and mind . . . so refined in taste that whatever other women had in the way of finery in those days seemed childish and tawdry in comparison . . . She was the best informed of women and the best spoken. She was an openhanded woman." She was upset when Kjartan decided to go abroad without consulting her, and said she would make no promises about waiting for him for three years. But when Bolli proposed to her, she said: "I shall marry no one as long as I know Kjartan is alive." She rises to superb heights in her liberality when she saves Gunnarr Þiðrandabani and

gives him the ship that can take him abroad. But she sinks correspondingly low when she meanly gets her brother to steal treasures that are precious for their worth and associations from Kjartan and Hrefna, his king's gift of a sword and her fine head-dress. She seems truly feminine in her love of gorgeous things and in her seething jealousy, but she is a fury when she drives Bolli to attack Kjartan and eggs on her sons in set terms to avenge their father.

Her resemblance to valkyrie figures of eddaic poetry is self-evident and has often been commented on. She plays the part of Brynhildr Buðladóttir. Like her, she cannot have the *nonpareil* she loves and incites her husband to destroy him. It could be that heroic poetry had already had a shaping influence on tales told about Guðrún before the saga was written – but if it is a matter of direct imitation, then we must put the "eddaic" realisation of her character down to the author's credit – he was perfectly capable of it.

There are not many verbal correspondences between the saga and eddaic poetry, though they occur here and there. One of the many memorable instances of the spoken word in the saga is Guðrún's jubilant expression of derisive anticipation after the death of Kjartan: "But I mention last what seems to me worth most – that Hrefna will not go laughing to bed this evening." That sounds like an echo from the *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma* (pp. 62–3):

Hló þá Brynhildr	Then Brynhildr
Buðladóttir	daughter of Buðli
einu sinni	laughed once
af öllum hug,	with all her heart
er hon til hvílu	when she could hear
heyra knátti	the piercing lament
gjallan grát	from the bed
Gjúka dóttur.	of Gjúki's daughter.

As is often the case with romantic or romantically-inclined writers, the author of *Laxdæla saga* takes least trouble over the portrayal of his favourite men. In this connection it has been said that he could have adapted Guðrún's own words as a motto: I was worst to those I loved the most. Despite the superficial courtliness, the saga has in most respects the fundamental realism of earlier sagas of Icelanders – but even so, Kjartan and Bolli Bollason appear a pair of handsome dummies when compared with Guðrún and Þorgerðr. When *Íslendinga sögur* had the status of holy writ in Iceland and it was a common custom to

assess and compare the characters in them, sensible people were known to opine that Kjartan could not have been a very intelligent man. His father, Óláfr, is similarly beautiful to look at – when he was twelve years old, people used to come from other districts to "marvel at his wonderful shapeliness" – but in his prime, the glamour fades and he takes on a new guise as the sturdy manager of his estates and the respected leader of his district. No one has any doubts about his intelligence, and we cannot help but admire his desire for reconciliation and his patience.

Bolli Bollason is still a youth when the story ends, and the author merely remarks that he turned into "a man of many parts and popular". Some later reader who found this unsatisfactory took up his pen and composed an independent *þáttr* to tack onto the end of the saga. In this *Bolla þáttr* Bolli is associated with a number of other people, most of them new in the story – mere ciphers the lot of them, a collection of goodies and baddies. The whole piece is pure invention and artistically much inferior to *Laxdæla saga*.

The author of *Hænsa-Þóris saga* treats his subject-matter very freely – but then he cites no verse in support of his story and may not have had much in the way of oral tradition to restrain him. A contribution of his own is clearly seen in the account of the case after the burning of Blund-Ketill, where the same sequence of events is described time and again, with some slight variation, until many chieftains are implicated. This is not the sort of matter that was likely to live in oral tradition. The same can be said of other episodes, as Sigurður Nordal points out in his introduction to the saga in Íslenzk fornrit III (1938).

But we have to accept the chief incident, the burning at Örnólfsdalur, as a historical fact, because Ari refers to it in *Íslendingabók*. The odd thing is that Ari's brief account differs in some important respects from that of the saga, most strikingly in the identification of the victim of the burning. The saga says this was Blund-Ketill, Ari says it was Þorkell, his son. Another discrepancy is that the saga presents Hersteinn as Blund-Ketill's son, while Ari makes him Þorkell's son.

Landnámabók – i.e. Sturlubók and Hauksbók – agree with the saga in reporting that it was Blund-Ketill who died in the fire, and so do the early annals which record the burning s.a. 962 (*Flateyjarannáll* s.a. 963). These sources were once generally preferred but Konrad Maurer, in *Über die Hænsa-Þóris saga* (1871), demonstrated that Ari was more

reliable in every respect. He also argued that Sturla had followed the saga in his recension of *Landnámabók*, often following it in preference to his main *Landnáma* source. Since then, scholars have universally accepted Maurer's conclusions and have looked on Sturla's choice of a recently written saga in preference to the venerable and trustworthy Ari as one of the clearest instances of his uncritical approach.

But there are many points to note. The reason for the burning was that Blund-Ketill took hay without permission from the wealthy Hænsa-Þórir in order to dole it out to tenants of his in a hard winter. These circumstances have drawn attention to a novel article in the laws of *Jónsbók*, which said that hay could be lawfully taken from anyone who had it to spare and be sold, on condition that enough was left to keep the owner's stock until summer. This article caused great dissension at the General Assembly of 1281, and in the petition sent to the king on matters concerning the new law-book the Icelanders specifically asked for its alteration. In the *Grágás* laws such appropriation of another man's property was strictly forbidden. It is very tempting to connect the composition of the saga with these disputes, and indeed direct parallels, both of substance and phrasing, can be found between the saga and *Jónsbók*. But if the saga was not written until 1281 or later, it is hard to think that it influenced Sturla, who died in 1284. In a paper on this problem published in 1977 (in *Opuscula septentrionalia*, a Festschrift for Ole Widding), I came to an opposite conclusion: it was Sturla's *Landnámabók*, or a recension related to it, which influenced the author of *Hænsa-Þóris saga*. The confusion between Blund-Ketill and Þorkell Blund-Ketilsson must have arisen in oral transmission. The saga itself was composed in the last decades of the thirteenth century, when controversy raged hottest over the *Jónsbók* law concerning appropriation of surplus hay.

There was a time when *Fóstbræðra saga* was counted as antique as *Heiðarvíga saga*: they were the oldest of all *Íslendinga sögur*, written about 1200 or very soon afterwards. More recent studies have shown however that it is a much younger work, written towards 1300. The evidence for this date of composition is found in the saga's literary relations, direct or indirect. It will be remembered that the saga contains a number of strange digressions, so-called *klausur*, "passages, clauses", whose syntax and vocabulary betray late origin and strong signs of clerical or learned style. It was once thought that these passages were interpolations – a conclusion which appeared to be warranted by their absence in Hauks-

bók, the oldest manuscript. But further study has shown that, in fact, there are traces of some of the *klausur* in Hauksbók: and the rest must have been excised by the editor who was busy abridging the saga.

The saga takes its name from the foster-brothers, Þorgeirr Hávarsson and Þormóðr Bersason, called Kolbrúnarskáld. Both are brilliantly portrayed. Þormóðr the poet is a vacillating character, as is proper enough. He is attached to Þórdís of Ögur but does not want to marry her. Later he makes love-poetry about Þorbjörg kolbrún – "dark-brow" – in Arnardalur, and his nickname comes from her. Þorgeirr is valour personified – at the age of fifteen he avenges his father and thereafter kills on the slightest provocation. But he has little interest in women – he said it was a shameful misuse of his strength to crawl over girls. The Flateyjarbók text has some extra passages with far-fetched illustrations of his intrepid courage and his attitude as a cold-blooded connoisseur of killing. Thus, he did not call for help even though the angelica stalk he was hanging on to was nearly out by the roots and there was a sheer sixty-fathom cliff beneath him. And when the shepherd from Hvassafell leant forward on his staff and stretched out his neck, Þorgeirr sliced off his head. "He had not done anything to offend me," said Þorgeirr, "but the fact was that I could not restrain myself when he stood in such an ideal position . . ."

When Þorgeirr was at his most arrogant, he once asked Þormóðr which of them he thought would win if they fought it out between them. "I don't know," answered Þormóðr, "but I do know that this question of yours will put an end to our companionship, under a roof or on the road." A champion like Þorgeirr cannot be expected to die in his bed. He was attacked on his ship in Hraunhöfn on Melrakkaslétta in the far northeast of Iceland and was overcome after a valiant defence. He had notched up thirteen killings and learned men calculate he was just under thirty years old. But no better illustration of the obligations of honour observed in those days can be found than in Þormóðr's conduct after Þorgeirr's death. Despite their sudden rupture, he now spares nothing and no one, neither himself nor others, in his efforts to avenge his blood-brother. First he took his place as a sworn retainer of St Óláfr and then sailed to Greenland, where in all he killed five men in revenge for Þorgeirr's death. After that he returned to King Óláfr in Norway and stood by him to the last, making a memorable end with his royal master in the battle of Stiklestad. The *Legendary Saga* and Snorri's *Óláfs saga* have related accounts of Þormóðr's death, and it is clear that Snorri and

the author of *Fóstbræðra saga* knew the same saga – or possibly sagas – of St Óláfr.

An important source utilised by the author was poetry attributed to Þormóðr, of which he cites many stanzas. Nearly half of them are said to be from the memorial lay – *erfidrápa* – which Þormóðr composed on Þorgeirr. If the term *drápa* was used in a technically correct way, then probably a good deal of the poem is lost, since none of the preserved stanzas includes a refrain section. But possibly the term *erfidrápa* was used more loosely in the saga-author's time and might refer to a sequence without refrains. Some scholars have doubted the antiquity and attribution of the *drápa* but hardly, it seems, for compelling reasons. More doubt attaches to some of the occasional stanzas, not least those which Þormóðr is supposed to have composed – with an arrow lodged in his heart – after the battle of Stiklestad: as Jón Helgason observes, "There won't be many who labour at versifying in such a state." But the author of *Fóstbræðra saga* doubtless accepted all the verse in good faith – and he had good precedent for, long before his time, writers of kings' sagas had vividly added to the "truth" of their narratives by quoting the stanzas of the dying Þormóðr.

In addition to *Óláfs saga helga* and Þormóðr's poetry, which came to him in fixed form, it is usually assumed that the author drew on extensive oral tales about the foster-brothers. But the closer one studies the saga, the clearer it becomes that it is packed with literary motifs – so packed, indeed, that it is difficult to find much room for oral tradition at all. The saga belongs with those *Íslendinga sögur* that are on their way to becoming pure novels. Constant repetition of the same or similar elements shows that the author had to stretch his material as far as it would go. Trivial dialogue exchanges are common, sometimes reminiscent of the direct speech found in *fornaldarsögur*: consider, for example, the exchange between Illugi Arason and Helgi selseista in chapter 14. The people in the story are presented in ways reminiscent of *Grettis saga*: minor characters are not individualised but the chief actors are fully and vividly portrayed; and between them Þorgeirr and Þormóðr have some of Grettir's traits. The story of Þormóðr's exploits in Greenland is admirably told: what he lacks in physical prowess is made up for by his undaunted courage, intelligence and luck. And the account of his death at Stiklestad is also unforgettable, even though much of it builds on *Óláfs saga helga*, including the stern pathos of his death-chant:

Undrask öglis landa
eik hví vér erum bleikir,
fár verðr fagr af sárum,
fann ek örva drif, svanni.
Mik fló málmr inn dökkvi
magni keyrðr í gögnum,
hvasst beit hjarta it næsta
hættligt járn er ek vætti.

The tree of hawk's ground [the woman] wonders why I am pale: few become fair from wounds – I met the driving snow of arrows, lady. Driven with force the dark metal flew through me, the perilous iron bit sharp – next to my heart, I fancy.

The *Oldest Saga of St Óláfr* (p. 159) contains a separate *Þormóðar þáttr*, doubtless first composed by the author for that text. The *þáttr* has usually been printed from Flateyjarbók, where the text, though fuller, does not give a true impression because the end of it is a conflation of the *Oldest Saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga*. Originally, the two were quite independent. The *þáttr* tells quite a different story from the saga, describing Þormóðr's stay with Knútr the Great in Denmark and his first meeting with St Óláfr.

Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu has been the best known and the most popular of all sagas outside Iceland, though its reputation has suffered somewhat in the last generation or two. In Íslenzk fornrit III (1938) Sigurður Nordal noted that "the Icelandic text has been printed at least twenty-four times before this and nearly sixty translations published (if we include some slightly abridged versions)."

It was in fact the elegant and thoughtful introduction which Nordal wrote for this edition which marked the turning-point in the saga's fortunes. He notes certain artistic flaws in the saga, and dwells especially on its lack of consistent realism. But he also acknowledges that it was precisely the flaws in the saga which accounted for much of its popularity. "Gunnlaugr Snake-tongue, who does not limp while both his legs are the same length and who risks his life to bring his wounded enemy a drink of water, is just how people want their Viking to be: tough, arrogant, magnanimous, a man who plays fair. Helga the Fair, the swan who sits passive while eagles fight for her and who tenderly fondles her grief when, with death at hand, she spreads out the cloak Gunnlaugr had given her, is close kin to Ophelia and Gretchen and many other women portrayed in modern literature. She is far closer to the nineteenth-century ideal of womanhood than the viragos of ancient days who compassed men's deaths and put their feelings second to their pride. And, not least, it is more in keeping with the sentiments of

our age to fight a duel for the sake of a beautiful woman than to indulge in murderous competition on account of an all too prickly sense of honour, as the custom was in the saga age."

This verdict of Nordal's on *Gunnlaugs saga* was the outcome of long deliberation on saga-problems and part of a wider study. Soon afterwards he published his paper on *Hrafnkels saga* (p. 251), which increased the fame of that story as much as his work on *Gunnlaugs saga* reduced *its* reputation. But when Sigurður talks of "our age", he is talking of a time that was past: behind his judgment of *Gunnlaugs saga* lies the end of one epoch and the beginning of another. For over half a century sentimental literature has not enjoyed much esteem anywhere, for a variety of historic reasons. If some tenderness of heart is unavoidable, it should at least be concealed under a hard-boiled exterior. Sigurður Nordal's verdict coloured critical opinion – but it was itself coloured by the views of a new literary movement.

Naturam expelles furca, tamen usque recurret. Love and love's tragedy are part of life and will not easily be eradicated from literature and other art. Readers "sacrifice in secret" and go back to older literature if they find themselves deprived. Literary taste goes in waves, and who can tell whether unashamed emotionalism may not reappear in some unexpected vogue.

The main theme is patterned in brief in the dream which Þorsteinn Egilsson has at the outset of the story. Like Þorsteinn, the reader suspects what must come, but he does not know for certain and still less does he know how it will happen. Thereafter the story flows on in a straightforward sequence. The main characters are introduced: there are not many of them and, as is suitable in a romantic work, they are not very complicated personalities. At first sight there seems little to choose between Gunnlaugr and Hrafn: both are poets, ambitious, brave, good fighting men . . . But it soon appears that in some qualities they are quite unlike, and this difference between them has a vital influence on the course of events. Gunnlaugr is demanding and haughty, outspoken and sometimes rash, but always honest. Hrafn has more guile, he can dissimulate his anger when necessary. But he is a knave at heart and cheats Gunnlaugr at fateful moments – he lies in order to win Helga, Gunnlaugr's betrothed, and he gives Gunnlaugr a mortal wound with a last treacherous blow. "Don't deceive me, then," says Gunnlaugr, as he agrees to bring Hrafn water. That imperative shows that he knows Hrafn – and the sequel shows he had good cause to utter it. It is in this

contest between the rivals that the author displays a sharp-edged realism which lifts the saga above the ordinary level of romantic love-stories.

Everyone agrees that *Gunnlaugs saga* belongs with the younger *Íslendinga sögur*, probably written in the latter part of the thirteenth century. The author evidently knew *Egils saga, Laxdæla* and *Eyrbyggja*; the saga's relations with *Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa* were discussed above (p. 256). In assessing its date of composition critics take into account both its literary associations and its markedly romantic character.

The romantic tendency and comparatively late date of the saga have persuaded scholars that the author treated with the utmost freedom any information he had from oral sources and added matter of his own invention as he pleased. One of the points argued by Björn M. Ólsen in a paper published in 1911 was that the author was responsible for nearly all the verse attributed to Gunnlaugr and Hrafn. Scholars have since regarded these stanzas with grave suspicion, though they vary in what they reject. No one has a very high opinion of their value as poetry – they are not up to the standard of Gunnlaugr (but how can we tell?) or of "Poet-Hrafn", as he is called in *Landnámabók*. It does not help that the best stanza in the saga, *Brámáni skein brúna*, is given to Kormákr in *Kormáks saga* – and seems more at home with the verse of that saga than with the other poetry of *Gunnlaugs saga*. It has also been noted that some of the stanzas simply could not have been composed in the circumstances described – but of course that stricture applies to verse in other sagas as well.

Snorri however cites a half-stanza found in the saga and attributes it to Gunnlaugr. And Sigurður Nordal points out that some of the digressions from the main story and some of the saga's structural flaws can in fact be explained by assuming that the author was basing his narrative on stanzas which he knew and did not want to ignore. In that case the stanzas must have been made before the saga was written. But, as Nordal remarks, whether they are correctly attributed is another matter, and it is entirely probable that at least some of them were composed to accompany unwritten stories told about Gunnlaugr, Hrafn and Helga.

There are other reasons for thinking that the author made some use of orally-preserved accounts. The essential events were of a tragic kind likely to be remembered from one generation to another, though not without accretion and embroidery. The author of *Egils saga*, who certainly wrote his work well before the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* settled

to his task, twice refers to those events as if they were common knowledge: he speaks of Helga the Fair "over whom Gunnlaugr Snake-tongue and Poet-Hrafn contended".

Although *Gunnlaugs saga* has recently enjoyed less favour than before, we should not allow that to blind us to its qualities. Its classic tragic theme lifts it above time and space, and a new literary taste may well restore it to esteem. While we wait for this to come, we need not discourage anyone from enjoying it for what it is. Nor need we worry much if it once more plays a part in shaping a new generation's ideas about men and women in early Iceland: life seen whole has room for Gunnlaugr and Helga.

The last phase of composition of sagas of Icelanders belongs to the fourteenth century, perhaps to the early fifteenth century too. *Fornaldarsögur* and home-produced sagas of chivalry were extremely popular and influenced the development of *Íslendinga sögur* (pp. 219–222). The youngest of these last tend to offer a mosaic of motifs drawn from native and foreign sources but are virtually empty of well-informed history. Some sagas of this "novelistic" kind, with settings in the saga age, were written in the west of the country.

Sagas which represent revisions of older narratives occupy a special place. *Harðar saga Grímkelssonar ok Geirs* is referred to in Sturla's *Landnámabók*, so its first version must have been made comparatively early in the thirteenth century. We only know it in complete shape, however, in a young recension, the oldest manuscript of which is from the latter part of the fifteenth century, where it has the title *Hólmverja saga*. The opening also exists in another manuscript, where it is slimmer in substance and briefer in expression. This has been generally regarded as a fragment of the older saga known to Sturla, possibly here in an abridged form. In some ways, however, this text looks like an excerpt from the complete recension we have, and it is best to reserve judgment pending further enquiry.

There are elements in the saga which put it on a par with the fantastic sagas of the fourteenth century: Hörðr's mound-breaking to win the treasures of Sóti the Viking for one. The verse in it is clearly fourteenth-century work. Many of the characters are inventions of the author, though some have authentic origins, and it is reasonable to suppose that the destruction of the Hólmverjar, the main event in the saga, reflects a real incident of long ago. Hörðr Grímkelsson is referred to in *Landnáma-*

bók as "the leader of the Hólmsmenn", and the same source says of Torfi Valbrandsson that he "played the biggest part in wiping out the Hólmsmenn". Hauksbók says specifically that Hörðr was killed on Geirshólmur, and this is probably original in *Landnámabók* rather than an insert from the first *Harðar saga*. But various other elements in the story are more easily rejected than authenticated.

The theme has a certain grandeur besides the thread of romance. An Icelandic farmer's son wins fame abroad and marries the daughter of the earl of Götaland. Back on his home ground in Iceland, he is struck by misfortune and becomes the leader of a gang of bandits, but he and his company are finally destroyed by his uncle. What we remember best is probably the tale of how Helga, his young widow, swims to the mainland from their islet-refuge along with her two small sons – "Helga's Sound is the name of it now." But the author does not concentrate as he might on the central themes, his structure is shaky, his descriptions full of exaggeration. We know little about the earlier *Harðar saga*, but the mishmash we have does not suggest we have lost much of a masterpiece.

At the end of the saga the writer refers to Styrmir the Wise (died 1245). He reports that Styrmir thinks Hörðr was one of the most notable outlaws, for three reasons which he cites. Some people have concluded from this that Styrmir wrote the original *Harðar saga*, but it is doubtful whether so much should be read into it. If it were true, Styrmir's opinion could have been given verbally or in some short note. We recall that similar remarks occur at the end of *Grettis saga* and are there credited to Sturla Þórðarson. Perhaps the author of *Harðar saga* wanted to vie with that authentication and found a still more venerable authority in Styrmir.

Kjalnesinga saga was written by a man who was thoroughly familiar with the district which forms the background to his story. He is indeed an enthusiastic inventor of people named after farms in the area. He was well-read in older sagas and borrowed from them, but he also drew on local traditional lore which he then linked to his imaginary characters. He goes to *Eyrbyggja saga* for his description of the temple of Þorgrímr the Chieftain. When Esja hides Búi and burns a damp peat to make smoke and stench in the house, he models the scene on Gríma's concealment of Þormóðr in *Fóstbræðra saga*. He often turns to *fornaldarsögur* for material, especially *Örvar-Odds saga* – his description of Búi Andríðsson is reminiscent in many ways of the description of Oddr. One

of the incidents not pillaged from a book but probably of local, unwritten origin is the wrestling between Búi and Jökull, his son, which ends with Búi's death. A fatal contest between father and son is a widespread motif, famous for example from the Old High German *Hildebrandslied* (p. 31). Elements in certain Irish tales have been found to provide especially close parallels to the episode in *Kjalnesinga saga*.

Some manuscripts have a separate *þáttr* of Jökull Búason as an appendix to the saga. It was written later than the saga and is still more fantastic, totally at home in the world of *fornaldarsögur* and *riddara sögur*.

In its extant form *Flóamanna saga* is one of the fanciful sagas of the fourteenth century, put together from bits of *Landnámabók*, legendary and even hagiographic material. Some traditional tales can however be detected in the later part of the story, and their presence suggests that the saga was re-created from an older version. The hero is Þorgils Þórðarson Örrabeinsstjúpr and the saga could be appropriately named after him. There are impressive elements in the account of his voyage to Greenland – he suffers extremes of hardship, his wife dies and later his son – a baby he has suckled himself – dies too. But these disasters deserved a better narrator.

Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings is another saga that must have existed in an earlier version than the one we know now – like *Harðar saga*, *Gull-Þóris saga* and *Svarfdæla saga*. Sturla used an older text in his *Landnámabók*, referring to it once as "the saga of Þorbjörn and Hávarðr the Lame" and once as "the saga of the men of Ísafjörðr". He takes some genealogies from the saga and re-tells a chapter of it. Sturla's material is notably different from what is told in the preserved saga, and it seems most likely that the author of the latter was working from memory as well as altering as he saw fit.

He had no compunction about adding fictions of his own either, for the saga is full of typical fourteenth-century fantasy. Þormóðr of Bakki, the zombie laid low by Óláfr bjarnylr, is reminiscent of Glámr in *Grettis saga* and was doubtless modelled on him. The "coal-biter", Atli the Little, seems most at home among *fornaldarsaga* figures. There are only two sorts of people: Hávarðr and everyone on his side are good, Þorbjörn Þjóðreksson and all his lot are bad. Þorbjörn kills Óláfr bjarnylr, Hávarðr's son, without provocation, and Hávarðr then takes to his bed and stays there, more or less inactive, for three years. After that he responds to his wife's egging and leaps up full of vigour. He

gathers men, attacks Þorbjörn and kills him and his two brothers in revenge for Óláfr.

Gull-Þóris saga is also called *Þorskfirðinga saga*, and it is the latter name which Sturla used in his *Landnámabók*. The version he had in his hands is now completely lost. The preserved text contains much exaggeration, which suggests that it is a good deal changed from the original recension. Þórir gets his nickname by winning masses of gold from Vikings who had turned into dragons and sat on their treasure in a cave north in fabulous Dumbshaf. The tale was also told that Þórir himself turned into a dragon and settled down on his gold in the waterfall later called Gullfoss in Djúpidalur.

Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss is a story about *landvættir* – "land-spirits" – and trolls, put together from passages in *Landnámabók*, various *märchen* motifs and place-name legends. The principal character, Bárðr, is son of Dumbr, king of the giants in Hafsbotn, "Ocean's gulf" – Dumbshaf was named after him. Bárðr moves to Iceland and becomes the supernatural patron of the men of Snæfellsnes. The latter part of the saga chiefly concerns his son, Gestr. Some scholars have thought this part was tacked on by a later editor, like the *þáttr* of Jökull at the end of *Kjalnesinga saga*, but a clear-cut division between the sections is not as visible here as there.

The best things in the saga are the verses – few in number but remarkably varied in tone. One of them describes the fishing banks off Snæfellsnes, another refers menacingly to the fate of a solitary fisherman – this one has been set to a modern tune and few people hearing it suspect that the words were composed in the fourteenth century:

Út reri einn á báti	Out alone he rowed his boat,
Ingjaldr í skinnfeldi . . .	Ingjaldr in cloak of fur . . .

The most affecting part of the prose story concerns Helga Bárðardóttir. She drifted on an ice-floe to Greenland where she became the mistress of Miðfjarðar-Skeggi. Back in Iceland she must be parted from him, and from then on she roamed restless about the country. Memories of her childhood home and longing for her lover merge in her melancholy verse:

Sæl værak	Happy I should be
ef sjá mættak	if I could see
Aðalþegnshóla	Aðalþegnshólar
ok Öndvertnes,	and Öndvertnes,

Plate 16
Part of Berserkjahraun on Snæfellsnes, where the berserks, Halli and Leiknir, cleared a road and built a wall for Víga-Styrr, as told in Eyrbyggja saga, *ch. 28. – Photo: Björn Rúriksson.*

Plate 17

"I dreamt," says Flosi, "that I thought I was at Lómagnúpr and that I went out and looked up at the mountain. And it opened and a man came out of the mountain and was in a goatskin coat and had an iron staff in his hand. He cried out as he came and called on my men, some sooner, some later, and named them by name . . . And I asked him his name. He said his name was Járngrímr. I asked where he was bound. He said he was bound for the Alþingi. 'What will you do there?' I said. He answered: 'First I shall clear the panels, then the courts, and then a battle-field for the fighting men' . . . Then he struck his staff down and there was a great crash; then he went into the mountain, and a fear came over me" (Njáls saga, *ch. 133). – Lómagnúpur seen from the south. – Photo: Hjálmar R. Bárðarson.*

Búrfell, Bala,	Búrfell and Bali,
báða Lóndranga,	both the Lóndrangar,
Heiðarkollu	Heiðarkolla
ok Hreggnasa,	and Hreggnasi,
Dritvíkr möl	the pebbles of Dritvík
fyrir durum fóstra.	at my fosterer's door.

Víglundar saga tells the love-story of Víglundr and Ketilríðr. They are long kept apart and Víglundr – or rather the saga-writer on his behalf – composes sorrowful stanzas on his beloved. But after suitable trials they are finally re-united at the end of the saga. This was one of the very last *Íslendinga sögur* to be written, a fact amply demonstrated by the atmosphere of the story and by the palpable influence of other kinds of younger literature, *fornaldarsögur, riddara sögur* and *Íslendinga sögur*. The most obviously influential of all was *Friðþjófs saga*, from which the author adopted the whole framework of his narrative.

Króka-Refs saga is pure fiction but skilfully composed and very entertaining. Refr, said to be a nephew of Gestr Oddleifsson (p. 276), gets his nickname from his cunning which never fails him at need. His bewildering word-play when reporting the death of Skálp-Grani to King Haraldr the Hardruler is probably his best-known stratagem – indeed, some of his circumlocutions have become so established that they can be heard in the Icelandic of today.

The south country is the setting of only one saga from the prime period of saga-writing – but it is worth a whole fistful of others. *Njáls saga, Brennu-Njáls saga, Njála* is the longest of all *Íslendinga sögur*, so vast and complex that it was long thought to be a compilation of at least two separate texts, a *Gunnars saga* and a *Njáls saga*. But we can quote with approval – as is often done – the words of A.U. Bååth (who otherwise made much of the notion that sagas were regularly made by putting several *þættir* together): "In its present form *Njáls saga* was written by an author who had such sovereign command over his material that, when he wrote the first line, he had – so to say – the last line already in his head." And Einar Ól. Sveinsson has shown beyond all doubt that the saga is the work of one author, a unity from beginning to end.

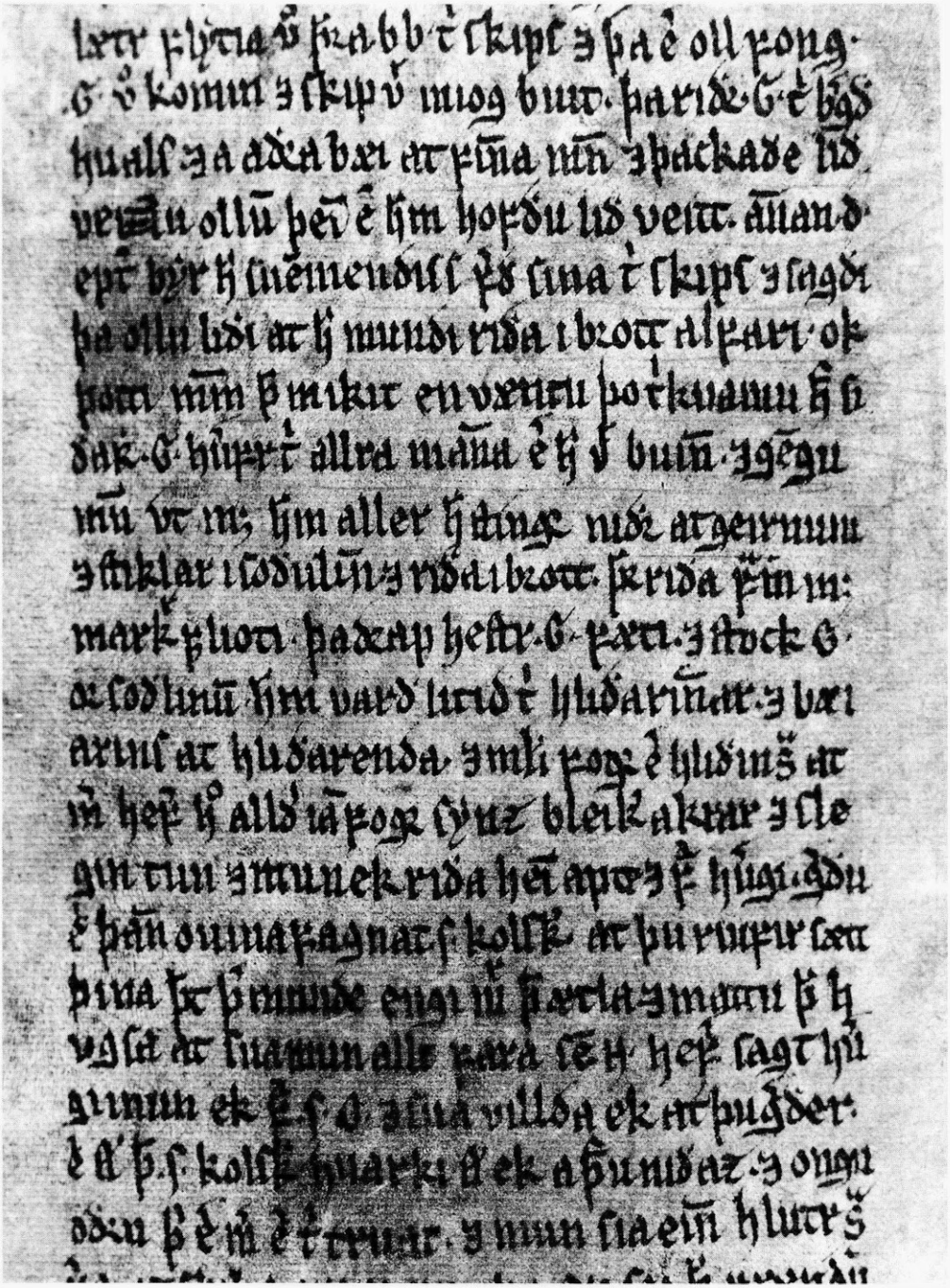
Even so, we must assume that this author – more than most others indeed – had many sources of many kinds to work on. We can distinguish three main groups: (1) written accounts of people and

events; (2) traditional oral accounts; (3) other literary works which the author took as models and adapted for his own creative purposes.

The use of a number of immediate literary sources can be demonstrated with a high degree of probability. The author knew written genealogies, very likely in several collections, and traces pedigrees on their authority, sometimes so far back that we meet whole strings of names. Their extent has led some scholars to think of dismissing them as interpolations, but this family history is so firmly locked into the whole story that such rejection cannot be countenanced. The pedigrees give the saga a semblance of history, and they give the reader a rest from the action-packed narrative. The lengthy rehearsal of legal formulas in the lawsuit at the General Assembly has the same effect. They offer a lull between great events as well as being dramatic in their own right, like court-room scenes in modern thrillers and films.

The author obviously knew and benefited from many earlier sagas, *Íslendinga sögur*, kings' sagas, *fornaldarsögur*, "contemporary" sagas. Sometimes such sources provide him with both the substance and the detail for his portraits (e.g. Hrútr Herjólfsson in *Laxdæla saga*, Snorri goði in *Eyrbyggja saga*). Sometimes he relies on his audience to know famous incidents from earlier works. It seems certain that he obtained his account of Þangbrandr's mission and the conversion of the Icelanders from a written source, which he modified and possibly abridged.

From Njáls saga, *ch. 75. Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi and his brother, Kolskeggr, were banished for three years. Starting at the end of the fourth line we read:* a*n*nan d(ag) ept*ir* byr h*ann* sne*m*mendiss fe*r*ð sina t*il* skips – *"Next day he gets ready early for his journey to the ship." It goes on: "And then he told all his people that now he would be riding off for good, and that upset them but yet they hoped he would come back again. Gunnarr embraced each one when he was ready and they all came out to see him on his way. He jabs down his halberd and vaults into the saddle and he and Kolskeggr ride off. They ride on towards Markarfljót, then Gunnarr's horse stumbled and he jumped clear from the saddle. He chanced to look up at the sweep of the Slope and the homestead at Hlíðarendi and said (lines 13–15):* fogr e*r* hliðin s*va* at m*er* hef*ir* h*on* alld*ri* ia*m* fogr synz bleik*ir* akrar *ok* slegin tun *ok* mun ek riða hei*m* aptr *ok* fa*r*a hu*e*rgi – *'Fair is the Slope and it has never looked to me so fair as now, cornfields white to harvest and homefields mown, and I shall ride back home and go not at all.'" Árni Magnússon Institute, Reykjavík: AM 132 fol. (Möðruvallabók). C. 1350. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.*



This *Kristni þáttr* is definitely not an interpolation, as some people have suggested it is. It provides an interlude between mighty conflicts in the narrative, and the introduction of the new faith paves the way for the stern Christian moral of the latter part of the saga. Ari's account of the Conversion in *Íslendingabók* is a source, direct or indirect, for the *Kristni þáttr*, whose text is also related to the story of the Conversion given in the expanded *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (p. 158).

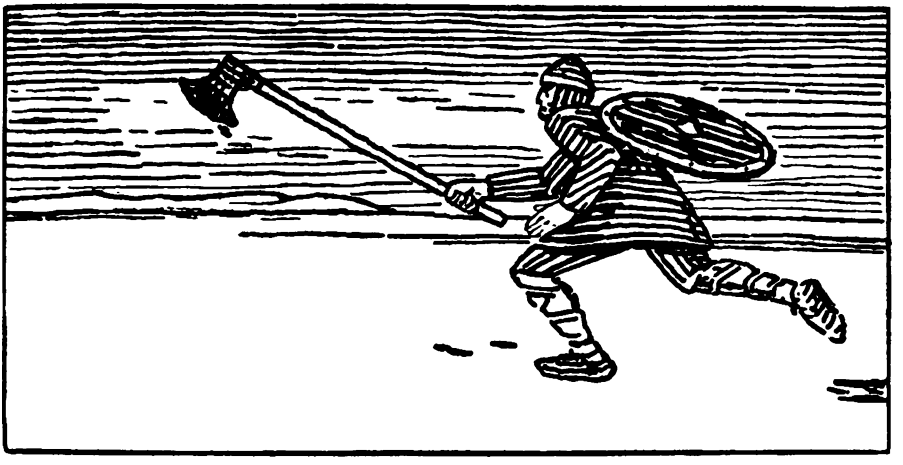
A further source whose use by the author is regarded as indisputable was an independent account of the battle of Clontarf, the so-called *Brjáns saga* (after Brian Boruma, the Irish high king who was killed but won the battle), which also provided matter for *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* (p. 249) and possibly for *Orkneyinga saga* (p. 164).

Minor influences from a variety of other written sources that are now lost can also be plausibly assumed. They include a saga about Mörðr gígja and the men of Fljótshlíð, which was also used in Sturla's *Landnámabók*, and a *Gauks saga Trandilssonar*, which is referred to in an entry in Möðruvallabók, the great codex of *Íslendinga sögur* in which *Njáls saga* has pride of place (see p. 208). The author learnt from *Gauks saga* that Gaukr and Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson were fosterbrothers and that Ásgrímr killed Gaukr.

The indirect profit the author of *Njáls saga* had from earlier sagas is no less noticeable. We can see how he picks up details here and there, incidents and personal characteristics, even phrases from narrative and dialogue, and re-fashions them to serve in new contexts. He learnt most from *Laxdæla saga* which he knew intimately and which, wittingly or unwittingly, he had in the forefront of his mind as he wrote. It is very instructive to compare these two sagas if one wants to understand and appreciate the methods of the author of *Njáls saga*.

After this cursory review of the author's written sources, we may turn to what he probably gleaned from oral stories and consider the possible nature of those stories. Where can we draw the boundary lines between literary sources and oral tradition, between imagination and history, in *Njáls saga?*

I remarked earlier (pp. 218 ff.) on the gradual development of saga-writing. Events of the saga age became more and more remote, traditional tales were variously transformed, historical accuracy dwindled, and authors compensated by borrowing from books and by taking older sagas as models. In these respects *Njáls saga* stands somewhere between the old and the new, though it chiefly belongs with the older sagas which we sometimes call "classic". Its transitional nature makes it



Njáls saga, *ch. 92: "Skarpheðinn takes a running jump and clears the channel between the ice-banks, gets his balance and hurls himself into a slide – the ice was very slippery and he went as fast as a flying bird." A drawing by Gunnlaugur Scheving.*

however difficult to answer the questions posed at the end of the last paragraph. The author had such creative power that he inevitably set aside claims of history and tradition in pursuit of his objectives. But he deploys historical fact and antique genealogy in such a way that, under the influence of a certain air, carefully cultivated, of calm objectivity, we are persuaded to believe what he sets before us.

Njáll, son of Þorgeirr gollnir, is mentioned in *Landnámabók*, which also says that he was burnt to death in his house at Bergþórshvoll with six or seven other people. In his *Edda* Snorri cites a half-stanza by "Brennu-Njáll". Early annals record the burning of Njáll, usually s.a. 1010. Kári Sölmundarson also figures in *Landnámabók* and is called Sviðu-Kári in Sturlubók, Brennu-Kári in Hauksbók – Kári "of the singeing" and Kári "of the burning". *Kristni saga* refers to Brennu-Flosi, and so do several sagas of Icelanders and kings' sagas. Most of these sources are older than *Njáls saga*.

Various other sources antedating *Njáls saga* make mention of Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi. *Landnámabók* tells of his fight with Otkell of Kirkjubær "by the fence at Hof" and with Egill of Sandgil at Knafahólar. These are evidently more reliable accounts, and less is made of the numbers of men killed by Gunnarr than in the saga. But Gunnarr was clearly famed

in story as a great champion and his last defence was especially well remembered. *Landnáma* and *Eyrbyggja saga* both refer to it, and it is spoken of in a verse by Þorkell elfaraskáld (cited in *Njáls saga*) and in the *Íslendingadrápa* by Haukr Valdísarson (p. 110). The poetry and *Landnámabók* agree in crediting him with two enemies dead and sixteen wounded before he himself fell – figures that must have been derived from a common source. *Landnámabók* and *Njáls saga* also largely agree on the identity of the leaders of the attack on Gunnarr: Gizurr the White, Geirr goði and Starkaðr from under Þríhyrningur. (Haukr Valdísarson names only Gizurr.)

All things considered, it seems likely that the author had more reliable information about Gunnarr than about Njáll. It is conceivable – though hardly possible to prove – that he had a written account of Gunnarr's career: perhaps a short *þáttr* – the answer to which Einar Ól. Sveinsson inclines in his introduction to the saga in Íslenzk fornrit XII (1954) – or perhaps a whole saga – the conclusion reached by Björn M. Ólsen in his unpublished lectures of seventy years ago. It is then worth noticing the differences between the verse quoted in the first part – "Gunnarr's saga" – and that in the second – "Njáll's saga". In the first part there are only two proper stanzas: the one by Þorkell elfaraskáld, mentioned above, and the one Gunnarr is heard reciting in his grave, which would appear to have been composed for him rather than by him. In the second part we find a good number of stanzas of very varied origin: some are very old, some from much later times, some perhaps even composed by the saga-author himself. Editors or scribes then made still more verses to insert in the saga, especially, it seems, to redress the balance between the two parts of the saga in this respect (see Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit XII, pp. 465–80).

By this I do not mean to claim that there is no history in the latter part of *Njáls saga*. Old and trustworthy sources confirm that Njáll was burnt to death at Bergþórshvoll along with members of his household. Excavation has proved that the farmstead there did indeed burn down at some time in the first two centuries of the settlement. The names Brennu-Flosi and Sviðu-Kári must depend on their association with a house-burning. Kári is probably also referred to in a verse by Móðólfr Ketilsson, which appears old and correctly attributed (see Íslenzk fornrit XII, pp. 335–6):

Stafr lifir einn, þar er inni unnfúrs viðir brunnu	A single man of Njáll's house- hold lives, where men burnt

– synir ollu því snjallir	indoors – the bold sons of
Sigfúss – Níals húsa.	Sigfúss were the cause of that.
Nú er, Gollnis sonr, goldinn	Now, son of Gollnir [Njáll],
– gekk eldr of sjöt rekka,	the death of valiant Höskuldr
ljóss brann hyrr í húsum –	is repaid – fire trod over the
Höskulds bani ins röskva.	home of men, bright flame burnt
	in the buildings.

This stanza may prove the burning of Njáll and the escape of Kári, but it does not accord particularly well with the saga. It suggests that the sons of Sigfúss led the attack and were seeking revenge for Höskuldr (their nephew), whose death was Njáll's responsibility. A general conclusion to be drawn is that we should be chary of trusting anything in *Njáls saga* which is not to be found in independent sources. And indeed we hardly need source-criticism of this kind to make us suspect the reliability of the author, seeing how constantly he succumbs to the temptation to tip the scales in favour of the extravagant.

People familiar with the lie of the land and the history of Þingvellir can pinpoint where each victim fell in the battle at the Alþingi. The burning of Bergþórshvoll is described as if by an eye-witness – it also shows a good many parallels to the burnings of the Sturlung age as recounted in "contemporary" sagas. But if we examine these graphic narratives closely, we perceive that they contain one implausible incident after another. Who believes that Skarpheðinn could hit Gunnarr Lambason in the eye with Þráinn's molar at that range and with such force that the eye hung from its socket and Gunnarr fell off the roof? Or that the sons of Njáll "trod the flames" until Grímr fell down dead? Or that the fire raged so close to Kári that the cutting edge of his sword turned blue and soft from the heat?

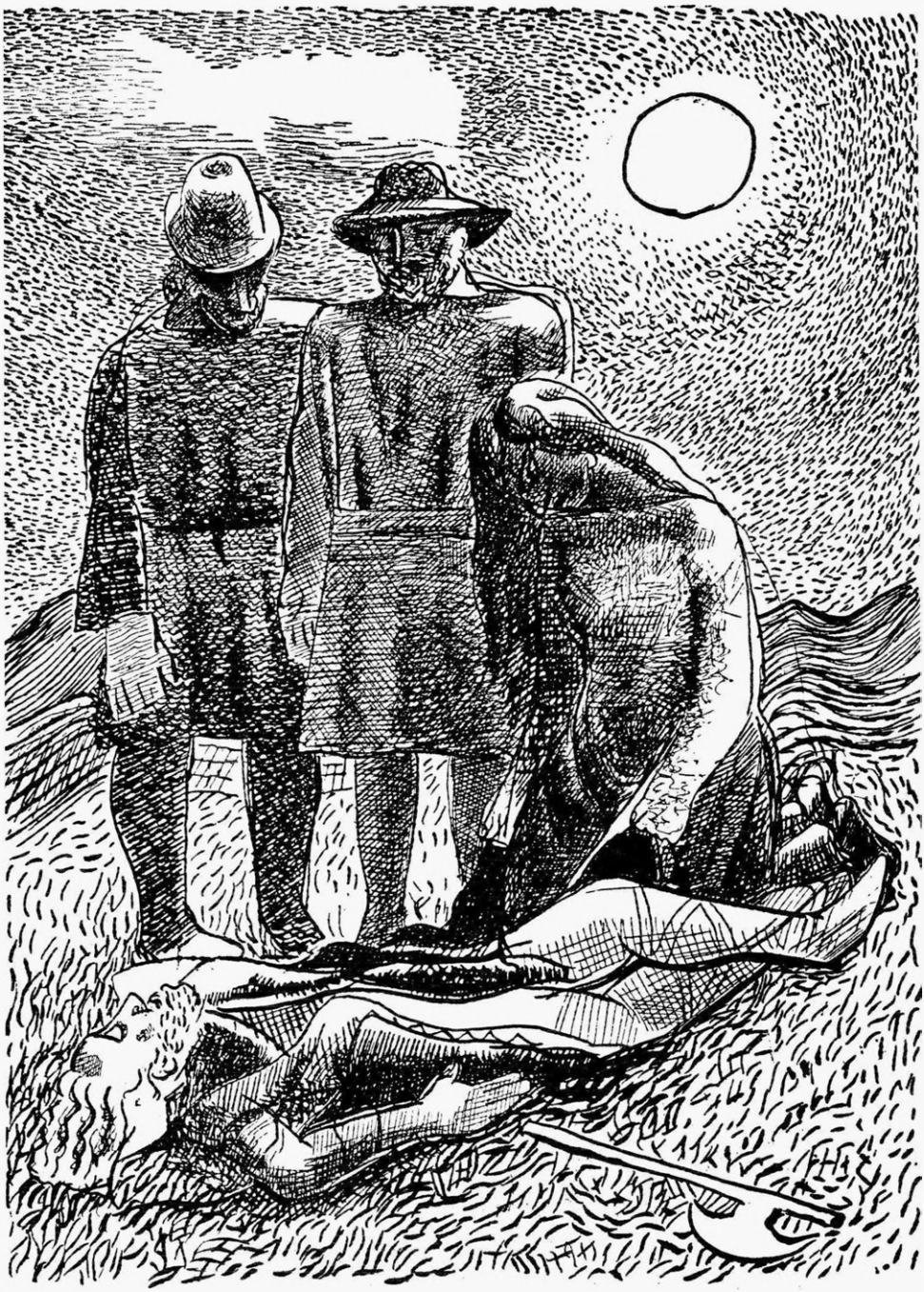
Some readers fail to appreciate *Njáls saga* because they cannot get over the exaggerations and improbabilities. But we should refrain from magnifying the saga's defects, for they are closely allied to its virtues. They are not the result of the author's carelessness – they are what he aimed at. Sigurður Nordal compared *Njála* to a mellow fruit, luscious just because its ripeness is on the turn; de Vries compared it to woodland in autumnal panoply. People complain that the sequence of events in some episodes is not logical enough, but is that not because the author wants to create vivid pictures, show life in all its variety, prompt questions rather than provide neat answers to everything? Why does Njáll not reply when Flosi asks who put the silk robe on top of the pile of atonement money at the Assembly? Why does he refuse to make a stand

out of doors and insist on going into the house when Bergþórshvoll is attacked? Does he trust Flosi as a man of honour? Is he doomed and therefore bound to be the instrument of his own death and defeat, as Skarpheðinn thinks? Or does he want to die a martyr's death in atonement for the crime of his sons, as some critics now suggest? Why at the end is Hildigunnr married to Kári, considering the dastardly part he had played with the sons of Njáll in killing her first husband, Höskuldr, and the awesome thirst for vengeance she had then shown? Did the author know from genealogies that this marriage had taken place, or was it the result of his desire to establish a final equilibrium? Questions like these and many more besides well up inside us as we read this saga. Icelanders of the past have discussed them at length – sometimes violently.

This very fact is irrefutable evidence of the surpassing quality of this centuries-old book. We see the events unfold, we hear the men and women talk – we know them like the people we live among. Usually the author's sympathies are kept in reasonable check, but he certainly admired some of his characters and detested others – in this, as in other things, he wavers on the brink of excess. But all his portraits are firmly drawn – the dark have their lighter tones, none is so bright that it is not set off by some shadow. A crowd of people appear on the scene, but each one is effectively endowed with an individuality which distinguishes and brings to life. And in spite of the mass of people and incident, the saga is extraordinarily easy to read and follow. The patterned structure, the clear presentation, and the simple, supple, incisive language – not far from polished Icelandic of today – all help to that end. We might compare the saga to a great ocean where mountainous seas and flat calms alternate. In each separate section there is a heave and swelling, a climax and fall – antagonists clash and then the struggle subsides, peace reigns. Sections join to make larger parts where the same pattern is repeated: waves surge higher and higher until they comb and foam – then after the shattering turbulence, there is stillness for a space.

One sign of the popularity of *Njáls saga* is the fact that it exists in more copies than any other saga. We have it, complete or fragmentary, in some twenty medieval manuscripts. No saga has enjoyed so much

Njáls saga, *ch. 112: "Hildigunnr woke up and found that Höskuldr was out of bed and gone . . . She and two men with her go to the cornfield. There they find Höskuldr killed." A drawing by Þorvaldur Skúlason.*



esteem, whether among ordinary folk at home or among men of learning abroad. Young minds are seized by its hyperbole and glamour, its easy style and dramatic scenes. At the same time, there is such breadth and depth of wisdom in it that adults can read it again and again and always find something new. The famous literary critic, W.P. Ker, said that *Njáls saga* was one of the great prose works of the world. And Helgi Haraldsson of Hrafnkelsstaðir, a contemporary Icelandic farmer, has declared that in *Njáls saga* answers to all life's problems can be found.

Íslendinga þættir

Characteristics. Sources

Some shorter stories or tales – usually called *þáttr*, plural *þættir* – that have Icelandic heroes are customarily counted with the *Íslendinga sögur*. They can be divided into two groups, according to whether their main action takes place in Iceland or abroad. The latter are more numerous and they are preserved incorporated in or closely associated with kings' sagas. They are very often regarded as forming a link between the kings' sagas and the *Íslendinga sögur* proper. Some seem to have been composed at the outset as part of a king's history; others were originally independent and subsequently built into a king's saga. In some instances we have *þættir* preserved both independently and as part of the saga of a foreign ruler.

Þættir are very unevenly apportioned between kings' sagas. There are no *þættir* in Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, for example, while the equally ancient *Oldest Saga of St Óláfr* (and the *Legendary Saga*) has a number of episodes with Icelanders as the central figures. These all seem to have been included in this saga from the start, and the same seems to be true of the *þættir* in *Heimskringla* (though in modern editions of *þættir* these have been abstracted and printed separately). *Morkinskinna*, on the other hand, certainly contains a good many *þættir* which originally existed as separate entities. Other stories of similar kind were introduced in compilations such as we find in *Flateyjarbók* and the collection of kings' sagas in the recension identified with the *Hulda* and *Hrokkinskinna* codexes. It may often be a matter of opinion whether a particular episode is classed as a *þáttr* or as an integral part of the saga in which it is found. In the volume of *þættir* edited by Þorleifur Jónsson and published by Sigurður Kristjánsson in 1904, forty texts were included. A later edition, prepared by Guðni Jónsson (1935), added *Ísleifs þáttr biskups* and by now distinguishing between *Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar I* and *II* made

forty-two *þættir*. Nine of these take place largely or entirely in Iceland, the other thirty-three are associated with the following Norwegian rulers:

Haraldr Fairhaired	1
Earl Hákon Sigurðarson	1
Óláfr Tryggvason	2
Earl Hákon, Óláfr Tryggvason (Earl Eiríkr)	3
St Óláfr	6
Magnús the Good and Haraldr the Hardruler	14
Magnús Bareleg	1
Sigurðr the Jerusalem-farer and Eysteinn	4
Magnús Erlingsson	1

The large number associated with Magnús the Good and Haraldr the Hardruler gives food for thought. We must bear in mind, however, that most of these are in *Morkinskinna*, supplemented by others in *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna*, works which only begin their history with the return of young King Magnús to Norway in 1035. It may thus be an accident of transmission that so many *þættir* fall in his reign and in that of his uncle, co-regent and successor, Haraldr the Hardruler. It might also be thought that traditions from times earlier than theirs were too sparse to allow the composition of many *þættir* on Icelanders who had been associated with previous rulers of Norway. Obviously, however, that is not an explanation which will account for the dearth of *þættir* from the reigns of the kings who followed them – who certainly had Icelanders among their visitors and retainers. We can only conclude that the preponderance in the reigns of Magnús and Haraldr was the result of literary fashion and accidents of transmission – these kings were magnets who attracted *þættir*. Many of the tales have a polished literary form, which they are not likely to have acquired in oral transmission. It is common to find in them, for example, a steady progress towards a calculated climax (e.g. *Auðunar þáttr, Halldórs þáttr*). Some *þættir* are closely related to one another, and direct influence of one *þáttr* on another is sometimes demonstrable, though authors seldom fail to introduce some lively modification in what they receive from an earlier work. It has been noted that two very different attitudes to King Haraldr the Hardruler appear in the *þættir*. In some he is a good and open-handed lord (*Auðunar þáttr, Stúfs þáttr, Þorsteins þáttr sögufróða*, and more), while in others he is a close-fisted and vengeful tyrant (*Halldórs þáttr, Odds þáttr Ófeigssonar, Hreiðars þáttr heimska*).

Like *Íslendinga sögur, þættir* vary in form and quality. Some are

humorous and amusing, like *Hreiðars þáttr* and *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*. Some inculcate an improving lesson, like *Auðunar þáttr* and *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs*. The best are perfect miniatures and belong among the great short stories of the world.

Individual *þættir*

Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar. Halldórr was the son of Snorri the Chieftain (p. 210). In his youth he accompanied Haraldr the Hardruler to Byzantium and shared his adventures in the ranks of the Varangian Guard, as told in *Morkinskinna* (and *Heimskringla*). Snorri Sturluson says that Halldórr brought this story to Iceland – and by "this story" he means the account of King Haraldr's exploits abroad, his *útfararsaga*. We may recall that in *Þorsteins þáttr sögufróða* Þorsteinn says that he had picked up that "saga" about King Haraldr when Halldórr told it at the Alþingi (p. 306). In *Morkinskinna* (and in *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna*) there is, however, a separate *þáttr* of Halldórr Snorrason, which was originally independent. It tells how the friendship between him and the king gradually cooled after their return to Norway. Halldórr's obstinacy and pugnacity come up against Haraldr's royal pride, which swells after his elevation to the throne. At the end there is open enmity between them. After an exciting episode in which he daringly exacts his due from the king, Halldórr sails away to Iceland and spends the rest of his life at Hjarðarholt.

Some commentators think that the *þáttr* shows the shape of stories as told by "saga-men", but that seems doubtful. In its recorded form the *þáttr* shows clear signs of composition by an author working to literary patterns. There is a steady purpose amid the variety of incident, a calculated development leading to a climax in a mode not characteristic of oral stories. People are invented or known figures are summoned onto the stage to fulfil this or that function in the progress of Halldórr's dealings with the king (Þórir Englandsfari, Bárðr upplenzki, Sveinn of Lyrgja). The author's disregard of historical circumstance is shown by the fact that, according to him, Snorri the Chieftain was still alive when Halldórr left Norway – when that famous man had been dead for something like twenty years.

In the main narrative of *Morkinskinna* Halldórr appears in the same light as in the *þáttr*, though he and Haraldr do not collide while they are comrades under the Greek emperor. It seems most likely that the author of the *þáttr* knew the original *Morkinskinna* text and created his own work of art on the basis of what he learnt from it.

Another *þáttr* of Halldórr Snorrason is found in *Flateyjarbók*. It is believed to be a later work than the one we have just discussed, but since its action belongs to a slightly earlier stage in Halldórr's career, it is denoted *Halldórs þáttr I*, and the *Morkinskinna* story *Halldórs þáttr II*. Here there is a story within a story, to do with the saintliness of Óláfr Tryggvason. The inner tale is put into the mouth of Einarr þambarskelfir and builds on the ancient legend – contradicted already by Hallfreðr in his memorial lay (p. 105) – that King Óláfr had survived the battle of Svold.

Stúfs þáttr is in *Haralds saga harðráða* in *Morkinskinna* and other manuscripts; it also exists in a separate version in some vellums. The latter is considered to be on the whole closer to the original. Stúfr was a son of Þórðr köttr Þórðarson, so a grandson of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and a close kinsman of Ari fróði. The *þáttr* is an entertaining tale of his encounter with King Haraldr. Stúfr amuses him by reciting many poems by other poets and finally offers a poem of his own. This last (if it ever existed) is not known today, but we do have fragments of a memorial poem made by Stúfr on King Haraldr. This is mentioned in the *Morkinskinna* version of the *þáttr*, where it is called *Stúfs drápa* or *Stúfa*.

Auðunar þáttr vestfirzka is in *Morkinskinna* but was originally an independent creation, like *Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar*. The latter is conceived first and foremost as a picture of a craggy individual, but *Auðunar þáttr* is both a portrait and an exemplum, illustrating tenacity and resolve, justice and the fulfilment of obligations – and the reward that such good qualities duly bring. Auðunn never deviates from the path of rectitude, from the time he sets off with his bear to visit King Sveinn of Denmark until his return to Iceland to provide for his mother. His antagonists, the shadows that deepen the perspective, are Áki, the greedy steward of King Sveinn, and the retainers who laugh at him when he comes back from his pilgrimage, "bald and rather wretched-looking". Auðunn is balanced by King Sveinn and King Haraldr. With all Sveinn's great gifts heaped upon him, Auðunn seems in the ascendant: but perfect equilibrium is attained and the circle truly completed in the final scene with King Haraldr. It takes Auðunn a long time to count up Sveinn's gifts, one after another, and at the end King Haraldr admits that he would not have rewarded him so lavishly – but "Did he reward you further?" "Certainly, lord," says Auðunn, "reward me he did. He gave me a ring which I have on my arm, and said it might

happen that I lost all the presents, and he said I would still not be penniless if I had the ring; and he told me not to part with it unless I owed so much to some man of rank that I wanted to give it to him. And now I have met him, for you had the chance to take both from me, my animal and my life, but you let me go in peace to a place other men were not allowed to visit."

Reading this short story, we not only marvel at the economy and symmetry of the narrative, where there is not a word too many or too few, but feel warm at heart in the company of such a good soul as Auðunn and such magnanimous rulers as Sveinn and Haraldr. It is not for nothing that *Auðunar þáttr* has always been so popular. It has been translated in dozens of languages, and the original has been printed more often than any other piece of Icelandic prose.

Hrómundar þáttr halta tells of a feud in Hrútafjörður late in the tenth century. It was written before Sturla's *Landnámabók* because he gives an abstract of it. Three stanzas are attributed to Hrómundr in the *þáttr*, and *Sturlubók* contains others attributed to his sons. Those said to be by Hrómundr have archaic and idiosyncratic features and are probably authentic. He hears a raven croaking by the roof-opening early in the morning – an omen of death which he does not let prey on his mind:

Varat mér í dag dauði, draugr flatvallar bauga – búumsk við Ilmar jálmi áðr – né gær of ráðinn. Rœki ek lítt þótt leiki litvöndr Heðins fitjar – áðr var oss of markaðr aldr – við rauða skjöldu.	Death was not decided for me today nor tomorrow, wielder of the shield – I make ready for battle first. Little I care though the sword plays on shields – my life-span was earlier determined for me.

Great events are described swiftly and tersely – some authors might have made a longer story of it. Twelve Norwegians spend the winter on a neighbouring farm, loud-mouthed and aggressive. Hrómundr accuses them of stealing stud-horses and gets them outlawed at the Alþingi. Now the Norwegians have got inside the defences he has built round his steading and only he with his two sons and a grandson of fifteen are there to meet them. They kill seven of the attackers and drive the others off – but Hrómundr and one of his sons are dead and the lad wounded almost beyond hope of recovery.

Sneglu-Halla þáttr is found in variant versions in *Morkinskinna* and *Flateyjarbók*. Each represents a revision of the original text. In the *Flateyjarbók* version the language has been "modernised" to some extent and the tale is more extravagantly told. In *Morkinskinna* the story has been abridged – some of the coarser elements in the *Flateyjarbók* text are among the omissions.

The *þáttr* tells of Halli's stay at the court of King Haraldr the Hardruler and of his encounters with the king and his retainers, including Þjóðólfr the poet (p. 108) and Einarr fluga. Halli is quick-witted, never short of an answer, and always gets the better of an opponent. It is witty and amusing comedy but we can hardly believe it tells us anything reliable about what life was like in King Haraldr's retinue.

Hreiðars þáttr heimska is another humorous tale set in Norway at the time when Magnús the Good and Haraldr the Hardruler were co-regents. Hreiðarr is described at the outset as an "ugly man and with hardly wits enough to look after himself". This is how he appeared to others, but beneath his uncouth exterior he is a man of sense and ready speech and a superb craftsman to boot. A rare portrait but true to life – there have been a good many Hreiðarrs in Iceland and they have not disappeared entirely yet, despite the effects of our compulsory schooling and frenzied mobility. It is not as if Hreiðarr does not alter and develop when he leaves his isolated countryside and comes among great men in Norway – he has the capacity to change. He not only learns what he most desires – how to get angry – but his temperament is also generally affected and he steadily matures in his sojourn in the outside world, as the author shows us with great skill and economy. But it is all in moderation, success does not go to his head, he will never have courtly dress on his back: it suits him best to settle down on his farm up in Svarfaðardalur where, for good reason as we can see, he becomes a man of note in the locality. If the writer goes too far, it is at the end of the story when he says that Hreiðarr had "made up those antics which he put on in the early part of his career". Were they not rather natural responses on his part, both conscious and unconscious?

Ögmundar þáttr dytts is really two stories, one about Ögmundr, the other about Gunnarr helmingr – who got his nickname "half" because he liked parti-coloured clothes. Ögmundr, on the other hand, was called "dint" because he suffered a blow from the back of an axe wielded by a

Plate 18

The Icelanders submitted to King Hákon Hákonarson of Norway in 1262–4. King Magnús Hákonarson gave them a new code of laws in keeping with the acknowledgment of royal authority and changed conditions generally. The new code of 1281 was called Jónsbók, *after an Icelandic lawman who played a part in its compilation and was responsible for bringing it to Iceland. See pp. 363 ff. Miniature from* Skarðsbók, *a 14th century copy of the* Jónsbók. – *Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.*

Plate 19
Burstarfell in Vopnafjörður, a stately farm from the nineteenth century. In the first part of the nineteenth century there developed a new style of architecture for the Icelandic farmhouse. Tall, steep gables stood side by side covered with turf and with wooden ends. This style remained in fashion into the present century, and a few such farmhouses are still preserved as folk museums. – Photo: Björn Rúriksson.

certain Hallvarðr in Norway. The *þáttr* is in manuscripts of the expanded *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (p. 158) and, because Ögmundr was a kinsman of Víga-Glúmr, it is also incorporated in the longer version of his saga, which we have only in fragments (p. 239). When Ögmundr came back to Iceland, Glúmr reproached him for not avenging the blow. Later Ögmundr wiped out his disgrace by killing Hallvarðr, with the aid of Gunnarr helmingr – which is where the two tales join.

After Hallvarðr's death Gunnarr fled to Sweden, where Freyr was held in great veneration. The god, or his simulacrum, was given a young and beautiful girl as a handmaid and they believed she played the part of the god's concubine. Gunnarr sought the help of this girl and stayed with her for a time. They travelled round with Freyr attending festivals – "when he has to vouchsafe men a prosperous season". Gunnarr smashed the Freyr image and took over his job. As time went on, people noticed that Freyr's "wife" was pregnant and "the Swedes were now highly delighted with this god of theirs; the weather was fair too and everything so promising of a good season that no one remembered a time like it."

Gunnars þáttr helmings has occasioned much interest and comment because scholars have found it a valuable source of information about the religious practices of the ancient Scandinavians. But the truth is that the contents of *Gunnars þáttr* can all be traced to classical myths and Christian ideas, and it is virtually worthless to the student of Scandinavian paganism.

Gunnars þáttr Þiðrandabana is connected with *Droplaugarsona saga* and *Vápnfirðinga saga* but through its characters rather than through its events. Þiðrandi, the man killed by Gunnarr, was Þorkell Geitisson's brother and consequently, as in the saga, also a cousin and fosterbrother of Bjarni Brodd-Helgason. After the killing Gunnarr lives as a fugitive, first among people in the east of the country but then he is sent for safekeeping to Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir at Helgafell on the other side of Iceland. At that time Guðrún was betrothed to Þorkell Eyjólfsson. When Þorkell arrives for their wedding, he recognises Gunnarr and wants him thrown out. When Guðrún hears this, "she says it is the same to her if she doesn't have that Þorkell Eyjólfsson for a husband, and let him go as he came." Þorkell let the matter drop and the wedding took place. Guðrún helped Gunnarr to get away from Iceland and fitted him out generously.

This incident is told in a similar way in *Laxdæla saga*, where even more

is made of Guðrún's spirited response. The author there refers to *Njarðvíkinga saga*, and it is generally believed that this is *Gunnars þáttr* under another name. The *þáttr* must then have been written before *Laxdæla saga*, but after *Droplaugarsona saga*, since the author appears to assume his audience's familiarity with this work.

Ölkofra þáttr is a comic tale with the Alþingi as its setting. Þórhallr brewed beer for sale at assemblies and did well out of it. Because of his occupation and his characteristic headgear he was called *ölkofri*, "ale-hood". He made the mistake of accidentally burning down a stretch of woodland belonging to six chieftains. They got together and planned to mulct him of a great sum. But with the aid of Broddi Bjarnason and his brother-in-law, Þorsteinn Síðu-Hallsson, he invalidated their case. The story is very reminiscent of *Bandamanna saga* (p. 232) and there is undoubtedly a connection between them: the *þáttr* is usually reckoned to have been the model for the saga. Some scholars think that the *þáttr*, like *Bandamanna saga*, is a critique of the corrupt state of the chieftain class in the thirteenth century.

A reader nowadays may find the *þáttr* rather heavy going because of the antique legalities that occupy the author. But take these in one's stride and the *þáttr* can be enjoyed to the full for the brilliance of its style and wit. The characters are firmly delineated, though with some extravagance. The portrayal of Ölkofri himself is an outstanding success. Sometimes we simply cannot tell whether his tears of misery are real or feigned – just as we are left in doubt by old Ófeigr's tottery state in *Bandamanna saga*.

Þorsteins þáttr sögufróða is set at the court of Haraldr the Hardruler. Þorsteinn entertains the king's men with stories, and finally at Christmas when his store is exhausted he tells the king's own *útfararsaga* – the tale of his journey to Constantinople and exploits with the Varangians. He said he had learnt it from listening to Halldórr Snorrason at the Alþingi. The episode in the *þáttr* has often been taken as proof of the art of story-telling among the Icelanders and the part played by sagas as oral entertainment. If we lend it such import, however, it can only be in symbolic terms. The *útfararsaga* of Haraldr as told in *Morkinskinna* (and *Heimskringla*) is made up of colourful migrant tales of diverse origins – it is not a story Þorsteinn would ever have told the king to his face. Most probably the *þáttr* is the invention of someone who had read Snorri's

words in *Heimskringla:* "He – Halldórr Snorrason – brought this story to Iceland."

Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs is a continuation of *Vápnfirðinga saga* inasmuch as Bjarni Brodd-Helgason is one of the two main figures in it. The author builds his portrayal of him on the saga's account and makes direct reference to the battle of Böðvarsdalur. The other main character is Þorsteinn, who got his nickname "rod-stroke" because he took a blow from a goad used at a horse-fight. Both men are equally peaceable but when Þorsteinn has killed three of Bjarni's men who slandered him, Bjarni challenges him to a set duel. During the fight Þorsteinn twice allows Bjarni to rest: first he lets him have a drink, then he lets him tie his shoe-lace. When they start the third round – it is Bjarni's turn to strike and Þorsteinn stands defenceless before him – Bjarni stops the duel and takes Þorsteinn into his service in place of the three men he had killed.

This is one of those complex stories which prompt questions and reflections. Did Bjarni, who was the older man, really get tired, or was he only testing Þorsteinn by implying his need for intermissions? And was he testing both his sense of honour and his courage before offering him a place in his service? Why did Þorsteinn not take advantage of Bjarni when he drank from the brook or tied his shoe? Because he was "an exceptional man", as Bjarni calls him? Or is the explanation found rather in Þorsteinn's own rejoinder: "I had opportunities against you today when I could have been treacherous, if my ill hap had run stronger than your luck"? Does he perhaps know that in reality he cannot defeat Bjarni, who is so brave that he uses a blunt sword and is merely playing with him? Or does he, a poor man's son, fear the revenge of the powerful clan behind Bjarni? These are only some of the solutions offered to the problems posed by the deeds and words of the actors presented by the penetrating author of *Þorsteins þáttr.*

Some further *þættir* are chiefly designed to add to the glorification of the great missionary kings, Óláfr Tryggvason and St Óláfr Haraldsson. *Þorvalds þáttr tasalda* is associated with *Víga-Glúms saga* because Þorvaldr is Glúmr's nephew and plays a small part in his uncle's story. The *þáttr* tells however of a mission undertaken by Þorvaldr at the behest of Óláfr Tryggvason. He is sent to force an important man called Bárðr to accept Christianity. He succeeds, not least because he has a cloth bound to his

chest with the names of God on it. In *Hrafns þáttr Guðrúnarsonar* (or *Hrafns þáttr Hrútfirðings*) it is invocation of St Óláfr which resolves the predicament Hrafn finds himself in. He is a stubborn, pugnacious character and it happens that he kills a sheriff of King Magnús – of course, not without provocation. For a time he is a fugitive but is finally reconciled to King Magnús, thanks to the support of Sighvatr the poet (p. 106), who has called on St Óláfr for aid. The story is a concoction of various well-known motifs found in earlier sagas and was meant not only to entertain but also to confirm and strengthen its hearers and readers in Christian faith and goodwill. The aftermath of Stiklestad is also reflected in *Þorgríms þáttr Hallasonar* which, like *Hrafns þáttr*, is built into *Magnús saga góða*. It tells of partisan rancour and fighting among Icelanders in Norway, some of whom support Kálfr Árnason while their opponents are on the side of young King Magnús because of their devotion to his father.

With *Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds* we are back in the time of Earl Hákon the Mighty (died 995). The *þáttr* is partly dependent on *Svarfdæla saga* (in its older version) but is otherwise based on a variety of *märchen* motifs. Hákon is said to have plundered Þorleifr's goods and hanged his companions. Þorleifr retaliated with such powerful denigratory verse of the kind called *níð* that terrifying marvels came to pass in the earl's hall. Later on the earl infused a "tree-man" with magic potency and sent this Þorgarðr to Iceland, where he killed Þorleifr at the Alþingi. In later centuries men could point out Þorleifr's burial mound there, until it was encroached upon by the river, Öxará.

The action of two more *þættir* belongs to the reign of Haraldr the Hardruler. In *Þorvarðs þáttr krákunefs* Þorvarðr, an Icelander, comes to the king and offers to make him a present of a very fine sail. The king will not accept it, so he gives it to Eysteinn orri, the king's brother-in-law. Eysteinn repays him handsomely and his gifts are in some degree reminiscent of King Sveinn's to Auðunn (p. 302) – King Haraldr's part in the story, however, is quite different from his role in *Auðunar þáttr*. When he sees the fine sail, he is sorry he refused it – and Eysteinn, who is the real hero of the tale, again displays his munificence by presenting it to King Haraldr.

The only link between *Odds þáttr Ófeigssonar* and *Bandamanna saga* (p. 232) is the person Oddr himself. The author of the saga doubtless lifted

his name and his characteristic ability as a sailor and merchant from the *þáttr*. The author of the *þáttr*, on the other hand, seems to have taken the name of Einarr fluga and his characteristics from *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* (p. 304). In the story here King Haraldr suspects that Oddr or his men have been trading with the Lapps without leave. He makes several searches for the trade-goods from Lappland but Oddr takes the advice of his friend, Þorsteinn, and always hides them successfully. Each time the king realises too late where they must have been concealed. This hunt-the-thimble game is reminiscent of Earl Hákon's search for Hrappr on Þráinn Sigfússon's ship – the author of *Njáls saga* probably knew *Odds þáttr*.

Finally, there is a *þáttr* which chiefly involves a Norwegian magnate of the early twelfth century. In *Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttr* (or *Ásu-Þórðar þáttr*), which is found both separate and in *Morkinskinna,* Ingimarr of Askr makes three attempts to seize and execute Þórðr, always returning with a bigger band of followers until he finds Þórðr protected by no less a person than King Eysteinn himself. This *þáttr* is one of those written in a terse, forceful style and appears to be very old. It is a literary work through and through – perhaps pure fiction but possibly sprung from some faint recollection of an actual incident.

Sagas of chivalry

Origins

We have more than once had occasion to speak of Norwegian literary activity – which was by no means divorced from Icelandic writing in this early period. Iceland was converted to Christianity by Norwegian agency, and Christian culture came to the country partly from Norway, partly straight from Britain and western Europe. The Church in Iceland first came under the metropolitan of Hamburg-Bremen, then from 1104 under the archbishop of Lund in Denmark. After the creation of the metropolitan see of Nidaros, in 1152/3, the Icelandic bishops were henceforth suffragans of a Norwegian archbishop. Writings of fundamental Christian import were thus bound to be closely related in both countries. And a little over a century later, when the Icelanders became tributary to the Norwegian crown, the links between the two countries became closer still. Throughout the early middle ages, indeed to c. 1400 when both nations came under Danish rule, Icelanders always had most dealings with Norwegians. After that – partly because of the ravages of the plague in Norway – Danish sway was supreme, but for five hundred years before that, from the settlement period onwards, Norway and Iceland made one cultural region. It is most appropriate therefore to consider the medieval literature of Norwegians and Icelanders as a common heritage, though modern nationalist sentiment sometimes strives to keep the two apart. This survey was primarily written as a contribution to a history of Iceland, so more emphasis has inevitably been laid on the Icelandic share in that literature.

Norwegian literature has also always had difficulties to face in competition with Icelandic. It never existed in such variety or amplitude. Probably – though it cannot be proved – much more Norwegian than Icelandic literature has been lost in the course of time. A third point is that a good many works which we know were written in Norway

in the early middle ages are only preserved in Icelandic manuscripts. If we have a text only in Icelandic copies, it is obviously hard to demonstrate Norwegian origin, and a succession of such copies undoubtedly brought about a gradual Icelandicisation of the attitudes, taste and language of the work in question.

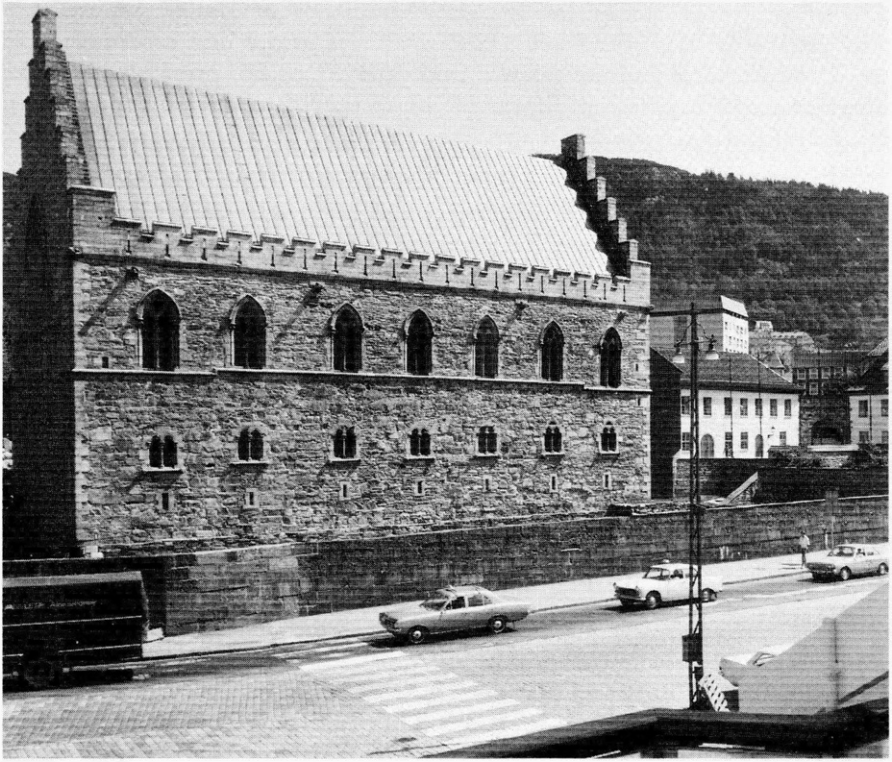
Writing in Norway must have begun at about the same time as in Iceland, though evidence for that early literacy is less abundant. Norwegian laws were recorded in the same period as Icelandic laws, or quite probably rather earlier. Early Norwegian law seems to have been less affected by reforming and codifying tendencies than Icelandic law, so the statutes of the old law-provinces of Gulaþing and Frostaþing now seem more primitive and archaic than the *Grágás* texts. They open windows on a distant world and are more illuminating sources of information about pre-Christian and early Christian times than the laws of *Grágás* are.

The oldest eddaic poems are thought to be the work of Norwegian poets and they are magnificent monuments of Norse genius and culture from the period before and during the settlement of Iceland. We have scaldic poetry attributed to named Norwegian poets from the same period and from later in the tenth century, but very little Norwegian verse from about 980 onwards. We may suspect that this is not because Norwegians stopped making poetry but because what they made has not been preserved.

Religious writings were translated and composed in Norway at an early stage. We have the *Norwegian Homily Book* and the *Miracles of St Óláfr*, both of which go back well into the twelfth century. Saints' lives in texts showing Norwegian characteristics exist in very old manuscript fragments and doubtless such works were put into the vernacular in Norway at an early date. But the bulk of such literature is now found only in Icelandic copies and decisions about its ultimate provenance are problematic.

The oldest histories written in Norway appear to be the two Latin works discussed on pp. 154–156. Further, the work called *Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sögum* (p. 156) is thought to have originated in Norway, though now known only in an Icelandic copy. It too is one of the earliest specimens of Norse history writing in our possession.

There are however few signs of Norwegian literary activity in the age which saw the birth of scholarly writing and saga composition among the Icelanders. The first historian to write in Latin was the Icelander, Sæmundr, and the first to write in the vernacular was the Icelander, Ari.



"On the Sunday after the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin the princess was wedded to King Magnús with great pomp. King Magnús then came to his wedding feast and both the kings were in the stone hall and the archbishop and all the suffragan bishops . . . and the choicest men." This is from Sturla Þórðarson's description in Hákonar saga *of the marriage of King Magnús the Lawmender and Ingibjörg, daughter of King Erik IV Ploughpenny of Denmark, in 1261. The "stone hall" was Håkonshallen, still standing in Bergen and mentioned here for the first time. It was a notable architectural symbol of the growing power of the Norwegian monarchy. Photo: Øyvind Berger.*

The first Norwegian historian we know by name, Theodoricus, refers particularly to Icelandic source-men – so does his younger contemporary, Saxo Grammaticus, in Denmark. When that most remarkable of Norwegian kings, Sverrir Sigurðarson, wanted a saga composed to record his incredible successes, he chose an Icelandic scholar, Abbot Karl Jónsson of Þingeyrar, to wield the pen. And most of the other

twelfth- and thirteenth-century works on the kings of Norway are demonstrably by Icelandic authors.

At the beginning of the thirteenth century fresh life stirs in Norwegian interest and enterprise in literary fields – and it would make less of an impact if the preceding period had not been so generally torpid. As one might expect, the inspiration for these new departures came from abroad: twelfth-century Europe. A single man was chiefly responsible for this new burgeoning of Norwegian literature, one who as well as learning and zeal, also had the power to produce results.

When Hákon Hákonarson was elected king by the Birkibeinar in 1217, he was thirteen years old. Sturla Þórðarson wrote his biography – full of informative detail and correspondingly dull to read. Hákon was an illegitimate son of Hákon Sverrisson. In the first part of his reign he had frequently to take the field against other pretenders to the throne, but after the death of Duke Skúli Bárðarson, his father-in-law and rival, in 1240, he ruled in peace until his own death in 1263. He got the nickname "the Old" to distinguish him from his son, Hákon "the Young" – but this crown prince died before his father, in 1257.

King Hákon is not portrayed with the glamour of his grandfather, Sverrir, and his career was not so full of dramatic incident, but few kings of Norway have been as prosperous or influential. He was a pupil at school in Nidaros when he was set upon the throne, and he remained a lover of learning and literature all his life. Matthew Paris from the great monastery of St Albans in England and a capable judge of such matters visited Norway in 1248 and he speaks of the king as *bene literatus*. His Latin was good enough for him to follow the Latin books that were read to him as he lay on his death-bed: though as his strength failed, he had works in the vernacular, *norrænubækr*, read to him instead. Saints' lives in Norse were read to him first, then sagas of the kings of Norway from the beginning until they ended with the saga of Sverrir, his grandfather. Whenever he was awake, they read to him continuously, by day and night, until he breathed his last.

In his long reign Hákon proved a prudent, even cautious, ruler, but he was also farsighted and effective. He did for Norway what the first Augustus did for Rome. After long turbulence he established lasting peace, in Iceland as well as Norway. He introduced new laws to govern the succession to the throne and so put an end to the everlasting dynastic strife which had torn Norway apart, or always threatened to, ever since the days of Eiríkr Bloodaxe in the early tenth century: now

the succession was ordered in accordance with fixed rules based on primogeniture and legitimacy.

Hákon was a great builder of churches and monasteries. He actively promoted the townships and organised and strengthened the country's defences. His most famous building is the handsome stone hall which still stands in Bergen, his capital. He was ambitious to extend his dominions and he succeeded in bringing Iceland and Greenland under his sway without recourse to war. He was eager to maintain the authority of the Norwegian crown over the Hebrides and Man and it was in pursuit of this aim that he led his fleet against the Scots in 1262. He died on that expedition in the following year, laid low by sickness in Kirkwall in Orkney. His surviving son, Magnús, later called "Lawmender", had then been his co-regent for six years.

King Hákon was anxious to model his realm on the leading nations of Europe. Like foreign rulers at the time, he believed his royal power was from the Almighty, and to confirm it he got the pope to send Cardinal William of Sabina to preside at his coronation, celebrated with great ceremony in Bergen in 1247. He maintained lasting connections with Emperor Frederick II, that great promoter of the arts whose realms stretched from the Baltic to Sicily. But Norway's chief commercial and other dealings were with England – and the import of all kinds of learning and literature went with them. Hákon and Henry III were good friends, exchanging letters and gifts. Hákon also had connections with France and Spain, and his ambassadors went as far as Tunis, bringing prized falcons to the Soldan. The most famous of all the journeys made on his behalf was the convoy of his daughter, Kristín, to Spain with a splendid retinue, where she chose Don Philip, brother of the king of Spain, as her husband.

This period in European history is often called the age of chivalry and it was the ideals of knighthood which Hákon introduced in Norway. They lay behind his interest in fortification and military matters, and they were the cause of the courtly customs and feudal titles he ordained for his retinue – his followers were no longer "landed men" and "servitors" but barons and knights, who were addressed as *herra*, "lord". And one part of his endeavour to make the Norwegians a cultivated nation was the commissioning of translations of contemporary European literature.

When the Roman Empire collapsed, the classical literature of Greece and Rome was largely forgotten, but around AD 800, in the time of

Charlemagne who saw himself as the heir of the Roman emperors, there was the first of the several "renaissances" the western world has experienced. Classical literature was rediscovered in the Carolingian age and the following centuries, when learning and literature flourished under the protection and patronage of great men both lay and clerical. Many Latin writings saw the light of day, chiefly religious and philosophical in character but with some history and even *belles lettres* among them. At the same time, no vernacular had been without its creative elements, sometimes in oral forms only, sometimes in written modes when scribal arts had been acquired after conversion to Christianity. It is true that most of what was first written in languages other than Latin, whether in verse or prose, was religious or didactic, along with occasional pieces of history, chiefly of annalistic or chronicle kind. In the period we are considering, however, the foreign literature of greatest significance for Norway and Iceland was of quite a different kind. These foreign works were all in verse and may be divided into two main groups.

One group comprises anonymous epic works which have sometimes been called "popular" or ascribed to "the people" – on the assumption that names of "people's poets" get forgotten rather easily. In Germany such poems were the successors of ancient heroic lays, and to some extent they treat the same themes as the eddaic poetry. The best-known is the *Nibelungenlied*, from the twelfth century. Stories of Sigurðr the Dragon-slayer, Brynhildr and Gunnarr are among the subjects of this great poem – and very different they are too from those we know in the *Edda*. The narrative thread of the *Nibelungenlied* has more continuity but its artistry seldom matches that of the best eddaic lays. Probably Wagner's operas have done most to keep alive some interest in this early medieval German poetry.

The French had their own poetry of the heroic and epic kind, different from that of the German school, and it is of more concern to the literature of Norway and Iceland. Most of the French *chansons de geste*, as they are called, are anonymous. As their generic name suggests, they seem originally to have been sung or chanted in some way. That must reflect their popular origins as oral entertainment, while the romances in contrast were made to be read from books. The *Chanson de Roland* is the best-known and doubtless the oldest of preserved *chansons de geste* – on the battle of Roncevaux, a theme which lived on to be treated in many forms, through centuries and over continents, with Icelandic saga and Faroese *kvæði* among them.

The other group consists of courtly poems or romances, *romans courtois*. They were composed in aristocratic and educated circles and we usually know the names of the poets. France – or the whole domain where French language and culture were dominant – was the nursery of this courtly literature. The genre began in the twelfth century and soon enjoyed a tremendous vogue, the fashion spreading rapidly to other countries where French influence was strong, England and Germany in particular.

A characteristic feature of the romances is delicate and elaborate analysis of human feelings: the thoughts and emotions of the actors in the plot are dwelt on at length, often conveyed through their own words, in dialogue, soliloquy or "interior monologue". A hero's tragic love for a married lady is often the theme. The leading men are not only formidable warriors, as in the epic literature, but are also celebrated for their courtesy, munificence and magnanimity. Thomas's poem on Tristan – to be spoken of later – is an example of the *roman courtois*. But the most famous of all the poets is Chrétien de Troyes.

Another division of early romance literature depended on the origins of the subjects the poets treated: there were three great "matters", of Greece and Rome, of Britain, and of France (matière de Rome, matière de Bretagne, matière de France). Stories in the first group were ultimately derived from classical literature and were especially concerned with the Trojan war and the siege of Thebes. The "British" matter was ultimately of Celtic origin and told tales of King Arthur and his knights and of Tristan and other heroes. The matter was preserved in Wales and Ireland, but the source nearest to hand lay in Brittany on the Channel coast, a settlement made by British inhabitants of southwestern England retreating before the conquering Angles and Saxons in the fifth and sixth century. The "matter of France" was represented by the stories of the *chansons de geste*, with Charlemagne and his twelve peers at the forefront of the poets' interest.

Minor kinds also existed, like the *romans d'aventure* and the *fabliaux*. The former kind resembles the *lais* on subjects from the "matter of Britain", but they are kept separate because their action is not set in the "British" – "Breton" or Celtic – world. The romance of Flores and Blanchefleur is of this kind. *Fabliaux* are short verse narratives, comic and satiric in mode, with subjects often drawn from everyday life.

It is important to remember that national and linguistic boundaries were not the same in the early middle ages as they are today. Celtic-speaking peoples occupied Wales, Cornwall and Brittany (as remnants

still do) – we may recall that the Norse name for Wales was *Bretland*, Cornwall was *Kornbretaland*, and Brittany was sometimes called *Syðra-Bretland*, "southern Britain" or, as we might say, "the Wales of the south". French, on the other hand, was not confined to France but was also the natural language of the upper classes in England once the Norman Conquest was complete. The Norse name for "French" was *valska,* the language of the *Valir* of *Valland.* Geographically *Valland* referred especially to France south and east of Flanders and Normandy and Brittany, and south and west of Lorraine and Burgundy, but the name *valska* was not specific. Like the English name "Welsh", it referred originally to what was foreign and is the language spoken by foreigners. The most unmistakably alien were unintelligible Celts – whereas the speech of Saxons and English was recognised as akin to Norse; and of course in the British Isles and Normandy there were substantial settlements made by Scandinavians in the course of the Viking Age. On the whole, Icelanders who went abroad in that period would not have great linguistic problems in Scandinavia or England or among Frisians and Saxons. Slavonic, Celtic and Romance languages posed problems of quite a different order.

The British Isles were the great mixing area and they formed a vital bridge – though not the only one – between Norse and Romance worlds. Many of the courtly poems translated for King Hákon were of Anglo-Norman rather than continental French origin. A difficulty in the way of all this study, however, is that so much early medieval Romance literature has been lost. There are no texts in existence which are precisely the same as those used by the Norse translators. Sometimes it happens that the Norse version is the only extant representative of the work in question – its French or Anglo-Norman original has disappeared entirely.

These chivalrous romances were the fashionable literature of cultivated circles in Europe when the young King Hákon first thought of looking abroad to find suitable matter for his Norwegian court. They could not fail to attract his attention. We do not know whether he undertook any translation or was himself an author, but the initiative lay with him and he had men of letters in his service. The Norse translations are all in prose and we refer to them by a term already used in various works from the fourteenth century, *riddara sögur*, "sagas of knights" or, more usually, sagas of chivalry. The term is used indifferently whether the sources were *romans courtois* or *chansons de geste;* and it also covers a third kind, represented by a few translations of

medieval pseudo-histories, like *Trójumanna saga*, based on Dares Phrygius, and *Breta sögur*, based on Geoffrey of Monmouth (p. 332).

Individual works

Manuscripts of *Tristrams saga* have a short prologue which describes how the translation came into being: "1226 years had passed since the birth of Christ when this story was written at the behest and ordinance of the worthy lord King Hákon, and Brother Robert performed it and wrote it up as best he knew how, with these words which now follow in the story and as shall now be told."

There is no reason to doubt that the substance of this prologue is genuine and faithful to fact, even though the wording has probably undergone some alteration and the date given may be wrong – corruption of numbers is very frequent in old manuscripts. Relying on the date, however, scholars are generally inclined to believe that this was the first translation commissioned by Hákon, because in 1226 he was only twenty-two years old and it seems unlikely that he could have begun his career as an active patron of literature much before that. Comparative study tells us what the prologue neglects to mention, *viz* that the source of the translation was a *roman de Tristan* by a Norman poet called Thomas, who worked at the court of Henry II of England in the 1170s. Unfortunately we have only fragments of his poem, sufficient though to demonstrate it was certainly the source of Brother Robert's version and to illustrate his methods as a translator.

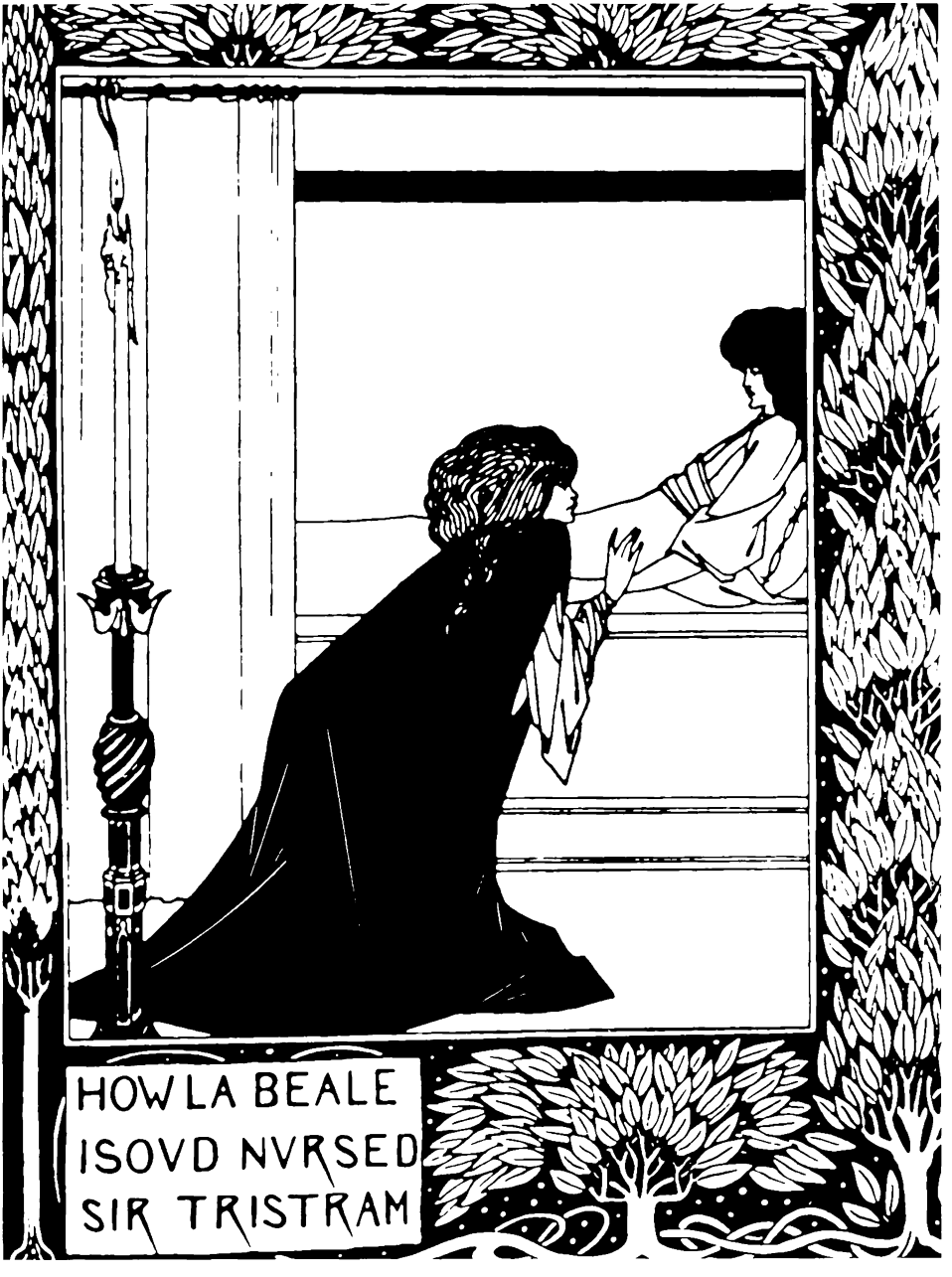
The king and his clerk could hardly have chosen a better representative of fashionable foreign literature, for this is one of the most beautiful and moving themes of all time. As I mentioned, the story of Tristan is Celtic in origin. It is not quite certain when it was first put into a book but we have two other written versions from about the same time as Thomas's poem, one from North France and one from Germany. One of the best-known treatments of the story is Gottfried of Strassburg's *Tristan* (c. 1210), which was finally completed by other hands. It presents the story in its entirety and later gave Wagner the substance of his libretto for *Tristan und Isolde*. Mention may also be made of the surpassingly beautiful Icelandic ballad called *Tristrams kvæði* (p. 377 below) – but these are only one or two of the most famous works inspired by this immortal love-story.

Tristram, or Tristan, was the greatest and handsomest champion at the court of King Mark of Cornwall, his uncle and foster-father. Mark

sends him to Ireland to seek a queen for him, Ísönd (as she is called in Norse), known as "the Bright", daughter of the Irish king. Tristram destroys a dragon ravaging the countryside there and is in a fair way to winning the beautiful Ísönd as a reward, but he shows his nobility by remembering his duty to King Mark and pleading his uncle's suit instead. Inadvertently he and Ísönd drink a love-potion which had been intended for Ísönd and Mark, and after that they are bound to each other by indissoluble bonds of love: in reality, their love was already kindled, and the potion is a symbol of their passion and their sad fate.

The middle part of the story tells of their tribulations and the random stolen hours they have together: King Mark becomes suspicious and cruelly jealous. They deceive and placate him but time and again succumb to temptation and always cover themselves with new subterfuge. For a time they find a paradise in solitude, hiding out in the wasteland, but the king discovers them and takes Ísönd away with him. Tristram now leaves the country and marries a lady who in the extant manuscripts of the saga has the same name as Ísönd – but this was probably not the case in the original translation because in Thomas's poem the ladies have different names. Even so, Tristram never forgets his first love. Finally he is wounded in battle by a poisoned sword. He knows no one can save his life except Ísönd, who had cured him from the venom of the dragon in Ireland. He sends her a message and orders his men to hoist sails striped white and blue if they are returning with her on board. Ísönd willingly responds to Tristram's tokens and on the voyage they set the sails as Tristram ordered. After a hard passage of ten days they approach land. Tristram asks his wife to tell him what canvas his messengers sail under. "They sail with a black sail," she answers. When Tristram hears that, he turns savagely to the wall, calls out Ísönd's name thrice, and dies as he utters it a fourth time. When Ísönd steps ashore, she hears the lamentations of the people and the sound of bells. She goes to Tristram's corpse, prays for them both, puts her arms round his neck and dies. Tristram's wife had them buried one on each side of the church: "But it happened that from each grave grew a tree, so tall that the branches intertwined over the roof-ridge of the church, and from that can be seen how great was the love between them."

It is reasonable to think that with his *Tristrams saga* and other translations Brother Robert established the methods to be followed by later makers of *riddara sögur*. This applies both to his treatment of the content and to the particular diction and style he adopted. The French



Isoud by Tristram's sickbed. A drawing by Aubrey Beardsley.

sources were in verse but Robert used prose from the start – naturally enough, for there was no northern tradition of epic poetry – in Iceland the *rímur* of the fourteenth century and later were the first long narrative poems and in mainland Scandinavia we find nothing comparable before the *Eufemiavisorna* from about 1300. Robert was not however willing to forgo all the loftiness of style of the originals in pedestrian everyday prose and he created a special *riddara saga* style, rather ornate and verbose but with supple and lyrical qualities as well. We may say that it is a style woven of three strands. One is the native saga style, which Scandinavian scholars tend to call by the dubiously apt term "folkelig" – "popular". The second is the latinate learned style sometimes used in translating religious works into Norse. Among its characteristics are many adjectives and descriptive embroidery, alliteration and rhyme, parallelism in enumeration, and other elements foreign to everyday speech. The third strand is the poetic language of the original French, which naturally influenced the translations in some degree. This *riddara saga* style is called "høvisk stil" by Scandinavian scholars – "courtly style" in English, *hefðarstíll* in Icelandic.

We may justly say that the efforts of Robert and the other early translators to create a decorated prose well suited for re-telling the French romances were crowned with remarkable success. Most of the sagas of chivalry are preserved only in Icelandic manuscripts, including *Tristrams saga* which we have complete only in seventeenth-century paper copies. It is to be assumed that the long succession of Icelandic transcripts affected the original diction in ways that tended to harmonise it with the familiar style of the native sagas. But even though the Icelanders did not retain the courtly style in a pure form, it had its own effect on Icelandic literature, offering authors a variety of fresh devices, to be found not only in the *riddara sögur* made in Iceland but also in several of the later *Íslendinga sögur* and various works of other kinds.

Two texts of *riddara saga* kind, *Elis saga ok Rósamundu* and *Strengleikar*, exist in very old Norwegian manuscripts and therefore offer good examples of undiluted courtly style. Comparison with Icelandic manuscripts of *Elis saga* reveals that, though much has been changed, a good deal of the original diction nevertheless remains. The same is doubtless true of *Tristrams saga*. As an instance we may take the beginning of the saga where Tristram's father is introduced:

> In Wales there was a youth, the handsomest of men in bodily beauty, the freest with rich gifts, power-wielding and wealthy in

> rich castles and townships, adept in many arts, the doughtiest in knightly deed, trustiest in every trait of nobility, wise and wary in counsel, prudent and prescient, complete in every feat beyond all men who at that time were in that kingdom; and this knight was called by the name of Kanelangres. Toward the hard he was all hard and toward the fierce all fierce. He had with him so great a number of trusty knights and resolute retainers that he wanted more men in his train than his means could support. And inasmuch as he was the freest with gifts and the most amiable in behaviour and the most stalwart in battle, by his strength, valour and joustings he won such great estates and rich takings from his enemies that in a few years his power and repute prospered with many resources.

Brother Robert made changes in the content of the stories too, but in this he was much less successful. His aim was to turn the French romances into Norse sagas – which he evidently knew and esteemed highly. Probably he worked in the belief that his audience was incapable of appreciating other kinds of literature. But the *romans courtois* were created on quite different terms – they could not be changed into sagas without some degree of maltreatment. As was said above, the poets devoted much care to the psychology of their characters, describing their states of mind at great length, sometimes directly, sometimes through dialogue or even monologue. These hardly suited in stories of the native Norse kind where the convention was to appear to tell only what the author or reporter had himself seen and heard. Robert disposed of this difficulty by dispensing with practically all the psychological description and all the mental processes and monologues and by drastically cutting the long exchanges in direct speech. But that meant excision of vital parts, a destruction of the essence of the poems, and in consequence the chivalric sagas compare favourably with neither the original French poems nor the realistic Icelandic sagas which provided Robert with his native models.

The Tristan legend is "British", i.e. Celtic, but most of the stories dealing with the "matter of Britain" concern King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. King Arthur is remembered as a famous British leader at the time of the Saxon conquests in the fifth and sixth century. According to legend, he regaled his champions at a great round table where all sat without regard to degree. Little is known about the

historical King Arthur and all the preserved stories and poems about him were made more than five hundred years after his death. Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth century was one of the earliest "sources" (cf. below on *Breta sögur*), but the greatest of all the poets of the Arthurian cycle was Chrétien de Troyes at the end of that century, a contemporary of Thomas, the Tristan poet. One of Chrétien's best-known romances is *Yvain*, or "the Knight of the Lion", re-told in several countries, including Norway: "And here ends the story of Sir Íven which King Hákon the Old had turned from French into Norse" is the way the northern translator concludes his tale. Íven is one of Arthur's champions. He overcomes another knight, guardian of a forest and magic spring, and marries his lady. But his chivalric conscience drives him to seek adventures and he leaves his wife, promising to come back a year later. He does not appear at the appointed time and his wife demands the return of her ring from him. He now roams the forests and suffers various hardships, but meets benevolent ladies who help him. He frees a lion from the claws of a dragon, and the lion follows him like a faithful dog thereafter: a celebrated motif in the story which in Iceland is found, for example, on the carving of the door from Valþjófsstaðir. Finally Íven returns and is reconciled to his wife through the intervention of Lúneta, her lady-in-waiting. This theme of conflict between the claims of love and the claims of duty was real enough in an age of warring barons and distant crusades. In Chrétien's poem the action is built on close description of the thoughts and feelings of the principal characters, but in the Norwegian version only the adventures remain and the result is a more-or-less unmotivated sequence of episodes. *Ívens saga* was particularly popular in Scandinavia, notably in Sweden. The story is told in

The Knight of the Lion. The church-door from Valþjófsstaðir, carved about 1200. "The first scene of the story is in the lower panel where everything is in motion: a horse and a hawk rush on and a knight mounted on the horse thrusts his sword through a winged dragon which writhes in its death-throes; a lion which owes its life to the knight, extracts itself from the dragon's claws. The next scene, in the upper panel, shows the knight riding his horse at a gentle, measured pace, with the hawk perched quietly on the horse's neck and the lion trotting along with head held high behind its rescuer. The last scene is at the right-hand end of the upper panel: the lion crouches, grieving and dying, on the knight's grave; there is a cross on the grave and a church in the background. Below the lion it says in runes: 'See the mighty king, here buried, who slew this dragon'" (Kristján Eldjárn). Photo: Gísli Gestsson.

one of the so-called *Eufemiavisorna*, Swedish poems in *knittelvers* composed about 1300 for Queen Eufemia, the Swedish wife of Hákon V of Norway.

Two other Arthurian tales translated from poems by Chrétien are *Erex saga* and *Parcevals saga*. The first is badly preserved in late paper manuscripts and is a mere shadow of its French original. *Parcevals saga*, with the *Valvers þáttr* as its sequel, is a good deal better preserved but, as usual, shows large omissions of Chrétien's text. The translator cannot be seriously blamed for the looseness and obscurity of the narrative for in this case the original suffers from the same defects. We get, for example, only a vague idea of the Holy Grail, a mysterious object which occurs in numerous romances. Various knights attempt to achieve its quest but only the one who is absolutely pure in mind and body can be successful. Some stories told that the Grail was the chalice used at the Last Supper, and then by Joseph of Arimathea to collect the blood that dripped from the side of the wounded Saviour on the Cross.

Two *romans* that belong to no cycle, both pretty stories, were translated as *Partalopa saga* (*Parténopeus de Blois*) and *Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr* (*Floire et Blanchefleur*). The second of these is the source of one of the *Eufemiavisorna* mentioned above.

Flóres was the son of the king of Saracen land – Serkland – and Blankiflúr the daughter of a Christian lady of France enslaved there. They were born on the same day and loved each other from childhood. The king was not pleased at the prospect of a slave-woman's daughter as the wife of his princely son and sold Blankiflúr as a slave to the king of Babylon, who wanted to marry her. When Flóres heard what had become of her, he set off for Babylon and smuggled himself in a basket of flowers into the tower where Blankiflúr lived among the king's handmaidens. The king found them there, sharing one bed, was naturally furious and planned a horrible death for them. But Flóres slew a great champion in single combat and so proved his love and his royal descent. All was forgiven. He married Blankiflúr and became a Christian.

Möttuls saga, "the saga of the mantle", one of the five stories explicitly said to have been translated at the command of King Hákon is on the other hand an example of the *fabliau* genre. King Arthur invites guests from distant lands to celebrate Easter with him. A young man turns up with a beautiful mantle, whose property is that it will only fit a chaste

woman. The king orders the ladies of his court to try it on, one after another, and then much is revealed: not only that they have been unfaithful to their husbands but in what ways they have set about it. But in the end one lady is found who has been loyal to her lover. Not surprisingly, this was a popular tale, and we have early *rímur* on the subject, *Skikkjurímur*.

But the translation which is bound to seem to us the most memorable of all those commissioned by King Hákon is the collection of tales called *Strengleikar*. These short *lais* were originally sung to instrumental music – which explains the Norse title they are given – but the translations are of course in prose. The poet says her name was Marie – usually identified with the lady called Marie de France – and she dedicated her work to an unnamed king – probably Henry II of England.

There are two main reasons why we respond more readily to *Strengleikar* than to the other translations from Romance. The first is that the Norse version is very close to the original, with few omissions or alterations. We are not merely told of the events but the thoughts and feelings of the characters are also brought home to us: the pangs of lovers who must part, the bliss of reunion. The second is that these *lais* in prose are preserved in an ancient Norwegian manuscript and are the most authentic representative we know of the chivalric literature of thirteenth-century Norway. A modern Icelandic reader may find the language a little strange, but we soon discover it has a peculiar beauty of its own – the translator was a stylist of genius who had learnt much from Brother Robert. The tales belong in a romantic dream-world. Love is the great theme – lovers suffer separation and hardship but finally come together – or most of them do. Sir Guiamar is wounded by a dying hind who puts an enchantment on him. A mysterious ship carries him to a tower where an aged nobleman keeps his wife shut up behind a high wall. She cures the stranger but irresistible love springs up between them. Their liaison becomes known and Guiamar is forced to leave in his ship. But at parting she folds his shirt with incomparable skill and he fastens a belt firmly round her bare body – these were to be everlasting tokens of their love, for only she could unfold his shirt, only he loosen her belt. In the end her grief becomes unbearable – she finds she can slip out of her tower through unlocked doors and Guiamar's good ship carries her to her lover, though with more adventures and suspense on the way.

But love's transport can lead to disaster, as the *Tveggja elskanda ljóð*, the "two lovers' *lai*", shows. A king in Normandy announced that his daughter would be given in marriage only to the man who could carry her to the summit of the huge mountain that towered over his castle. Her young sweetheart took her in his arms and carried her up the mountainside – she had a magic potion in a little phial which he was to taste when he grew tired. But "because of the joy he had in the maiden, he forgot his drink. As the maiden felt him flagging, she said, 'Sweetheart,' she said, 'drink your drink for I feel you tiring, drink and renew your strength.' But he answered, 'I have ample strength, sweetheart, my heart is not faint, so on no account will I rest.' When he got two-thirds of the way up, he almost fell down in a swoon. The maiden begged him with many pleas: 'Sweetheart,' said she, 'drink your potion.' But he would not listen to her words or believe what she said, and went a great way with her, and then reached the summit with her and in much suffering. There he collapsed and never stood up again, and all his heart flowed out of him, and like that he lay there, dead from exhaustion." – As for the princess, she fell down and died of grief beside her lover. A stone tomb to receive them both was built there on the mountain.

One of the finest and most touching of the *lais* is *Laustiksljóð* – "the *lai* of the nightingale". A young knight is in love with his neighbour's wife. At night he listens to the song of the nightingale calling his mate to make love among the leaves and blossom. The lady realises what her sweetheart does and stands by her window to hear the nightingale too. Displeased at this, her husband has the nightingale snared and flings the dead bird into her bosom. She takes the little corpse, wraps it in a cloth woven with gold thread and sends it to her lover. He at once has a casket of gold, adorned with gems, made to receive it and there lays the nightingale to rest, closing the box with a golden lock. "This happening went round all Brittany, and out of this happening the Bretons made the *lai* they call the *lai of Laustik*."

We come now to the epic *chansons de geste*, the other main kind of French poetry represented in Norse translation. In *Elis saga* it says, "And Abbot Robert made the translation and King Hákon, son of King Hákon, had this Norse book translated for your pastime." It seems virtually certain that this Robert is the same as the Brother Robert who was responsible for *Tristrams saga* – only now he has been promoted in

his order. In all probability few people nowadays would find reading *Elis saga* a pleasing pastime – it was not chosen with the same felicitous taste as the *roman de Tristan*, for its original, *Elie de St Gille*, is rated one of the poorest *chansons de geste* we have. There is some echo of the crusades in the vast pitched battles against the paynim, but it rings hollow and the characters are too shadowy to rouse our interest. Critics find the language of the French poem uninspired, and Robert has tried to compensate by adopting a clangorous courtly style – which we can be sure we are reading in a form close to what Robert wrote, for the bulk of the saga is extant in an old manuscript – the one that also has *Strengleikar* in it. The saga is found complete – indeed, with additions – in Icelandic manuscripts. Comparison between the Norwegian and Icelandic versions provides useful guidelines for considering other works of this kind that are known only in Icelandic copies.

Flóvents saga is of particular value because it is a translation of an otherwise lost *chanson de geste*. But the most remarkable of all the Norse translations is the so-called *Karlamagnús saga*. This is not a single work but a translation of a number of *chansons de geste*, welded into one great sequence of narratives, most probably cobbled together after the poems had been translated. Formerly it was thought that the whole work was translated in Norway in the reign of Hákon the Old. Some traits of the saga suggest, however, that the translator – at least of most of the *þættir* – was an Icelander. All the extant manuscripts appear to be Icelandic – a fragment (NRA 61) generally regarded as Norwegian has now been shown to be the work of an Icelander who affected Norwegian habits in his script. On the basis of the major manuscripts, scholars normally distinguish an A and a B redaction, the former older than the latter. But there are various indications that the separate parts led separate existences, and it is proper to consider each one individually.

The part called *af Runzivals bardaga* – on the battle of Roncevaux – is the outstanding piece in the whole *Karlamagnús saga* – but then it is based on the finest of the French epics, the *Chanson de Roland*.

Charlemagne, Charles the Great (Karlamagnús in the North, from the Latin form, Carolus Magnus), who died in 814, was understandably a revered figure in the stories and poems of succeeding ages. And like King Arthur, he had a group of supremely valiant knights around him, his twelve peers. When Sighvatr the poet explained to St Óláfr why he had taken the liberty of baptising the king's newborn son with the name Magnús – he was later to be known as King Magnús the Good – he

said of the child's great imperial namesake, "He was the best man I know ever to have been in the world." Charlemagne converted or tried to convert the neighbouring heathen and won wide renown for his efforts on behalf of Christendom. His struggle against the Moors in Spain was especially famous. The *Chanson de Roland* treats of his Spanish campaign and the action fought at Roncevaux. The Norse version – here Roland appears as Rollant – is a good deal altered in comparison with the original and a good deal for the worse too – important parts are omitted and a number of wildly fantastic episodes added.

The *Chanson de Roland* is thought to have been first composed about 1100 and once the story had achieved that masterly form it was rapidly carried to other countries. In its popularity and in the variety of treatment it received it can be compared with the tale of Tristan. The Roland theme made greatest headway of all in Italy – where the hero becomes Orlando – best known from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, the Italian classic from the beginning of the sixteenth century. But this work is a far remove from the *Chanson de Roland* and its qualities owe more to Ariosto's genius and the poetry of his own Italian precursors than to the original French epic. This last was rediscovered by nineteenth-century Romantics and since then the fame of Roland has spread far and wide. In Iceland Grímur Thomsen made the poem called *Olífant*, after Roland's renowned horn, and took his motto from the *Rollantsrímur* of Þórður á Strjúgi, composed late in the sixteenth century and popular for centuries:

En Rolland féll við Runsival og riddarar margir fríðir.	And Roland fell at Roncevaux and radiant knights aplenty.

The narrative of the *Chanson* has some slight historical foundation. Roland was one of Charlemagne's commanders and led the rearguard in the Spanish campaign of 778. In the pass of Roncesvalles in the Pyrenees they were attacked and overwhelmed by Basque forces. In the *Chanson* (and in *Karlamagnús saga*) Roland is the emperor's nephew and the foremost of his paladins. He had two possessions of great price, the sword *Durendal* and the horn *l'olifant* (*Dýrumdali* and *Olífant* in the translation). The battle lasts most of the day with three great onslaughts – the attackers are of course Saracens in the poem. As numbers wane on the French side, Roland blows his horn so loud that the emperor hears the blast fifteen miles away. But the traitor Ganelon (Gvinelún) persuades him not to regard it. Only when Roland blows a third time –

with the blood starting from his mouth in his effort – does Charlemagne turn back to reinforce him. He comes too late. Roland is dead and all the twelve peers and all their men.

Þiðriks saga af Bern is comparable to *Karlamagnús saga*. It is extant in an old Norwegian manuscript and a number of later Icelandic ones. *Þiðriks saga* must have been put together in Norway in the latter part of the thirteenth century, at a time when commercial and other contacts with Germany were flourishing at the expense of older relations with England. *Karlamagnús saga* is built on French epic poems – *Þiðriks saga* is similarly built on German poetry that told of ancient heroes.

In many other respects, however, the two compilations are markedly unlike. Description in *Karlamagnús saga* is often elevated to a pitch of chivalric splendour. In *Þiðriks saga* the outlook seems more bourgeois, the actions and circumstances of individuals – even of princely birth – are often rather unrefined. It has been assumed that the reason for this is that the poems followed in the translation were middle-class rather than courtly entertainment. Some German poems on the same subjects are known but in very different versions from those used for *Þiðriks saga* – any immediate sources of the saga seem to have been lost for ever. One of the major reasons for appreciating *Þiðriks saga* is thus that it tells us something about heroic legends and literary culture in thirteenth-century Germany.

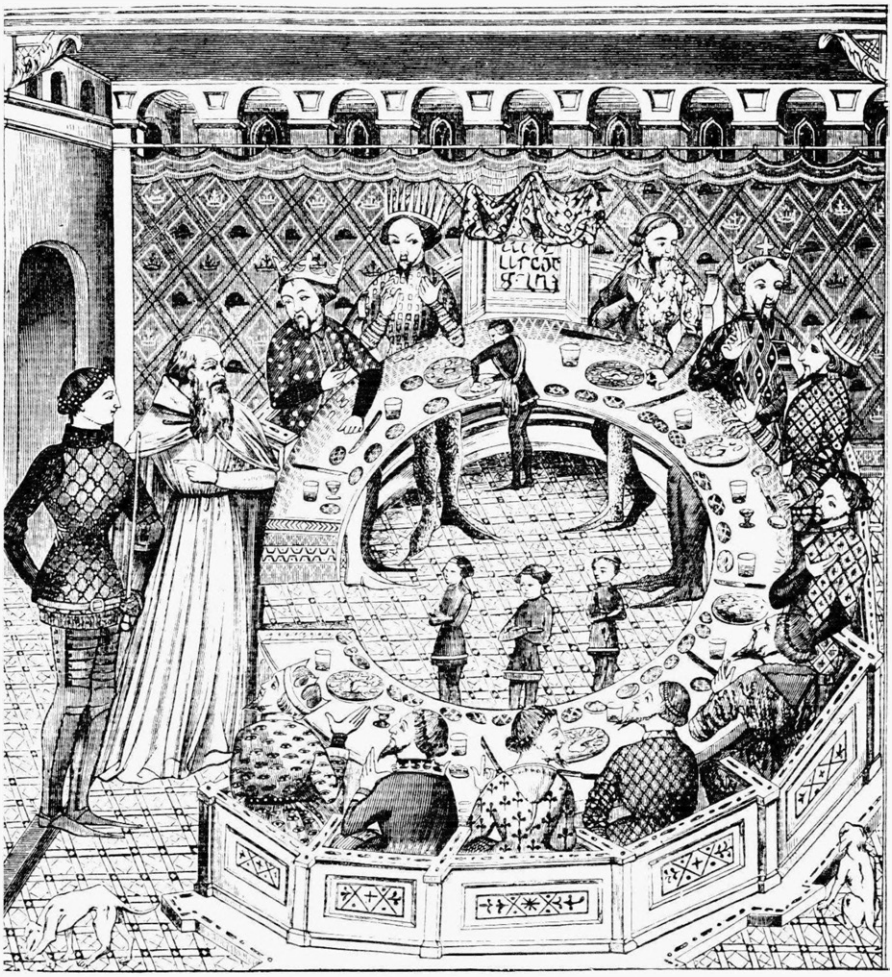
The central figure is Theodoric the Great, king of the Ostrogoths, who subdued the Roman Empire in 493 and reigned till his death in 526, with Verona as his chief residence. (In the German poems this becomes Bern and Theodoric is Dietrich or Didrik, Norse Þiðrikr, -rekr.) He attracted a large circle of heroes into his legendary orbit, some of whom we know from the heroic poems of the *Edda*. We meet Viðga, son of Velent the smith – better known to us as Völundr. We meet Hildibrandr and Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, Jörmunrekr and Atli king of the Huns (cf. p. 55). The story sometimes concentrates on such figures and forgets Þiðrikr entirely. Because the saga is so badly arranged, scholars have tended to assume numerous interpolations and additions in the preserved version, but the general opinion now is that we should lay the blame for the mess at the door of the translators who first put the various poems together to make the Norse prose version. The narrative is so clumsy and disorganised that as a whole it gives little pleasure, but there are some good bits in it; and as second-hand evidence of the state

of German letters in the thirteenth century it must be highly rated, as mentioned above. It may also be that it exerted more influence on Icelandic literature than has been suspected hitherto.

Some texts that are usually counted with *riddara sögur* were not translated from either French or German but from Latin. They are works of fiction – though looked upon as history in the middle ages – and cast in a mould resembling in some features that of the stories of chivalry. *Trójumanna saga*, "the saga of the Trojans", is extant in three different versions. The oldest of them is for the most part a translation of the *De excidio Troiae*, which claimed to be a version of a work attributed – falsely of course – to Dares Phrygius, named in the *Iliad* as priest of the temple of Hephaistos. In fact it seems to have been put together in Latin from the start, at some time in the fifth century. It draws its material from the *Iliad* and other ancient sources. The later Icelandic versions show a number of variations and accretions, taken especially from the *Ilias Latina*, a Latin version of the *Iliad* probably made in the first century. Some additions from classical poets, Vergil and Ovid among them, are also found.

Breta sögur, "sagas of the Britons", are linked with *Trójumanna saga* because the descent of the royal line of Britain is traced to Brutus, fugitive from the sack of Troy – in Icelandic manuscripts the two texts usually go together. But *Breta sögur* have quite different origins, for they were translated from Geoffrey of Monmouth's notorious *Historia regum Britanniae*, written c. 1135. Geoffrey's work partly deals with legends of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. Its fabulous material and lively style ensured the *Historia* great popularity for centuries – it was regarded as an authoritative work and used as a source by poets of the *romans courtois*, Chrétien de Troyes and others who composed on the "matter of Britain".

It is likely that most of the translations from French sources were made in Norway, including those that are not specifically attributed to King Hákon's initiative. Works from Latin on the other hand may well have been translated in Iceland – regarded as they were as serious history, not poetic entertainment designed to promote courtly ideals. We know that Gunnlaugr Leifsson, monk of Þingeyrar (died 1218, see p. 157), translated the "prophecies of Merlin" from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*. His verse translation, *Merlínusspá*, mostly in *fornyrðislag*, is included in *Breta sögur*. Probably the prose translation of the



King Arthur and his knights at the Round Table. A woodcut from a fourteenth-century French miniature.

Historia was made not long after Gunnlaugr produced his poem in the first years of the thirteenth century. That translation is more likely to have been made in Iceland than in Norway.

To these half-sisters of the *riddara sögur* must be added *Alexanders saga*, a prose translation of a long Latin poem, the *Alexandreis* by Gautier

(Walter) of Châtillon, whom the saga-author calls "meistari Galterus". The Latin original was composed at the end of the twelfth century, the translation probably not long after 1250 – if we are to take seriously the information given in one of the two main manuscripts of the saga, which tells us that the work was done by Bishop Brandr Jónsson (died 1264). The statement is repeated at the end of *Gyðinga saga* in the same manuscript and not everyone believes it. True or not, there are many points which suggest that the translation was made about that time, and it is certainly an Icelandic work, as the alliteration shows. The translation is superb and has stirred the admiration of many readers, from Árni Magnússon to Halldór Laxness. Árni had it in mind to produce an edition of it and Halldór was the prime mover behind its first Icelandic printing in 1945. The translator sticks close to the matter but obviously is no word-for-word man – even if that were possible when turning verse into prose. He was well schooled both in the native Icelandic saga-style and in the courtly manner of the Norwegian translations, but he goes his own way with the result that in many respects the language of *Alexanders saga* is unique in Icelandic literature.

Naturally the translation could not have succeeded so well if the original had not been a work of quality. It is a clear narrative in flowing hexameters though with many elaborate similes. When the translator finds the rhetoric or the excurses altogether too much of a good thing, he hides behind the author and adds, "so Master Galterus says", or something of that sort. Gautier chiefly followed a "history" – mixed with fable – by Curtius Rufus, a Roman author of the first century, whose work was a source of a number of extravagant tales in the middle ages. Special attention is paid to the presentation of Alexander – we see how his pride grows as his career prospers. *Alexanders saga* can be looked on as an exemplum illustrating that kind of excessive pride which the Greeks called *hubris*.

The work that properly takes pride of place in thirteenth-century Norwegian literature is *Konungs skuggsjá*, "the king's mirror". In spirit it is closely allied to the ideals of chivalry and the literature that enshrined them, which is why it is mentioned at this point. In the prologue the writer says, "And the book is given a fair name, for it is called *Speculum regale*. And it is called a 'royal mirror' because it deals with the manners of kings as with those of other men, since indeed the king is highest by title and it is his duty to follow the fairest customs, along with his court and all in his service."

In the middle ages the title *speculum*, "looking-glass", betokened a pedagogic work treating good manners and pious conduct. Such works were especially composed to provide instruction for princes, a model for them to follow – they were supposed to see themselves in the book as in a mirror. There is every reason to believe that the Norwegian specimen was written on the initiative of King Hákon the Old for the benefit of his sons, Hákon and Magnús, born in 1232 and 1238 respectively. Its date of composition is therefore likely to have been about 1250. It is in the classic colloquy form of medieval school-books. A son comes to his wise and experienced father to seek answers to his questions – and the answers fill most of the book. In the prologue the author says he will treat the "skills and manners" of four classes: merchants, kings "and other great leaders and the men who follow and serve them", clerics and finally farmers. Only the first two classes are discussed in the book we have, and it is thought that the author never finished it as he had intended.

The son says that he most wants to be a merchant in his first years and accordingly is given advice on the ways of responsible merchants and information about the knowledge they need – including the course of the heavenly bodies and the movements of the sea. Among this is a description of three countries with whom the Norwegians had close commerce, Iceland, Greenland and Ireland, and of the seas surrounding them. The author knew a lot about Iceland and had much of interest to tell, though he dwells most willingly on the marvellous features of the country – volcanoes and hot springs are the chief of his Icelandic *memorabilia*. He produces reasons for believing that the fires of hell burn in Iceland rather than in Sicily (which is where they were located by Gregory the Great and others): "I do not doubt," he says, "that there are more places of torment in Iceland than just in the fire, and that is why in that country there is an oppressive burden of glaciers and frost no less than of fire." He devotes many lines to a description of whales and other great fish in the Iceland and Greenland seas, most of it accurate description but with some admixture of the fabulous, as when he talks of the monster of the Greenland ocean called *hafstrambi*. His account of Ireland on the other hand is largely on the fantastic wonders of that country – but in this case the author relies on fabulous foreign writings, not on eyewitness reports.

The real "king's mirror" is in the second and larger part, where the conduct of the king and his men are discussed. The author proffers advice on dress, hair style and the fashion in beards, and every aspect of

courtly behaviour. He makes a sapient comparison between the murrain that can fall on cattle and crops and the canker that can come in the body politic of a nation. Famine can be relieved by supplies from neighbouring countries where conditions are better but "if the canker is in the people and the customs of the country, then the greatest damage results, for money can buy from other lands neither good customs nor good sense once those that existed in a country are destroyed or spoilt." Members of the court also need to train themselves in the use of arms of every kind. Some of the author's information about arms and armour is taken from foreign books and it is unlikely that all the armaments he discusses were in use in Norway – some things indeed he appears to have misunderstood. But in other respects the descriptions are in good accord with what we know of life at the court of King Hákon and the court regulations (*Hirðskrá*, p. 363) that were followed there.

The author of *Konungs skuggsjá* was an educated man, experienced in affairs, just and devout. He makes extensive reference to the Bible and other good books. The trinity of qualities essential for a king's man comprised sound sense, moral rectitude and polite manners. When God was to judge Adam and Eve after the Fall, he turned for counsel to four divine maidens, Truth, Peace, Justice and Mercy. As we saw, the book is a source of welcome information about the physical world of Iceland and Greenland, but it is preeminently valuable for the insight it gives us into the state of Norwegian society in the mid-thirteenth century. The author is not free of superstition, but that hardly affects the value of his descriptions and his independent observations, for example of the course of the sun and the length of the day in his own latitudes. His illustration of the relationship of the earth to the sun takes the form of an acute and entertaining parallel between them and an apple suspended in front of a candle: "From that one can now observe that the globe of the earth is spherical and is not brought equally near the sun in every part. But where its curvature comes closest to the course of the sun, it is there by far the hottest, and some of those lands which are directly opposed to its unshielded rays are uninhabitable. But lands which are placed where it approaches them with oblique light may well be lived in, though some are hotter than others."

Both the learned style and the courtly style find their echoes in the diction of *Konungs skuggsjá*. To us it may seem ornate and rather cumbrous, but in terms of its time, context and intention it must be judged a brilliant performance. The vagaries of the winds of summer and winter are described in passages of personification unique in Norse

literature. In summer the southwest wind is gentle "and as the day declines he takes with cheerful countenance the temperate glow and warm beams, shows for his part signs of reconciliation and concord, all anger set aside, invites mighty waves and steep rollers to subside with diminishing strength, and for full reconciliation with his neighbours he calls forth fertile dews and blows softly with warm breath." But when winter comes, "he weeps in bitterness of heart with great rainstorms, frowns above his tear-besprent beard, puffs out his cheeks under a thick-clouded sky, blows furiously with chill rainsqualls, brings forth mightily stout waves and deep-bosomed billows with boat-hungry breakers, and invites all the gales of ocean to run wild in pugnacious rage."

Icelandic sagas of chivalry

Norwegian *riddara sögur* soon became known in Iceland and they there exerted a multifarious influence, as was noted earlier. They affected the diction and even the matter of native stories, though in varying degree. They were among the incentives which led to the recording of the traditional tales that now began to be worked up as *fornaldarsögur*. As we saw, works of related kind were themselves translated in Iceland, though from Latin rather than French. The most significant result of these literary imports from Norway was, however, the impetus they gave to a new branch of saga-writing in the shape of *riddara sögur* home-made in Iceland. These new stories proved extremely popular and led a long existence, continuing to appeal to a wide audience to our own day, not least in the form of *rímur*. More than thirty home-produced sagas of chivalry are thought to be medieval in origin although, as was observed earlier, there is often only a fine line to be drawn between them and *fornaldarsögur*. Such stories were even made after the middle ages were over. *Rímur* preserve a number of otherwise lost *riddara sögur*, just as they do lost heroic sagas – *Filipó saga, Mábilar saga, Reinalds saga*, for example, are known in metrical form but not in prose.

These stories and their *rímur* offspring were not highly esteemed in the days of the Enlightenment and later – as the history of their publication shows. Only about half of them had actually appeared in print (often in poor editions) when Agnete Loth edited most of the remainder, fifteen in all, in five volumes issued in the years 1962–5 (*Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, Editiones Arnamagnæanæ, Series B 20–24). Each text there is based on a single manuscript source, but the idea was first and foremost to make these little-known texts available.

The Icelandic *riddara sögur* are not legitimate offspring of their Norwegian namesakes. They have much *fornaldarsaga* matter in them, which blurs the distinction between the genres, as we have said more than once. *Märchen* motifs and narrative elements of indeterminate origin are also common in them. The influence from the religious learned style is more conspicuous.

There are times when one suspects that a saga in this group may after all be a version of a foreign original which is lost or at least undetected. *Mágus saga*, for example, makes use of some of the same material as is found in the French *Quatre fils Aymon*, but the correspondence between them is not close, and possibly the author of the saga knew the story from hearsay. *Mágus saga* is found in a manuscript of some age and is generally reckoned one of the first home-made *riddara sögur*, perhaps composed as early as c. 1300 or not long afterwards. A later version of the saga is eked out with various tales, only tenuously connected with the main plot. Another story which seems relatively ancient is *Konráðs saga keisarasonar*, which contains a number of interesting narrative motifs.

One distinction between *riddara sögur* and *fornaldarsögur* is made by referring to the geographical location of the adventures. Cederschiöld made a valuable edition of some of the sagas of chivalry in 1884 and called it *Fornsögur Suðrlanda*. The Icelandic *riddara sögur* are sometimes set in western or southern Europe, sometimes in Byzantium or Egypt or Ethiopia, sometimes even in India or other remote oriental lands. The characters are often given exotic names, Kirjalax, Ermedon, Marmoria, Filaktemia, but sometimes they sound more familiar, Konráð, Vilhjálmr and even Sigurðr. The narrative methods are like those employed by writers of heroic sagas, the characters are ciphers and little more than examples of good and bad. Battles are fought between mounted hosts and knights joust with each other, but in single combat various weapons proper to the Norse world are wielded. Love is a great theme, in the manner of the continental tales, and is often the mainspring of the action, but there is little sentiment and no attempt is made to describe the personal feelings of the characters. The same may be said of the *märchen* motifs. These sometimes resemble those found in *fornaldarsögur* – wicked stepmothers, enchantments, hazardous quests, heroes who start life as "coal-biters", trolls and highwaymen. Others belong rather with the tales of continental origin: magic carpets and bewitched cloaks, charms and potions, and lions who give aid to heroes.

People nowadays set little store by these home-made tales of chivalry.

They suffer in comparison with other works and are overshadowed by the classical sagas. Nevertheless they have their qualities and deserve more respect and study than they have had. The threads of their material often lead us out into the wide world, and they were the chief original contribution to prose literature made by Icelanders in the late middle ages. They delighted many generations, both in their everyday garb of prose and in their Sunday-best in the *rímur*: popular literature that really belonged to the people. To the Icelanders in their poverty they revealed remote dream-worlds where pleasure and plenty reigned.

Heroic sagas

Character and date

The term *fornaldarsögur*, literally "tales of ancient times", "tales of antiquity", is now often rendered "heroic sagas" in English. Their full title, *fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, is taken from the first complete edition of these tales, published by Carl Christian Rafn in 1829–30. Here the term "antiquity" is used in a specific sense, of the period before the colonisation of Iceland and before the time of Haraldr Fairhaired. Historic times can be said to start with Haraldr, while before his day we have the prehistoric or folklore age of Norway. The stories are designated "of Scandinavia" because that is where most of them take place, particularly in Norway; and even if some of them go beyond Scandinavia in the usual limited sense of the word, still the outlook is Scandinavian, the setting is the sphere of activity of Scandinavian Vikings, for instance in the British Isles or Russia. By this means heroic sagas are distinguished from wonder-tales or other fictions which take place outside the Scandinavian ambience, namely the so-called *riddara sögur*, the sagas of chivalry (see above). Translated sagas of chivalry obviously differ from heroic sagas not only in scene but also in matter and treatment; but sagas of chivalry put together in Iceland have many motifs in common with heroic sagas, so there is often a fine line between the two categories. It was to some extent a matter of chance what tales were included in Rafn's three volumes; but the genre has been defined by reference to his edition ever since, and most of the fabulous stories set in foreign lands which were not included in it have been classed as sagas of chivalry. But it would be altogether more appropriate for instance to class as heroic sagas tales such as those of Sigurðr fótr, Vilmundr viðutan, Áli flekkr and Þjalar-Jón. Some written heroic sagas have been completely lost, while the substance of some has been preserved in *rímur*.

Examples are the tales of Hrómundr Gripsson (see below), Haraldr Hringsbani, Andri and Ormarr.

On the other hand the older heroic sagas are related to those kings' sagas which take place in the far past, such as Snorri's *Ynglinga saga* and also *Skjöldunga saga*, which no longer survives in its original form. But in the view of contemporaries these sagas were valid authorities, to be classed with other more veracious kings' sagas written in the latter part of the twelfth century and the earlier part of the thirteenth. As long as the learned tendency prevailed in Icelandic historical writing it was not thought proper to record the extravagant and fantastic heroic sagas. But as the thirteenth century wore on, the outlook changed and many factors combined to confer the accolade of written record on heroic sagas. Histories of the Norwegian kings of well-attested periods had gradually been written. The dry-as-dust scholarly attitude gave way before a delight in amusing stories. Fictional tales from the continent were transformed into Norse sagas. It is generally agreed that the oldest heroic sagas were written down about the middle of the thirteenth century or soon after. Still, it is necessary to scrutinise their age more closely, and it is worth considering whether they might not be altogether younger than has been supposed. Certainly those sagas of Icelanders most closely related to the heroic sagas in matter and diction are all dated to the fourteenth century. The oldest manuscript containing heroic sagas survives in two parts, in the Arnamagnæan collection in Copenhagen and the Royal Library in Stockholm; some think that it was written early in the fourteenth century, others date it to c. 1350.

Oral narrative

Sources and studies indicate that the older heroic sagas are largely based on oral narrative. At first sight it might seem improbable that these tales should depend on oral traditions about people and events dating from five to seven centuries before the tales were written down. But it should be observed that here we are dealing with a kind of oral tradition different from that of accounts regarded as literally true. Folktales can soar above the seas of time, they never die but take on different forms in the memory and on the lips of many generations. Reciters and authors have commonly realised that they were dealing with fantasy, and accordingly treated their material with a free hand, unshackled by the bonds of erudition.

Now for some examples to show that heroic sagas were recited to entertain and to inform, before they were ever written.

1. In *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* there is a famous account of a marriage-feast at Reykhólar on Barðaströnd in the summer of 1119. It gives some description of the kind of entertainment provided: "Hrólfr of Skálmarnes told a tale of the Viking Hröngviðr and Óláfr liðsmannakonungr, of robbing Þráinn the berserk's mound, and of Hrómundr Gripsson – with many verses to it. This story was told to entertain King Sverrir, and he reckoned such made-up stories the most amusing. Nevertheless people trace their ancestry to Hrómundr Gripsson. Hrólfr himself composed this story. The priest Ingimundr told the tale of Ormr Barreyjarskáld with many verses and a *flokkr* composed by Ingimundr himself at the end of the story; yet many well-informed people accept this story as true."

It is not known for sure when *Þorgils saga* was written (cf. p. 189), but it is not really a contemporary document; and also, it appears from the words introducing this literary recital that some people did not believe it: "Things are related which many now dispute and deny all knowledge of; for many are ignorant of the truth, taking invention for truth and truth for fabrication." But *Þorgils saga* is likely to be older than recorded heroic sagas, so its author must have had some grounds for thinking that such stories were recited extempore, in his own time at any rate, if not earlier. The story told by Hrólfr of Skálmarnes was later written down, but it has not survived. Before it was lost, the *rímur* of Hrómundr Gripsson, the *Griplur*, were composed and from them the present *Hrómundar saga* was made. It tells of the same people mentioned in the Reykhólar narrative, and the material is the typical stuff of heroic sagas. It has some relation to the Helgi lays of the *Edda* and also to narratives by Saxo Grammaticus; the indications are that Hrólfr based his story on ancient heroic lays. Ormr Barreyjarskáld has a few lines of verse attributed to him in Snorri's *Edda* but is otherwise unknown. It is assumed that this story was also a heroic saga, but obviously there is no proof.

2. On Hennøy in Nordfjord (Sogn) on the Norwegian coast there are some runes inscribed on a big rock by the shore which are attributed to the period around 1200. The main inscription runs thus: "Here the men stayed who came from Giantland in a ship laden with gold, and it is inside this rock." The inscription points to the existence of oral tales related to heroic sagas. Giantland (*Risaland*) is mentioned in *Örvar-Odds saga*.

3. Saxo Grammaticus, writing c. 1200, begins his *History of the Danes* in remote antiquity, and the first nine books could be described as a series of heroic sagas. Among his authorities he makes special mention of the Icelanders, for he says they were particularly well up in ancient lore. He states that he based a considerable part of his work on their narratives. Later in Saxo's text we hear of a certain Arnoldus Tylensis, i.e. Arnaldr the Icelander, who was in the retinue of Archbishop Absalon and who entertained King Valdemar with his stories. It is thought that the person meant is Arnaldr Þorvaldsson, included in the list of poets in the *Edda*, but otherwise unknown. The material in the first part of *Gesta Danorum* shows kinship with the Icelandic heroic sagas, both directly and indirectly. The narrative is composed of independent episodes, with frequent reference to poetry which is freely put into the mouths of characters in the story. The champion spends part of his youth among trolls and is on good terms with the daughter of the house, who makes him a tunic immune to the bite of weapons. A berserk lusts after a fair maiden and challenges her father or guardian to a duel, but the champion lays the berserk low. Occasionally Icelandic heroic sagas treat of ancient Danish kings and heroes who also come into Saxo's work, e.g. Hrólfr kraki, Haraldr Wartooth and Starkaðr the Old. Some things in these narratives are similar, some different, and the case is ambiguous: the discrepancy could arise from divergent traditions that existed in Iceland, or from different handling by the authors – Saxo on the one hand, Icelanders on the other. But some of the stories Saxo tells have never been recorded in Iceland, even though they may have originated in Icelandic oral tradition.

Axel Olrik, who did much work on Saxo's sources, assumed that he had specifically Norwegian informants (as well as Danish). But this conflicts with Saxo's own testimony, as already mentioned. It is another matter that Icelandic traditions were rooted in Norway, insofar as they were genuine "tales of antiquity" – stories older than the settlement of Iceland. Things that belong together are bound to match.

4. In the supplement to Skarðsárbók, derived for the most part from Hauksbók, there is the tale of a Norwegian merchant who told the history of King Vatnarr Víkarsson "whose howe lies to the south of Hákonarhella". Vatnarr later appeared to the narrator in a dream, and rewarded him with gold from his howe for telling the story.

5. Finally we may notice the report in *Sturlu þáttr* of the occasion when Sturla Þórðarson told the story of Huld on the ship of King Magnús the Lawmender (see p. 194). The story is called "a troll-wife story" and was

apparently of the same type as such narratives in the heroic sagas. No texts exist, and perhaps the story was never written down.

Poems

In the heroic sagas poetry has left various traces, both direct and indirect. The point has already been made that some of the oldest sagas were based on ancient heroic poetry. This can be seen both by comparison with the *Poetic Edda* and by the fact that separate verses or whole sections of poems are included. Thus the eddaic poems about Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and the Gjúkungar are used in *Völsunga saga*, and the very ancient *Hlöðskviða* is recorded in the latter part of *Hervarar saga*.

But in these works there are also remnants of poetry that once accompanied heroic sagas that were orally narrated: it is not very ancient, but still it is apparently older than the written sagas. At this point we may recall what is said in *Þorgils saga* about the excellent verse-sequence which the priest Ingimundr Einarsson composed as a conclusion to the story of Ormr Barreyjarskáld. It is common enough in heroic sagas for champions to call up times past in song, sometimes at the point of death. Among such poems may be mentioned *Víkarsbálkr* in *Gautreks saga*, *Hrókskviða* in *Hálfs saga*, the death-song of Örvar-Oddr in his saga, and the death-lay of Hjálmarr, preserved in both *Hervarar saga* and *Örvar-Odds saga*. It is not unlikely that the sequence composed by the priest Ingimundr was this kind of retrospect-poetry. The usual metre for such poetry is *fornyrðislag*. An exception is the poem wrongly named *Krákumál*, which ought to be called *Ragnarsmál* since it is put into the mouth of Ragnarr loðbrók in the snake-pit; the metre here is what Snorri calls *háttlausa, dróttkvætt* but for the most part without internal rhyme. *Krákumál* is also exceptional in that the author of *Ragnars saga* either did not know it or failed to use it; on the other hand, the poem has influenced the occasional verses in the saga, which shows that they are older than the saga itself.

In some death-songs the aim is not to review the life and exploits of the hero but rather to dwell on particular events in a lyrical and elegiac strain. This is the purpose of the death-song of Hjálmarr in *Örvar-Odds saga* (and in *Hervarar saga*), and of Hildibrandr in the *Ásmundar saga kappabana*. These laments or elegies show kinship with some late eddaic poems such as *Helreið Brynhildar* and *Guðrúnarhvöt* (in its latter part).

It may further be observed that Saxo got to know many heroic sagas in similar form: a narrative guided and supported by verse, some of it in

the form of very ancient heroic lays, some of it in the form of more recent compositions. The latter were probably Icelandic, like the later eddaic poems and the poetry in Icelandic heroic sagas. Saxo reworked these in long-winded Latin hexameters; his translations retained only the substance of the original poems, not their form. The most striking of the old heroic lays rewritten by Saxo is *Bjarkamál*. The opening verses are preserved in Norse, and comparison shows how Saxo treated the original. The so-called *Ingjaldskvæði*, pieced together from various poems or fragments found in Saxo's work, was probably an old heroic lay. Later still – and so perhaps Icelandic – is the death-song of Starkaðr which Saxo likewise rewrites in his history.

The heroic sagas can be divided into three main categories according to subject: heroic tales, Viking tales and romances. Heroic tales are regarded as pre-Viking in origin. In subject they are allied to heroic poems of the *Edda* and other ancient Germanic heroic lays, and they are also interwoven with authentic early poetry of this kind, as has been shown above. Viking tales have a setting on the verge of historic times, in the early Viking Age, and bear close resemblance to episodes belonging to the oldest period told of in kings' sagas and sagas of Icelanders. Romantic tales are for the most part free of any connection with particular times, being the invention of authors who used diverse motifs and models. This classification also accords in the main with the age of the stories or the time of writing. Heroic tales were the first to be written down, then the Viking tales, while the romances were composed in the final stages of Old Icelandic literary history.

Individual sagas

Völsunga saga is considered by many people to be the oldest of all heroic sagas, written about the middle of the thirteenth century or soon

The prose introducing Fáfnismál *in the* Poetic Edda *says: "Sigurðr and Reginn went up to Gnitaheiðr and found there the track made by Fáfnir when he crawled to water. Sigurðr dug a big pit on the pathway and got inside it. When Fáfnir crawled off his gold, he breathed out venom and it streamed past over Sigurðr's head. But when Fáfnir crawled over the pit, Sigurðr stabbed him to the heart with his sword. Fáfnir writhed and lashed with head and tail." The picture shows part of the carving on the church portal at Hylestad in Setesdal, Norway, dated to the first half of the thirteenth century. Photo: Universitetets oldsaksamling, Oslo.*

afterwards. This dating may need to be revised. There is nothing in its content to attest such great age, while the style and diction indicate a later period, and the treatment links it with later stories of other kinds, as has been suggested above.

The greater part of *Völsunga saga* is a summary of the heroic poems recorded – with interspersed prose passages – in the latter part of the Codex Regius (pp. 55 ff.). Allusion is made in Snorri's *Edda* and in *Norna-Gests þáttr* to a saga of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, and some scholars assume that this refers to a written saga which was then used in *Völsunga saga* and also in Snorri's *Edda* and the Codex Regius collection. If this is the case, then the poems concerned with Sigurðr would have originally been written down as quotations in the saga and extracted from there in the eddaic collection. The prose passages in the Codex Regius, which are especially numerous and rich in material in this part of the manuscript, would accordingly be remnants of the lost *Sigurðar saga Fáfnisbana*. Howsoever, the last poems of the Codex Regius, which are mostly free from interspersed prose, cannot possibly have been adopted from a saga. When the poems diverge, as *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál* do, the author fuses them together, making his own choice of what seems appropriate.

The author of *Völsunga saga* had the eddaic collection of poems complete and unmutilated; consequently a chief merit of the saga is that it has preserved, better than any other source, the content of those poems that occupied the present lacuna in the Codex Regius. Unhappily, only a few stanzas of the lost poems are incorporated in the saga, and though it gives the gist of the contents it cannot of course be any substitute for the poems themselves. Various scholars have tried to arrive at some idea of the "poems of the lacuna" with the help of *Völsunga saga*. The results vary widely and altogether the attempt must be considered a fruitless enterprise.

At the beginning of *Völsunga saga* an account is given of Sigurðr's father King Sigmundr and others of his kin, material not represented in any other source. Those who believe in a lost *Sigurðar saga* suppose it was the source of this information. But there is no unambiguous evidence of the existence of this saga, and moreover this opening part of *Völsunga saga* does not refer to Sigurðr and has little connection with the following narratives about him (derived from eddaic poems). Some scholars also assume that a lost poem (or poems) was used in this part. In this exordium there are various motifs that belong to romance rather than to heroic poetry: an apple cures a woman of infertility, labour pains

continue for six years, men turn into wolves, a leaf has power to heal as soon as it is laid on a wound.

In the description of Sigurðr in *Völsunga saga* there is perceptible influence from *Þiðriks saga*. Some believe that this chapter is interpolated in *Völsunga saga,* but there seems no need to assume this; unusual style can be explained by the impact of a new source. A more likely explanation has more than once been suggested: that the example of *Þiðriks saga*, in which ancient Germanic heroic tales were written up from German poems, moved the author of *Völsunga saga* to make a comparable saga from heroic poems extant in Norse/Icelandic.

Another saga demonstrably based on ancient poems is *Hervarar saga* (also called *Heiðreks saga,* or in full *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*). It is not built on poems in the *Edda* (Codex Regius) but on verse not otherwise preserved; yet it is some compensation that a great deal is incorporated in the saga and has survived in this way.

Hervarar saga covers the life-span of four generations of mighty heroes who perform great deeds and have no mind to die in their beds: when there is no help for it, even close kinsmen are put to the sword. The connecting thread is the name Angantýr, borne by one leading member of the family after another, and also the sword Tyrfingr which was renowned in ancient story. It was the sharpest of swords, "and each time it was drawn, light gleamed from it like a ray of the sun. It could never be unsheathed without causing the death of a man and it should always be sheathed with warm blood on it. No living thing, man or beast, could see another day after a wound from it, whether the wound were greater or less. It had never failed in a stroke, nor ever stopped until it entered the ground, and the man who took it into battle would win if it was wielded."

Arngrímr was an outstanding Viking who had twelve sons, Angantýr being the eldest and boldest, Hjörvarðr the second; all of them were berserks and great champions. One Yuletide Eve when the chieftain's toast was drunk Hjörvarðr swore an oath that he would win the daughter of Ingjaldr king of Sweden, the maid renowned through all lands for beauty and accomplishment, and would have no other woman. Next spring the brothers set off for Uppsala, and Hjörvarðr made his offer of marriage before the king. Then Hjálmarr the High-hearted stepped forward and reminded the king of the great support he had given him in battle and conquest. He asked the king to grant him his

daughter – "and it is more fitting that you should grant this request to me than to these berserks, who have done nothing but harm in your realm and in that of many other kings." Hjörvarðr then challenged Hjálmarr to single combat south on Sámsey, and at the appointed time Hjálmarr arrived with Oddr the Far-traveller, who was called Örvar-Oddr, Arrow-Oddr. Angantýr had the sword Tyrfingr and Oddr had a tunic immune to the bite of weapons. Hjálmarr did battle against Angantýr, and Oddr fought against his eleven brothers. In the end Oddr laid all the brothers low and Hjálmarr killed Angantýr, but himself suffered sixteen mortal wounds. Before his death he uttered his death-song with Oddr as his audience, ending with this verse:

Hrafn flýgr austan	A raven flies from the east
af hám meiði,	off a tall tree,
flýgr honum eptir	follows him flying
örn í sinni,	an eagle in company:
þeim gef ek erni	it is the last eagle
efstum bráðir,	I shall give carrion to,
sá mun á blóði	it is my life-blood
bergja mínu.	this one will taste.

When the king of Sweden's daughter heard this she was so grief-stricken that she killed herself. Angantýr and his brothers were buried with all their weapons in a howe on Sámsey.

The next part of the saga tells of Angantýr's daughter Hervör, and the first portion of it is based on the poem called *Hervararkviða*, often titled the "Waking of Angantýr" in English. She was a valkyrie who took on the garb and weapons of a man. She went to Sámsey and asked her father for the sword Tyrfingr; their exchange of words at the entrance to the howe occupies the main part of the poem. Afterwards she went to Guðmundr of Glasisvellir and married his son called Höfundr. Their sons were Angantýr and Heiðrekr. They were very different in nature. Angantýr was like his father, well-disposed to every man, but Heiðrekr did more harm than Angantýr did good, and Hervör loved him dearly. In the end Heiðrekr killed his brother by throwing a stone at malicious random, and then his father drove him out.

Then begins the third section of the saga, which concerns Heiðrekr. He defends the realm of King Haraldr of Reiðgotaland, marries his daughter and is given control of half the kingdom. Later he does battle with his father-in-law and kills him, and his wife is so infuriated that she hangs herself in the hall of the guardian spirit. They had a son called

Angantýr, and Heiðrekr had another son, called Hlöðr, by the daughter of Humli king of the Huns.

As he grew old, Heiðrekr became a great lord and a sage. He entered into a riddle-contest with a man called Gestumblindi, who was in fact Óðinn in disguise. The riddles of Gestumblindi are the oldest example of this kind of contest of wits in Icelandic. There is a riddle to each stanza, some few in the metre *fornyrðislag* or a variant of it, but most in the metre *ljóðaháttr*:

Hverjar eru þær brúðir	What ladies are they
er ganga í brimskerjum	that walk the fretted rocks
ok eiga eptir firði för?	and on the firth print their path?
harðan beð hafa	A hard bed they have
þær inar hvítfölduðu konur	those white-kerchiefed women,
ok leika í logni fátt.	in a dead calm they dance little.

For a long time Heiðrekr solves every riddle, until at last Gestumblindi asks, echoing *Vafþrúðnismál:*

Segðu þat þá hinzt	Say now last of all
ef þú ert hverjum konungi vitrari:	if you are wisest of kings:
Hvat mælti Óðinn	What was it Óðinn said
í eyra Baldri	in Baldr's ear
áðr hann væri á bál hafiðr?	before he was raised on the pyre?

"You alone know that, vile creature," replied Heiðrekr. He drew Tyrfingr and struck at Óðinn, but he changed into a hawk and flew away. Óðinn laid a curse on Heiðrekr, that he should meet his death at the hands of the basest thralls, and this came about soon afterwards.

Angantýr avenged his father sooner than expected, and then held a great funeral feast in his honour. Next begins the fourth part of the saga, telling of conflict between the brothers which ends with Angantýr slaying Hlöðr. This part of the saga is also based on a poem, the archaic *Hlöðskviða,* already discussed above (see pp. 73–76). At the end of the saga come short accounts of Angantýr's descendants, and lines of descent are drawn to Ragnarr loðbrók; reference is made to the saga of Ragnarr and to "kings' sagas" (probably meaning *Skjöldunga saga*). Finally, from an unknown source, there is a survey of the kings of Sweden down to Filippus (died c. 1118) and Ingi (died c. 1130), sons of Hallsteinn.

Hervarar saga is in Hauksbók, which was written soon after 1300. Here the saga is much altered and abridged, but a generally better text

survives in other manuscripts. There were several intermediate copies between Hauksbók and the original version, and it is generally thought that the saga was composed about the middle of the thirteenth century or soon after. This and *Völsunga saga* can be regarded as the most notable of the heroic sagas. Admittedly the work splits into several parts very loosely held together. The subject-matter is fantastic, the treatment stereotyped, and the characterisation slight, features which are shared by all heroic sagas. But individual episodes are exciting and in some ways unusual. The chief value lies in the poetry which forms the kernel of each separate section, in particular the riddles of Heiðrekr and *Hlöðskviða*. These poems are indeed incomplete and corrupt, but they have gleams of fine poetry which light our way into a very ancient culture.

Hrólfs saga kraka is set in the heroic age; it is estimated that Hrólfr and his nearest associates lived in the sixth century. This group is found in ancient heroic poems: the English *Beowulf* and *Widsið*, and the Norse *Bjarkamál* (which Saxo paraphrases in Latin) and also in *Skjöldunga saga*, which survives in the Latin paraphrase of Arngrímur the Learned (p. 163). There are various echoes of *Skjöldunga saga* in the works of Snorri Sturluson, his *Edda* and *Ynglinga saga*, and it is thought that *Hrólfs saga* was also derived in some sense from *Skjöldunga saga*.

But *Hrólfs saga* in its extant form is late; it can hardly have been composed before the late fourteenth century and is preserved only in paper copies of later times. It looks as if the old tales have changed and faded. The saga splits into a large number of more or less independent parts, beginning with an account of Hrólfr's ancestors and the origin of his chief warriors; these parts carry different titles in manuscripts and editions: *Fróða þáttr, Helga þáttr, Svipdags þáttr, Böðvars þáttr, Hjalta þáttr*. The most famous of all the royal champions was Bjarki, who was known as Böðvar-Bjarki because of his valour (*böð* = "battle"). The *Bjarkamál* were named after him, but in the saga he is wrongly called Böðvarr.

Hrólfr himself plays little part in the saga until it is well advanced. He is overshadowed by his champions, just as Charlemagne is in the sequence of stories named after him. Hrólfr was the incestuous offspring of King Helgi of Denmark and his daughter Yrsa, who later married King Aðils of Uppsala. Aðils treacherously killed his father-in-law Helgi, and Hrólfr then became king in Denmark and held court at Hleiðra (Lejre), named *Hleiðargarðr* in the story. The latter part of the saga tells of two great events in which he was concerned: his journey to

Uppsala to claim his inheritance from King Aðils, and his final battle against his sister Skuld and her husband Hjörvarðr. There is a briefer and more elegant account of the Uppsala expedition in Snorri's *Edda*. Aðils plans to destroy Hrólfr by trickery and sorcery, but he escapes with the help of his mother Yrsa, and his flight is renowned because he scattered gold over the plains of the River Fýri (modern Swedish Fyrisån) to delay Aðils and his men. After that he lived in peace for a long time. Hjörvarðr was a king in subjection to Hrólfr who was required to pay him tribute, which Skuld found hard to bear. She was of elf-descent on her mother's side and a mighty sorceress, as King Hrólfr and his champions found to their cost. She assembled an evil rabble and attacked and killed Hrólfr with all his champions in the famous battle called *Skuldarbardagi* after her.

Both these episodes, the Uppsala expedition and the battle against Skuld, are derived from *Skjöldunga saga* but are greatly altered and amplified to suit the taste of a later day. Some scholars think that an older and better *Hrólfs saga* once existed and is now lost, but this cannot be verified. The *rímur* of Bjarki, composed in the fifteenth century, suggest a different recension from the one now extant, but it is by no means certain that this was closer to the original except in a few details.

Another heroic saga that is in some way derived from *Skjöldunga saga* is the so-called *Sögubrot af fornkonungum*, "Fragment of the history of ancient kings", surviving in a manuscript attributed to the early thirteenth century. The beginning and end are missing, and there is a lacuna in the middle. The second part of the *Fragment* (after the lacuna) tells of the battle of Brávellir, famous in ancient story. The combatants were King Haraldr Wartooth of Denmark and Hringr (Sigurðr hringr in the saga) of Sweden. The outcome of the struggle was the fall of Haraldr and the accession of Sigurðr to the kingdoms of Sweden and Denmark. Many champions on both sides are named, and it is clear that the author drew on an ancient list of champions in a lay which Saxo also knew and used (the *Lay of Brávellir*). It was put into the mouth of Starkaðr the Old, the mightiest champion in the battle. The Brávík of the saga is on the coast of Östergötland (Bråvik), and the battlefield would have been about where the town of Norrköping now stands.

Norna-Gests þáttr, like *Völsunga saga*, is put together from written heroic lays, but alongside these it uses written heroic sagas. So it cannot be very old, and is generally assigned to the early part of the fourteenth

century. A casual attitude to the subject also suggests a late date: the author regards heroic tales as fun, and there is a hint of mockery of the ancient heroes. One example is the contest between Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and Starkaðr Stórverksson, persons the author is pleased to bring together. Sigurðr struck Starkaðr's bottom teeth with his sword-hilt, so that he lost two molars; one of them was used on a bell-rope in Denmark "and it weighs seven ounces".

Norna-Gestr had lived for three hundred years when he came to King Óláfr Tryggvason in Trondheim and entertained the courtiers with tales and poems. Predictably, he was able to tell of many things, since he had been contemporary with the most renowned heroes of antiquity. Gestr got his nickname from three norns who came to his cradle and foretold his fate. The youngest of the norns felt herself slighted, and predicted that the boy should live no longer than the candle burned that was lit beside the cradle. But in fact this fate resulted in a long life, for another older sibyl immediately put out the candle, and it was preserved unburnt. Gestr was baptised at the court of King Óláfr, then lit his candle and brought his long life to an end.

The sagas that have now been briefly described and classed as heroic sagas are all adulterated to some extent with other narrative matter and literary motifs, although they are largely based on antique poems and heroic tales. There is evidence of ancient heroic matter in a few more sagas, although in their present form they should properly be classed as romances.

Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka preserves the ancient tradition that Hálfr was attacked by fire, attested by the kenning "slayer of Hálfr" (= fire) in the *Ynglingatal* of Þjóðólfr of Hvin. Apart from this, the saga is not thought to contain much in the way of heroic material, particularly because it has various romance motifs, many of them nonetheless striking. There is the merman who laughs when a man strikes his dog, because he knows that the dog will thereafter save his master's life. Óðinn puts life into a brew with his spittle, and claims in return what lies between the vat and Queen Geirhildr, i.e. her unborn child. A mountain in the shape of a man rises from the sea and prophesies in verse. King Hjörleifr heats a spear in the fire and plunges it into a giant's eye: a distorted version of the story of Polyphemus.

This miscellaneous narrative matter and more besides seems to indicate that the author has picked up his story from here and there.

There are some occasional verses or fragments in the saga, as well as three longer poems attributed respectively to Hálfr's warriors Innsteinn, Útsteinn and Hrókr the Black. The poems constitute the real essence of the saga, and though their age varies, they are all generally reckoned to be older than the prose. Conversely it has been assumed that an older recension of *Hálfs saga* generated some of the poems in the latter part of the thirteenth century. This was probably the *saga Hróks ins svarta* which is mentioned in *Geirmundar þáttr heljarskinns* (*Sturlunga saga* I, p. 7) and which seems to have provided material for this *þáttr* as well as for Sturla Þórðarson's version of the *Landnámabók*.

The son of Hálfr was father of the Hámundr and Geirmundr who both took land in Iceland. The last chapter of the saga tells of their birth and early years. The queen their mother thought them extremely ugly and exchanged them for a servant's son, but the poet Bragi revealed the truth. *Landnáma* and the tale of Geirmundr heljarskinn in *Sturlunga saga* have the same account, but the relation between these texts and *Hálfs saga* needs to be studied, along with much else that bears upon this remarkable story.

Gautreks saga, also known as *Gjafa-Refs saga*, is entitled "a merry tale", which is a fair designation. The saga exists in two recensions, a shorter and a longer one. The birth of King Gautrekr is described at the opening of the saga, to some extent in the typical romance manner; but nevertheless the work contains various independent stories worthy of note. King Gauti the father of Gautrekr came upon some strange people living in a forest who observed the custom of throwing themselves from a high rock when age overtook them or life became insupportable, often for no good reason. The practice was called *at ganga fyrir Ætternisstapa*, "to go over the Lineage-cliff".

In the last part of the saga we hear of Refr Rennisson who was called Gift-Refr. He began as a backward child, who was driven from home by his father. He took a fine ox with him, and brought it to Jarl Neri as a gift. The jarl was the most miserly of men, and gave him nothing but a whetstone in return. But with it went the jarl's advice which constantly stood Refr in good stead, and his whetstone became the source of increasingly rich gifts. In the end Refr won the daughter of King Gautrekr and the dominion of his protector Jarl Neri.

Between these parts – which are connected, however tenuously – the longer recension of the saga has a completely unrelated interpolation about Starkaðr and Víkarr and their warrior prowess. This chapter is

based on a poem in *fornyrðislag* which has been called *Víkarsbálkr* and is put in the mouth of Starkaðr. Among other things it contains the remarkable account of how Þórr and Óðinn determined the destiny of Starkaðr, and of the infamous way in which he killed his foster-brother Víkarr. The poem is evidently much older than the saga, and is generally assigned to the eleventh century. This is the one *Lay of Starkaðr* extant in the vernacular, but Saxo has poems that he puts into the mouth of Starkaðr (*Ingjaldskvæði* and others), and it is thought that he paraphrased more such in prose.

Viking tales are distinguished from heroic tales inasmuch as they take place later in time – if any chronology can be applied to them at all. Occasionally people are mentioned who are known from other and more credible stories, and genealogies sometimes show more or less when the stories were supposed to take place. But Viking tales are preponderantly characterised by their subject-matter, although there are no sharp lines to divide them from heroic tales on the one hand and from romances on the other. Their themes are seldom tragic as in heroic tales. The Viking, generally of Norwegian or occasionally Danish origin, sails to Sweden, north to the White Sea, west to Ireland. He fights by land and sea, against other Vikings and as often as not against trolls and all kinds of monsters, and has the upper hand in all trials. His career is a series of detached minor incidents, larded with motifs from southern romance.

Örvar-Odds saga has long been classed as one of the oldest heroic sagas, and is indeed listed in the catalogue of books owned by Bishop Árni Sigurðsson of Bergen (died 1314). The saga exists in recensions of various length, and has been progressively spun out with various *märchen* motifs and monster-tales. The shortest version and the one closest to the original is in Perg. 4:o nr 7 in the Royal Library, Stockholm, written in the mid-fourteenth century. It has been printed several times, as for instance in the second volume of Altnordische Sagabibliothek (ed. R.C. Boer, 1892), but the latest and longest recension is the one printed in complete collections of *fornaldarsögur*, and most Icelandic readers know *Örvar-Odds saga* only in this much amplified version.

Oddr was the son of Grímr Shaggycheek and Lofthæna, and he grew up at a place which has been identified as Berriod on Jæren in Southwest Norway. A wise woman foretold that the skull of the horse Faxi would cause his death. Oddr later killed the horse and buried it deep in the earth. Thus the horse in fact ensured long life for him, as the

Runic inscription from Hennøy, Norway, dating from about 1200. The inscription points to the existence of oral tales related to heroic sagas: "Here the men stayed who came from Giantland in a ship laden with gold, and it is inside this rock." Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer IV.

unburnt candle did for Norna-Gestr. As a further guarantee of invincibility and battle-luck, his father gave him arrows which always hit the mark and flew back to the bow, and an Irish princess gave him a silken tunic immune to the bite of weapons. Now he could safely wander the world and contend against superior force, both doughty Vikings and malevolent beings armed with supernatural powers. He went to the White Sea and robbed a rich grave-mound, and to Ireland where he married Ölvör the fine needlewoman. He even went as far as Palestine, and on the way was baptised by Abbot Hugo in Sicily. In Bjálkaland he fought great battles, but most famous of all was the battle that he and Hjálmarr the High-hearted waged against Angantýr and his brothers on Sámsey. When Oddr had lived three hundred years he was voyaging past his youthful haunts on Jæren. He landed, and where there had been

fair slopes the ridge was eroded. Oddr stumbled over the exposed skull of old Faxi, when a serpent darted out of the skull and inflicted a mortal sting. Oddr was cremated on Jæren, as the wise woman had predicted.

Some people believe that *Örvar-Odds saga* was based on very old oral traditions about this antique Norwegian Viking. As corroboration they point out that he appears in other works. The *Lay of Brávellir* mentions him, both in the *Fragment* and in Saxo's work, where he is connected with Jæren; in another passage Saxo speaks of King Oddr of Jæren, who may be the same person. It is also maintained that the account of the battle on Sámsey in *Hervarar saga* is based on oral traditions unrelated to *Örvar-Odds saga*. But even if some tales of Örvar-Oddr were current, the written saga – this complex assembly of multifarious Viking stories and southern romances – is more like the work of an Icelandic author at his desk than the product of Norwegian oral tradition.

Örvar-Odds saga has always been very popular in Iceland, as may be seen for instance from the large number of manuscripts and their variations. To be sure, Oddr is invincible and the outcome is predetermined in every battle, the descriptions are superficial and the variety restricted, as is usual in these stories. But nevertheless there is enough invention to arouse expectation and keep it alive to the end of the saga. Oddr is the living image of a true Viking. He is an agile fighter and fearless in all trials. He readily accepts the conditions of partnership with Hjálmarr the High-hearted: never to eat raw flesh or drink blood, never to rob merchants or farmers and never to force women as captives to their ships. He has been accepted as the pattern of a man who attacks all the evils of life, pursues monsters and destroys them at every opportunity. He refuses the patronage of Óðinn and dies a true Christian. He says his body is to be laid in a sarcophagus and burnt, "because he did not want heathens to have disposal of it".

Ragnars saga loðbrókar exists in full form in only one manuscript, where it serves as the continuation of *Völsunga saga*. The stories are connected insofar as Áslaug, the daughter of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and Brynhildr, becomes the second wife of Ragnarr. The particular chapter linking the stories tells how Heimir of Hlymdalir, foster-father of Áslaug, travelled with the child in his harp-case to Norway, where an old man and woman murdered him for gain and reared Áslaug, whom they called Kráka. It is usual to regard this chapter as the beginning of *Ragnars saga*, and this is in keeping with the subject-matter, since Áslaug much more than her husband can be called the chief character of the saga. As Kráka

the peasant's daughter she touches the heart of the famous campaigner and sagely surmounts the trials he lays upon her. As the valkyrie Randalín she directs the fourfold expedition of her sons to Sweden to avenge her stepsons. This saga has more varied characterisation than usual, which raises the narrative above the normal monotony of the heroic sagas.

As well as Áslaug, her sons make their mark – the sons of Loðbrók – especially Ívarr called the Boneless, who can meet all dangers and from time to time uses stratagems well known in romance or antique literature. When he plans to gain a foothold in England, for example, he employs the same trick as the princess Dido in days of old when she got the land to build Carthage. But the city that Ívarr founded was called London, "the largest and finest city in all the lands of the North". So it is not for nothing that another shorter saga related to *Ragnars saga* is named after his sons and called *Ragnarssona þáttr*. It seems to depend on an older lost recension of *Ragnars saga* as well as on *Skjöldunga saga* and perhaps other sources.

But although Ragnarr loðbrók is almost brushed aside in the saga about him and although Icelandic traditions about him were apparently wearing thin at the beginning of the fourteenth century, there is no need to doubt that he and his sons actually lived. There is information about them in reliable sources, including some from England, on account of the raids they made there. These men must have lived in the ninth century. The poem *Krákumál*, already mentioned, was doubtless composed in the twelfth century. Ari the Wise dated the start of the settlement of Iceland in relation to the time "when Ívarr son of Ragnarr loðbrók put to death St Edmund king of the English". Also, the poet Sighvatr Þórðarson had heard how Ívarr killed another English king by cutting the blood-eagle on his back:

Ok Ellu bak	And on Ella's back
at lét hinn er sat	Ívarr, who was
Ívarr ara	master of York,
Jórvík skorit.	had an eagle cut.

Finally, and briefly, just a few of the later heroic sagas may be mentioned, those that may be called romances.

Friðþjófs saga hins frækna owes its modern reputation chiefly to the accomplished rendering of the story by the Swedish poet Tegnér at the

beginning of the nineteenth century. The subject was a gift to a romantic poet and his readers: a miniature Tristram-tale diverted into the current of the Norse heroic saga. Friðþjófr and Ingibjörg are lovers from childhood but are prevented from marrying by the pride of her wicked brothers. She is married off to an old king, Hringr; Friðþjófr arrives in disguise, and spends the winter in high favour at court. He convinces the king of his strength and chivalry, so that Hringr in a death-bed scene bestows both kingdom and queen upon him. Thus the saga ends in benign romance style, and indeed the characters have all the cast of romance: the brothers are altogether bad, the lovers chaste, and the aged king both wise and benevolent. When the king puts his winter-guest to the proof, Friðþjófr hurls away the sword so as not to fall into temptation. Ingibjörg takes all that comes, quietly and patiently. She is a gentle swan-like beauty of the same type as Helga the Fair, and indeed the influence of *Gunnlaugs saga* is evident, although the stories end differently.

Friðþjófs saga stands out from other heroic sagas because its structure is all of a piece and the narrative rapid and compressed, so that much material is covered in a few words; this also is due to influence from *Gunnlaugs saga* or other *Íslendinga sögur*. Another excellence of the story is the verse put into the mouths of Friðþjófr and other heroes. Andreas Heusler was of the opinion that in this saga the lighter style of Icelandic occasional verse in simple metre reached its peak.

Ásmundar saga kappabana tells of the half-brothers Ásmundr and Hildibrandr. They fought a battle which ended in Ásmundr killing his brother. Saxo has the story in a similar form but with different names. A few verses are included from the death-song of Hildibrandr, and their content agrees rather more closely with Saxo's rendering than with the prose of the saga. Among other things it emerges there that Hildibrandr had killed his own son. This fact and the name of the warrior point towards the German *Hildebrandslied*, which lacks the ending, as has already been said (p. 31).

Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar is extant in two recensions of differing length. The longer one is printed in most editions, the shorter only once (ed. F. Detter, 1891). Nevertheless the shorter recension exists in older manuscripts and is regarded as more authentic in various ways. As the name indicates, the saga is associated with *Gautreks saga*: the chief hero, King

Hrólfr, is Gautrekr's son. But otherwise *Hrólfs saga* is of a totally different stamp, a typical example of Viking story or romance, which in many ways resembles *Örvar-Odds saga*. Among foreign motifs may be instanced the tale of Polyphemus and also a fight against a lion, supposed to take place in England.

Göngu-Hrólfs saga has nothing but the name in common with the mighty Viking leader who subdued Normandy in the early tenth century. The parents of this Hrólfr were Sturlaugr the Strenuous and Ása the Beautiful. The saga is one of the longest heroic sagas, copious in material and yet pretty consistent in pattern. It is patently a literary creation, which is conventionally located in the world of Icelandic sagas and partially adapted to it. Two well-known romance motifs may be mentioned: the search of the hero for a fair maiden with a hair of her head as the clue; and the account of a faithless servant who deceives his master and treats him infamously.

Áns saga bogsveigis is one of the better of the late heroic sagas; it is entertaining and well told. As his nickname indicates, Án was the most skilled of archers, but in course of time he meets his match in the art, namely his son Þórir Long-leg. A wrestling match between father and son ends less terribly than is usual in heroic lays and sagas. The son displays the fine ring which Án gave him before his birth, and so all turns out for the best.

Ketils saga hængs and *Gríms saga loðinkinna* tell of the grandfather and father of Örvar-Oddr, and for this reason they are sometimes placed in front of his saga in manuscripts. But actually they were written quite a bit later, and have little that is original. The former takes its material principally from older heroic sagas, the latter draws on romances (with trolls, enchantment and the like).

Bósa saga is especially well-known for some obscene passages telling of the hero's dealings with three farmer's daughters; yet it is uncertain how much of this was originally part of the saga, since it is cut or expanded in manuscripts according to the taste of the copyist. Older than the saga itself is the string of curses which the foster-mother of Bósi declaims over his father, King Hringr. This *Buslubæn*, "imprecation of Busla", is taken as notable evidence of ancient incantations or augury; it recalls among

other things *Völsungakviða* and *Skírnismál* (pp. 51 and 38), and there is a related recital of curses in Saxo's work reproducing a series known to him in the vernacular.

Sörla þáttr, extant in Flateyjarbók, tells of the everlasting battle of the Hjaðningar, a theme widely current in ancient lays and stories, including Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa* and Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*. *Sörla saga sterka*, a very late and derivative heroic saga, also takes its name from this hero.

Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar is one of those monotonous accounts of battle and more battle, yet sparks of poetry come through; for instance, when Hálfdan sees the ungloved hand of the fair lady with its fine ring: "You shall seek and yearn for this hand with its ring and glove, and find no peace until the one who withdrew it replaces it as willingly in your palm." If this were more skilfully sustained, it would make a pleasing exemplum of patient love finally rewarded.

Yngvars saga víðförla stands on the margin between heroic sagas and kings' sagas, since the action takes place no earlier than the eleventh century and deals to some extent with historical people and events. Ingvarr was a Swedish warrior who made a famous expedition through Russia to Serkland. In Sweden there are some thirty rune-stones erected in memory of men who fell "in the East with Ingvarr".

Jónsbók

The work that was read and copied more often than any other in the middle ages in Iceland – and for centuries afterwards too – was not a book of sagas or poems but a book of laws: *Jónsbók*. This was a new code compiled at the instigation of King Magnús Hákonarson, who, on the death of his father in 1263, became the sole ruler of Norway and her satellites. Hákon the Old had energetically extended the power of the Norwegian crown and succeeded in pacifying both Norway and Iceland after a long period of internal strife. Magnús continued his father's policy and reorganised his administration in tune with the times. He revised local laws in Norway and ultimately produced a national code; he made new municipal laws *(Bæjarlög)*, and a new code for his officers of state and the retainers bound to him by personal allegiance *(Hirðskrá)*. He attempted to introduce a new ecclesiastical code as well, but opposition from clerics, headed by the archbishop, kept him short of his goal. Finally, he sent two new law-books to the Icelanders, with a mere ten years between them.

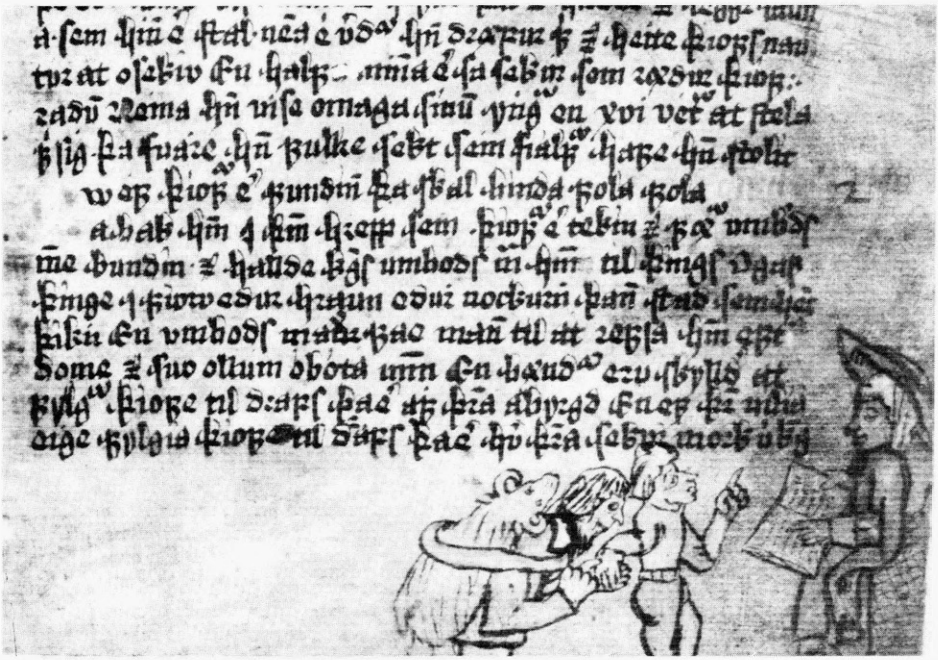
Norway was divided into four principal law-provinces: Frostaþing (chiefly Trøndelag and regions north of there), Gulaþing (west-coast Norway), Eiðsivaþing (south central Norway), and Borgarþing (the Oslofjord region). (The last two lay close together and are sometimes counted a single province.) From ancient times these different parts had had different laws, and many of their provisions were now out of date. In the 1260s King Magnús first had the laws of each province revised separately, but none of these revisions is now extant in its original form. He then sent a new law-book to Iceland, known as *Járnsíða*, doubtless because iron was a feature of the binding. Its text is believed to have been based on the lost revision of *Gulaþingslög* or *Frostaþingslög*, though some sections were derived from the old native laws of Iceland *(Grágás*, pp. 117 ff.).

Járnsíða met with opposition at the Althing of 1271, chiefly because it

Crime and punishment. The section on theft in Jónsbók *includes this regulation: "If a thief is discovered, the stolen goods are to be tied to his back in the commune where he is arrested and he is to be taken in bonds to the official . . . and the official is to find a man to execute him and every thief likewise." The illustrations are from AM 147 4to (Heynesbók), a* Jónsbók *manuscript from about 1500. In the right-*

often departed from Icelandic legal custom. We recall that the *gamli sáttmáli* of 1262 had promised the Icelanders that they should "obtain . . . Icelandic law." *Járnsíða* on the other hand was mostly based on Norwegian law, and it is even called *norræn* – that is, in this case, Norwegian. Scholars in the field of legal history also find it a rather sloppy compilation, at least in comparison with its successor. Nevertheless, after three bouts of argument, the Icelanders accepted the new code in the years 1271–3, though they did not have to live long with it. *Járnsíða* is now preserved, with one small lacuna, only in Staðarhólsbók, AM 334 fol., one of the two main codexes containing *Grágás*.

It is noteworthy that *Járnsíða* is the only one of King Magnús's early codifications to survive. His work as a legal reformer seems to show a



*hand picture a thief, with the sheep he has stolen tied on his back, is led before the official (*sýslumaður, *"sheriff"), who has the lawbook open in front of him. In the left-hand picture a petty thief is being flogged while, to the left, an out-and-out thief, one who has been four times convicted of stealing, hangs on the gallows. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.*

natural and beneficial development from his code for Gulaþing, introduced in 1267, to *Jónsbók*, sent to Iceland in 1281.

King Magnús's law-books for the separate provinces have not survived because he subsequently produced a unified code for the whole country, the so-called *Landslög*, adopted by the main provincial assemblies in Norway 1274–6. Some of the articles in this, especially those to do with assembly procedures, took local conditions into account. The *Landslög* remained in force in Norway throughout the middle ages and even longer, until they were gradually superseded by reformed and novel legislation. In the sixteenth century and later the code was used in Danish translation because officials in Norway, many of whom were foreign in any case, could no longer understand the old language.

When work on the *Landslög* was finished, attention turned to a new code for the Icelanders, since both the king and his Icelandic subjects had cause to be dissatisfied with *Járnsíða*. The identity of the compilers of the new law-book is not known, but the Lawman, Jón Einarsson, is believed to have been prominent among them. He at least brought the code to Iceland and it has been named after him ever since.

Jónsbók draws its material from the *Landslög* and *Grágás*, with some articles retained from *Járnsíða* and some new-minted laws as well. The *Landslög* provided the model for the arrangement and general scope of the book, but approximately one article in three is based on *Grágás*. The cobbling of the sources is so skilful that the seams are hardly visible. The language of the sections from *Grágás* is often modernised and simplified and successful efforts were made to reduce the ambiguity of some of the articles in the old native laws.

The work on *Jónsbók* must have been finished, or virtually so, when King Magnús died in the spring of 1280. Jón Einarsson and Loðinn leppr, a trusted agent of the king's, were sent to Iceland with it that summer. In the summer of 1281 they submitted it to the Althing for approval. As had happened with *Járnsíða* ten years earlier, the Icelanders found various provisions in *Jónsbók* unacceptable. Árni Þorláksson, bishop of Skálholt, was the chief antagonist. He fought against what he saw as encroachment on canon law and the rights of the Church, and *Árna saga* (p. 185) has some vivid reports of exchanges between him and Loðinn leppr on the subject. Compromise was finally achieved and a majority of the assembly men accepted the new code. A number of outstanding differences were referred to the decision of the king and archbishop, and some of them were settled by subsequent amendments.

With all respect for the old laws of the Icelandic commonwealth, most people today will agree that *Jónsbók*, like the Norwegian *Landslög*, marks a great improvement on them. Its enactments are clearer in expression than those of *Grágás*, while the penalties it stipulates are generally less severe. Executive authority, which had found no express formulation in the old laws, is now put firmly into the hands of royal officials. Private vengeance is forbidden, and instead of outlawry as the ultimate sentence, essentially with individual responsibility for its enforcement, a scale of penalties is introduced – fines, floggings and death – all exacted in formal accordance with the law. Judges are enjoined to be just and moderate and to judge "as they are willing to answer for it before God" and "their conscience". In any doubtful case judgment should err on the side of leniency rather than severity.

Jónsbók was the last of King Magnús's codes and the best composed of them. Initial opposition to it sprang chiefly from the Icelanders' loyalty to their old ways and their suspicion of the royal power. But as time passed, the new law-book became extremely popular and highly regarded. It was common for youngsters to learn to read from *Jónsbók* and afterwards they came to know it almost by heart. The code regulated people's lives for centuries, in big matters and small, in company with Scripture and other books of the Church, and some *Jónsbók* articles are still in force today. The law-book exists in more manuscripts than any other medieval Icelandic work: there are no fewer than some 250 of them. Many of these manuscripts are handsomely written and decorated, and these are the best sources we have to show us what Icelandic pictorial art was like in earlier times. And it was the Icelanders who first gave the king who instigated its composition the cognomen which deservedly celebrates his achievement. He is always called Magnús *lagabætir* – Magnús the Lawmender.

New forms

It has long been thought that the only kinds of literary novelty in Iceland in the late middle ages were in verse form, notably the *rímur* and a large body of devotional poetry; sagas were not composed after about 1350, and annalistic writing came to an end a generation or two later. The so-called *Nýi annáll* ends in 1430 and that was the swan-song of the great medieval tradition of historical writing in Iceland – or so it was thought. After that people put pen to parchment only to indite letters and charters until the Reformation called forth a new prose literature.

But there are grounds for challenging this common opinion. For some reason authors certainly stopped writing about the history of their own times, whether in the form of connected narrative or of annalistic record. The reasons for this lapse have been sought in bad seasons, the ravages of disease, and foreign oppression. Probably the climate did worsen and there were undeniably visitations of deadly plagues, but whether it is possible to blame them in any real degree for the alleged decline in Icelandic prose literature is open to doubt. It is altogether more likely that we have to recognise a change in taste which directed literary effort along new paths. And in all probability some original prose writing continued throughout the period.

The major division into secular and religious kinds of writing still obtains in the late medieval period. Among secular works the heroic and chivalric sagas were the most popular, and their language, manuscript history and mutual relations suggest that there was no pause in their composition down to the Reformation. And we have one notable and ambitious translation of saints' lives from the beginning of the sixteenth century (see p. 145), which shows there was no abdication of the will to make prose literature in this field too before the "torrent of twilight monstrosities rained down", to use one unfriendly description of the work of the Protestant reformers.

Furthermore, there were close links between verse and prose. *Forn-*

aldarsögur and *riddara sögur* were turned into *rímur*, devotional poems were based on saints' lives in prose. In substance both kinds of verse were quite unoriginal: the poets stick close to the narratives they are versifying, never or rarely adding but quite frequently omitting – often indeed only selecting episodes from longer prose works to put into verse. There are links between *rímur* and religious verse too: both met the needs of the same society and both were sung rather than declaimed. That society was one where orthodox piety reigned. It is not surprising that perhaps the earliest *ríma* we know is on St Óláfr and the battle of Stiklestad, where there was a joint appeal of the Christian and the militant.

Rímur were probably first used to accompany dancing as well (cf. p. 380 below), but there was also a special kind of verse used for this purpose. We may begin by surveying this dance-poetry, which was one of our most remarkable medieval innovations both in matter and form.

Ballads

Icelandic ballads – *sagnadansar* – were first recorded in the seventeenth century and then they had lived so long in oral tradition that nobody knew how old they were. The collectors called them *fornkvæði*, "ancient songs", and this name has stuck though people question its aptness in view of the fact that we have much older scaldic and eddaic verse. The *fornkvæði* are the Icelandic branch of a great international genre – *ballades, ballads, Volkslieder, folkeviser, folkvisor* – or simply *kvæði* to the Faroese because they represent their national poetry *par excellence*. The name "ballad" signifies a dance-song (cf. the words "ball" and "ballet"), which is what a ballad originally was.

We know of no dancing in early Scandinavia and the pastime does not appear to have been introduced there until the eleventh or twelfth century. We lack the sources to trace its origins in Iceland and elsewhere in the North. The earliest references are in Icelandic texts but it is unlikely that Icelanders took up dancing before other Scandinavian nations. In fact, not everyone is prepared to accept the testimony of the oldest sources on the grounds that they are not contemporary with the periods they purport to describe.

The life of St Jón, bishop of Hólar (1106–21), ascribed to Gunnlaugr Leifsson (p. 182), is the first work to mention some kind of dance. Bishop Jón did his best to stamp out this immoral pastime. In the A-text of the saga the passage goes like this:

> That sport was popular among the people which is not decent – where verses are exchanged from man to woman and from woman to man, verses that are shameful and scurrilous and not fit to be heard. But he had that abolished and totally forbade the practice. He was unwilling to listen to amorous poems and verses and would not allow them to be recited, but he was not able to get rid of them altogether.

There is no particular reason to doubt that dancing existed at the beginning of the twelfth century in Iceland, and it is quite certain that it did by about 1170 – we have a reference to it then in *Sturlu saga*, which is a well-informed source based on good contemporary reporting. We find the word *dans* used in these early texts both of the dance itself and of the verse sung or recited to accompany it. These dances must however have been different from those that were later fashionable both in the nature of the texts sung and probably in the manner of dancing. The oldest dance-songs are sometimes referred to as the "early" or "lyrical" form. We have little evidence to work on, but it looks as though the accompaniment consisted of single strophes of a lyrical character. In Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga* we are told that people *gerðu dansa marga*, "made many dance-verses", in mockery of Loptr Pálsson; and elsewhere in the same account Sturla quotes a satiric verse on him and his uncle, Sæmundr Jónsson, which is generally counted an example of a "dance-verse":

Loptr er í Eyjum, bítr lundabein, Sæmundr er á heiðum, ok etr berin ein.	Loptr in the Islands bites on puffin-bones, Sæmundr on the moorlands spits out berry-stones.

But the one absolutely reliable thirteenth-century identification of a "dance-verse", or a fragment of one, comes in the account of the execution of Þórðr Andréasson. Þórðr rides captive and foresees his death:

Ok þá hrökkti Þórðr hestinn
undir sér ok kvað dans þenna
við raust:
  Mínar eru sorgir
  þungar sem blý.
	And then Þórðr gave his horse
	the switch and sang this dance-
	verse in a loud voice:
	  Heavy are my sorrows,
	  heavy as lead.

That was in 1264. By that time, perhaps long before, novel forms of poetry are thought to have been introduced as dance-accompaniment in

Scandinavia. This kind of poetry told a story but had a lyrical refrain, repeated according to fixed rules. The "dance-verse" of Þórðr Andréasson would make a good refrain for a ballad of this new kind. Possibly such verse sequences for dance use were already fashionable in Iceland and Þórðr was quoting a known refrain. But some scholars believe that the single strophes of the "early" or "lyrical" dance-songs were adopted as refrains when the narrative came into fashion, and Þórðr's *dans* can be explained as one of them.

It remains a fact, in any case, that the ballad refrains are distinct in origin from the ballad texts themselves. They are compact lyrical lines, often with a note of sorrow or menace. Sometimes they sound like fragments detached from a larger whole – one senses an unwritten story behind them: they are mysterious, prompting questions and rousing anticipations. They are repeated stanza after stanza, sometimes with minor variations, existing both in antithesis to the main movement of the ballad and in some intimate connection with it – it is clear that they were often made or selected to reinforce, directly or obliquely, the main theme of the story-poem they accompany:

Ólafur reið með björgum fram	Ólafur rode the crags along
– villir hann, stillir hann,	– gone astray, softly stray,
hitti hann fyrir sér álfarann	found house of faery on his way,
– þar rauður loginn brann,	– where red the flames all play,
blíðan lagði byrinn undan	blew the breeze so gently under
björgunum fram.	the crags along.

We talk of narrative ballads but their character is more dramatic than epic: they are acted rather than told. There is much direct speech and exchange between characters and in between come quick flashes of description which both illuminate and are sparked off by the words of the actors – what is missing is left to the imagination of the audience to supply.

The origin and early development of ballads in Scandinavia are obscure and much discussed. Theories are in a state of flux and there is no need here to rehearse the facts and fancies of the contending arguments. A marked difficulty in any enquiry is caused by the absence of early written texts. In Norway, for example, there was practically nothing collected until the nineteenth century, when the nationalist movement woke people's interest in the treasures of local tradition.

The dances performed with ballad accompaniment were group

dances, with the participants probably holding hands in a circle, as in the Faroes today, where the tradition has lived on unbroken. One or two singers with well-stocked memories and good voices sang the ballad itself and everyone joined in the refrain. Many Scandinavian texts are translations of ballads from abroad, the oldest possibly direct from France but most of the later ones from the British Isles and Germany – natural sources in view of the northern countries' main commercial and other connections in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. But once the ballad was planted in Scandinavian soil, it grew vigorously and independently – new poems were created and new subjects embraced. Very few ballads found record in the middle ages themselves, and when collecting finally began, not least as the result of the antiquarian interests of renaissance scholars and men of letters, they had ceased to be used as dance-accompaniment – everywhere, that is, except in the Faroes. The Danes took the lead both as the most prolific makers of ballads and as their first recorders – manuscript collections of ballads were made in Denmark in the sixteenth century and the first printed edition of them was issued in Ribe in 1591. It was probably this publication which did most to persuade the Icelanders of the value of their *fornkvæði* and the desirability of collecting and copying them. Collections began to be made in Iceland in the latter part of the seventeenth century. The pioneer was Rev. Gissur Sveinsson, brother of Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson, who lived at Álftamýri in Arnarfjörður in the far northwest. His manuscript collection dates from 1665.

Ballads differ from most genres in being the common property of the whole of Scandinavia, sometimes of a larger region still. Some of them are found in more or less the same form in all the northern countries. In the late middle ages, when the ballads chiefly flourished, the differences between Icelandic and the other Scandinavian languages were such as to make a comparatively drastic degree of adaptation necessary if the result was to sound at all natural. In fact, we find a good many Danicisms, e.g. *undir hlíða* (under lide), *hæga loft* (høje loft), *grór* (for *grær*), *vintr* (for *vetur*), and the verb forms *gá* and *stá* (*ganga, standa*). The metres are also adopted from the foreign originals, very different from traditional Icelandic forms. In the translations alliteration is largely dispensed with and there is no internal rhyming, but end-rhyme, of a rather irregular kind, is used instead. Sometimes the stanza is a rhymed couplet with part of the refrain interposed:

Elen beiddi föður sinn,
– laufið á þann linda –
"Lofaðu mér til vökunnar inn."
– Allt er óhægra að leysa en að binda.

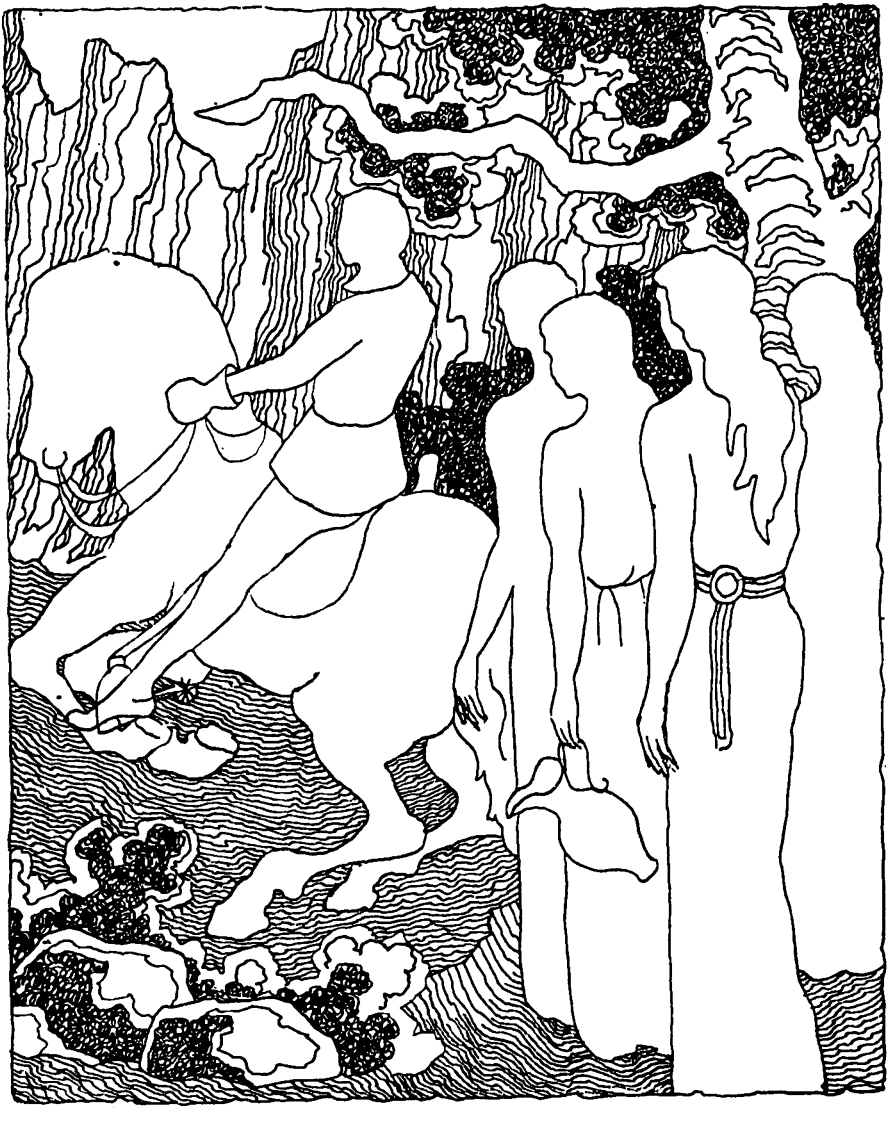
Another common form is a quatrain followed by the complete refrain; the usual rhyme scheme is a b c b, e.g.:

Sveinn kóngur á skeiðunum
siglir á millum landa,
Knútur er í Borginni,
festir frú til handa.
– Hvað syrgir þig, liljan, svo sáran?

It is customary to make a broad division between East Scandinavian (Danish and Swedish) ballads and West Scandinavian (Norwegian and Faroese) ballads, but characteristic features of substance and style do not always accord with the geographical demarcation. In general the Icelandic ballads seem closer to the Danish-Swedish group, even in cases where there is reason to believe we have early ballads which came from or by way of West Scandinavian areas.

Attempts have also been made to classify Scandinavian ballads in smaller groups according to their subject-matter. The so-called *riddervíser* – ballads of chivalry – are probably the oldest group and are particularly well represented in the Danish tradition. They belong to the feudal world of the early middle ages and their themes are mostly unknown outside Scandinavia. Many of the Icelandic ballads belong to this group and were introduced from Denmark. In contrast, the so-called *kæmpeviser* – heroic ballads – are thought to be of Norwegian, or possibly Faroese, origin. They draw their material especially from *fornaldarsögur* and other heroic tales, including the cycle of Sigurðr the Dragon-slayer and other stalwarts known from the lays of the *Edda*. Icelandic ballads that can be counted of this kind are *Eyvindarríma* and *Þorgeirsríma*. Ballads which tell of historical figures and have some basis in historical events are known from Sweden and more especially from Denmark. Only one comparable *fornkvæði* is known in Icelandic, *Gunnarskvæði*, on Hallgerðr's theft and Gunnarr's death as told in *Njáls saga*. It has a refrain which refers to a lost *Hrings saga ok Tryggva* (which we know at second hand from the *rímur* called *Geðraunir*):

Á þingi betur unni Brynhildur Hringi.	At meeting Brynhild's love for Hring was not fleeting.



Ólafur liljurós with the fairy maidens (see p. 372). A drawing by Jóhann Briem.

Ballads called "naturmytiske viser" in Danish, and usually referred to as supernatural ballads in English, tell of various beings who inhabit other worlds and of their dealings with mortals. *Stafróarkvæði* and *Elenarljóð* are of this kind, as is also the *Ballad of the sea-troll* who

becalmed the king's ship and the only inducement he would accept to lift the enchantment was the lovely boy who sat on his mother's lap:

Kóngurinn og drottningin á þann sunnudag héldu sínum skipunum á það myrkva haf. – Enginn veit til angurs fyrr en reynir	Lordly king and lady queen, on that one Sunday sailed out in their vessels fair on the sombre wave. – No one knows what grief is till he meets it.

But the best-known of all the supernatural ballads is *Ólafur liljurós* (cf. p. 372), still frequently sung at Icelandic parties.

Mention may finally be made of a number of comic ballads which tell of a variety of absurd events, like the one about the housewife who kept her husband hard at work but not always with the happiest results:

Bóndinn upp á ofninn fór og átti að sækja salt, greip hann ofan í öskupoka og skemmdi smjörið allt.	Climbed up on the oven then, salt is what he's after, seized upon the ash-bag there and ruined all the butter.

Ballads of chivalry and supernatural ballads are the most notable among the Icelandic stock. "In some of these poems the happiness of a human being is pitted against dangerous and mysterious powers of nature," says Jón Samsonarson in his study and anthology called *Kvæði og dansleikir* (I–II, 1964). "The elfin lady lives in the rock-wall and lures a human being to join her, the night-troll comes to the window after dark and sings to the waking girl inside . . . Here we meet the horse with power of human speech who turns out to be a prince and it is safer for anyone who rides him not to utter any word to him. Here we meet the knight who suffers no wound until the damsel speaks his name. Harp-strings are made from the hair of a deceived girl and speak in human tones; a harp is played and everything is powerless at the sound of its music; down on earth children weep their mother out of the skies . . . But most we hear of love and the fate of lovers. The maiden sleeps in a soft-appointed chamber or builds a bower and wears a diadem of gold on her head – the knight comes riding and she lets the diadem fall and puts on bridal linen . . . but she can also take sword in hand to wreak vengeance."

Some scholars fancy – not implausibly – that in the ballads' heyday people who were accustomed to the strict scaldic measures were not much impressed by the loose form and foreign-sounding diction of the

new poems. But it remains true that poetic feeling and inspiration have greater play in the free-flowing garb of the ballads than in the tight-fitting uniform of *dróttkvæði* and *rímur*. In modern times ballads and popular verse of related kinds have been a constant source of renewal for Icelandic lyric poetry. However remote we may feel the middle ages to be, we still cannot fail to be moved by the ballad of Ólafur liljurós who was stabbed by the sharp blade of the elfin lady, or excited and touched by the ballad of Tristram who fought with the "heathen dog" – "Many got a bleeding gash from their slash" – and then, mortally wounded, is kept from cure by his hard-hearted and jealous wife. But sadness is softened when he and his sweetheart join hands after death in the shape of the green trees that grow from their graves and twine their branches together over the church-roof – counter to the plans of mortals and to the ballad's mournful refrain: *Þeim var ekki skapað nema að skilja* – "All that fate imposed on them was parting."

Rímur

The *rímur* constituted another notable literary innovation, long narrative poems in short stanzas representing versifications of written sagas. They are normally composed in a series of cantos (hence the plural *rímur*), often with a change of stanza-form from canto to canto. The longevity of the genre was remarkable. It flourished for five hundred years, from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, and even now poets try their hand at *rímur* or imitations of them. They provided a welcome relaxation in times of poverty and isolation, carrying their audiences into worlds exotic and magnificent. They played a special part in keeping Icelandic a living and unspoilt language, for their diction is complex and poet and audience needed ample linguistic resources, the one to make, the other to appreciate these reams of stanzas. They were also delivered to a particular kind of music, chanted to the tunes known as *stemmur*, very attractive and effective in the mouth of a good singer – the nearest the Icelanders ever got to operatic recitative.

The early *rímur* are also valuable sources of information of various kinds. They tell us something about the history of Icelandic – rhymes may substantiate old word-forms, for example. In this respect they are comparable to scaldic poems – and suffer from the same drawbacks inasmuch as we are seldom able to date either kind of verse with complete accuracy. Linguistic forms are sometimes used to date *rímur*,

as they are to date scaldic poetry, and the same caution must be observed in both cases.

The value of *rímur* for literary history is no less evident. They often follow lost saga-versions that represented earlier stages of the text than any we have preserved. Sometimes their prose originals have been totally or largely lost, and it is only through *rímur* that we know the substance of numerous heroic and chivalric sagas. This is true, for example, of *Andra saga, Ormars saga, Haralds saga Hringsbana, Hrómundar saga Gripssonar* (cf. p. 343), *Hrings saga ok Tryggva* and *Gríms saga ok Hjálmars*. A lost *Íslendinga saga* is reproduced in *Skáld-Helga rímur*. We can see that the saga-author treated his story in a romantic and fantastic way, so it was doubtless among the last of the sagas of Icelanders to be written.

If a saga-source is no longer known, it is inevitably a matter of opinion to some extent whether a *rímur* poet had it in front of him in written form. But the general practice of versifying existing prose narratives and of following the sources very faithfully clearly justifies the assumption of lost written texts in cases where no original is extant. *Skíða ríma* is an exception, see pp. 381–384 below.

The *rímur* have their own metrical forms which, in spite of a good deal of variation, fundamentally obey the same rules and make a homogeneous group. The earliest of the basic forms is the quatrain type called *ferskeyttur háttur* (*ferskeytla*). This example comes from the *Óláfs ríma Haraldssonar* by Einarr Gilsson, which is in Flateyjarbók (c. 1390):

> Milding hafði menntir þær
> er mestar voru í heimi,
> hvergi frægra hilmi fær
> hvorki af gleði né seimi.

Another basic quatrain type is called *stafhenda*. This example is from *Sörla rímur*:

> Stýrin skulfu en stundu bönd,
> stórar fálu bárur lönd,
> bifaðist laukur en bendist rá,
> branda gleypti kólgan blá.

The third old metre is *braghenda*, where the stanza has three lines, the first with its own alliteration. This example comes from *Þrymlur*, based on *Þrymskviða* in the *Edda*:

Ýtar bjuggu Ása-Þór sem eg vil greina,
settu á bringu breiða steina,
blóðrautt gull og pellið hreina.

Finally *stuðlafall* may be mentioned. It is rare in the earliest *rímur* but occurs in *Blávus rímur*, counted among the oldest *rímur* by Björn K. Þórólfsson in his authoritative *Rímur fyrir 1600* (1934):

Sómir varla að syrgja þegna dauða,
hyggjum það meðan veröldin vinnst
varla þeirra líkinn finnst.

Opinions may differ as to how many of the stanza-forms should be counted basic. As time went on, variations were multiplied many times over: lines are extended or truncated and internal rhyming may become as complex as in the following *ferskeytla* variant from *Landrés rímur*:

Spottaði hrotta spennir menn,
sá sprund lést mundu gilja,
Kristur tvistrar kennir enn
kæru skæran vilja.

There are still many obscurities surrounding the origins and antecedents of *rímur* poetry, though the last few years have seen a number of new contributions toward the elucidation of the problems. It used to be thought that *rímur* were an isolated Icelandic phenomenon, born of a marriage between native scaldic poetry and imported ballads. The practice of telling a story in verse was supposed to have come about under the influence of ballads, and the *ferskeytla* was considered to be a ballad stanza braced up with strict rhyme and alliteration in accordance with the traditions of scaldic verse. On the other hand, scaldic diction was the source of the *heiti* and kennings which abound in the *rímur* – elements of style which remained fundamental throughout their long history. *Rímur* poets used Snorri's *Edda*, especially *Skáldskaparmál*, as their chief manual. But in this, as in other matters, scholars failed to bear in mind the ever-fertile connections Icelanders had with foreign parts. In a number of papers and in his book about the Icelandic ballads Vésteinn Ólason has now shown that the most likely models for *rímur* metres were not ballad stanzas but other forms used both for Latin and vernacular verse elsewhere in Europe in the medieval period. He also shows that in their treatment of the narrative – which differs markedly from the manner of story-telling in ballads – *rímur* can be seen to have prototypes and parallels in the late medieval narrative verse of other

countries, not least England. Davíð Erlingsson has further demonstrated that various rhetorical devices and elaborations of vocabulary used as tags and line-fillers by *rímur* poets are in imitation of foreign, in this case German, verse.

But it can hardly be denied that ballads and *rímur* lived side by side as close relations at one time. We have for example not only the *Óláfs ríma Haraldssonar*, on the battle of Stiklestad, but also the ballad called *Ólafsvísur*, which tells of the conception and birth of St Óláfr's son, Magnús the Good. It appears too that *rímur* were also used as dance-accompaniment in early times. The poets sometimes refer to their *rímur* as *dans*, and in *Sörla rímur*, which are thought to be ancient, the poet says in so many words that people danced to his verse:

Því má eg varla vísu slá, veit eg það til sanns, þegar að rekkar rímu fá reyst er hún upp við dans.	I know for sure that I can hardly strike up with a stanza but that, as soon as people get a verse, it is sung aloud for a dance.
Gapa þeir upp og gumsa hart og geyma varla sín, höldar dansa hralla snart ef heyrist vísan mín.	They gape aloft and energetically play the fool and hardly keep control of themselves: men dance with frantic speed once my verse is heard.

The gap between ballads and *rímur* may not have been wide to begin with but they soon went their separate ways. The ballads dominated the dance until finally the forms of dancing appropriate to them went out of fashion, probably before the end of the medieval period we are surveying here. *Rímur* became longer and longer, with more and more cantos included: now whole sagas are versified whereas previously only parts of them or shorter tales had been treated (as, for example, in *Óláfs ríma Haraldssonar, Þrymlur, Lokrur* and *Völsungs rímur*). The *rímur* find their niche as a kind of worksong, household entertainment as folk sat at their carding and spinning of a quiet evening, and the *stemmur* used were probably the direct offspring of the tunes once sung by the dancers. As we saw, the *rímur* inherited the ancient scaldic diction, with its special *heiti* and elaborate kennings – a great art once called a "skill unblemished" – but there was some confusion of the ancient rules as time passed by and the complex language and the complex metres made a straightjacket for the poets, constricting their individuality and hampering the free flight of their poetic fancy.

A feature which gradually developed as a peculiarity of the *rímur* is found in the so-called *mansöngvar*, "maid-songs", sequences of lyrical

stanzas, usually unconnected with the narrative itself, which introduce a canto. The tone is often one of melancholy and regret. The poet laments the mutability of love and the loneliness of old age; he expresses his reluctance to make poetry – but he forges on nevertheless. Foreign parallels to *mansöngvar* have been pointed out: the dejected love-poetry of French troubadours and German minnesingers, and even some kinds of lyrical preludes to narrative poems. *Rímur* without *mansöngvar* or with only occasional stanzas addressed to the audience are considered to be among the oldest – *Þrymlur* (from *Þrymskviða*), *Lokrur* (on Þórr's visit to Útgarða-Loki), *Völsungs rímur* (based on the first part of *Völsunga saga*) and others. Later it became the regular custom to have a *mansöngur* at the start of each canto, a practice which has prevailed to our own time. Most often the *mansöngvar* are a string of platitudes, more or less elegantly expressed but repeated by one poet after another.

As I said earlier, the stories told in *rímur* are virtually always taken from written sources. Heroic sagas and sagas of chivalry were chiefly favoured, which accords with the general popularity of such stories in the later middle ages. *Rímur* composed on themes known from eddaic poems and other sources, both mythological and heroic, have been mentioned once or twice in the foregoing but they do not represent a large group. A few *rímur* take material from *Íslendinga sögur* and kings' sagas, e.g. *Grettis rímur* (on Grettir's youthful exploits) and *Prændlur* (based on *Færeyinga saga* – the name is derived from that of Þrándr í Götu).

Skíða ríma is unique both in subject-matter and treatment and it is the one medieval *ríma* which we can now read with unalloyed pleasure. There was possibly a tale – or a joke of a tale – behind it, as a laconic entry *sub anno* 1195 in *Gottskálksannáll* suggests: "Skíði had his dream." In the *ríma* Skíði is a vagrant who drifts from one well-known twelfth-century chieftain in the west of Iceland to another: Þorgils Oddason of Staðarhóll, Sturla of Hvammur and Þorleifr beiskaldi of Hítardalur. He gets the poorest reception at Þorleifr's and it is here that he experiences his elaborate dream. At Óðinn's command, Ása-Þórr himself comes to fetch Skíði to act as judge in the dispute between Heðinn and Högni – Heðinn is refusing Högni the hand of his daughter, Hildr the Slender. Skíði is seated on the high seat besides Óðinn and receives gifts from him. He then declares his verdict, solving the problem by saying that he will marry Hildr himself. She said she had no objection if her father agreed, and they are formally betrothed:

Skíði rétti skitna hönd,
skyldi hann fastna Hildi,
Óðinn gaf honum Indíalönd
og allt það hann kjósa vildi.

Skíði proffered a filthy fist,
fastened Hildr to him,
Óðinn gave him all he list,
with all India would endue him.

Now the reason why Skíði dreamt he was among these trolls was because he had failed to cross himself earlier in the evening, but at this ceremonial juncture in his dream he made a hasty sign of the cross – this enraged the gods and sparked off a great brawl in Valhöll, with gods and famous heroes of old joining in, King Hálfr and Starkaðr and Sigurðr Fáfnisbani among them. But no one did greater deeds than Skíði:

Hann barði í hel þá Baldr og Njörð,
bæði Loka og Hæni,
fimmtíu lét hann falla á jörð,
en fleygði tólf í mæni.

He bashed to death both Baldr and Njörðr,
both Loki and Hænir thereafter,
fifty he made to fall to earth
and flung up twelve to a rafter.

Finally Sigurðr pulls Skíði out through the doorway and Gnoðar-Ásmundr throws his butter-box so hard at Skíði's brisket that he wakes up at the blow.

Skíða ríma makes one of a goodly fellowship of tales that burlesque martial deeds and fabulous exaggeration, from Don Quixote to Benedikt Gröndal's *Heljarslóðarorrusta* in the nineteenth century and Laxness's *Gerpla* in our own. Some close parallels to the *ríma* have been found in German comic poems of the late middle ages, and very probably there are relations between the Icelandic and German examples that await further investigation. But there is not much point in thinking of the *ríma* as a serious attack on fantastic stories, much less as some kind of polemic homily: the poet's overriding purpose was to amuse, and he certainly succeeds. In an excellent essay accompanying his edition of the poem in 1869 Konrad Maurer pointed out how appropriate it was to set the action in a dream where anything can legitimately happen, no excess is inconceivable. There is a great contrast between the dirty and greedy vagrant and the heroes of Valhöll whose very names call mighty exploits to mind. Naturally, Skíði does not entirely stop being himself

Skíði the vagrant. A drawing in JS 231 4to (Þingeyrabók), a manuscript from the end of the eighteenth century. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.

even in his dream – dreaming is the poor man's refuge and relief. The *ríma* is most successful of all in blending wretched everyday reality and the grandeur of a superior world. And as often happens, there is no great step between dreaming and waking, between reality and imagination. Skíði wears out two pairs of shoes in his long journey of a single night. In his bundle they find a tooth of Fáfnir the dragon weighing ten pounds. No less remarkable was the transformation of his butter-box, which had been empty the evening before:

Þar var komið í þrífornt smjör, það var úr Ásíaveldi.	Therein was butter thrice-aged come, that was from realm of Æsir.

A number of later sources attribute *Skíða ríma* to various named poets, Einar fóstri, Sigurður fóstri and Svartur of Hofsstaðir. Jón Þorkelsson championed the ascription to Svartur, and he is sometimes cited as the author even in recent editions and literary histories. He is said to have been a poet of Ólöf hin ríka of Skarð (died 1479/80). But doubt attaches to all the sources in question and in any case we know next to nothing about the poets mentioned.

The early *rímur* – and the same may be said of the *rímur* of later centuries too – played a vital part in the Icelanders' way of life, in the preservation of their language and in people's awareness of its riches. But as literature they are now bound to appear as little more than lifeless monuments of the past. We cannot say they are never read but, if they are, it is solely for practical purposes – chiefly by scholars investigating lost sagas and saga-versions. The dilatory progress made with their publication is another sign of the general lack of interest in them. Some of the oldest *rímur* have been edited from time to time, and Finnur Jónsson made a useful contribution with his two volumes of texts and a glossary volume (*Rímnasafn* I–II, 1905–22; *Ordbog til . . . rímur*, 1926–8). Nevertheless many medieval *rímur* remain unpublished, and no branch of medieval literature is in general so badly served. More than a score of pre-reformation *rímur* still await publication. It is hoped that a new series published by the Árni Magnússon Institute in Iceland (*Íslenzkar miðaldarímur* I–, 1973–) will remedy this grave deficiency in the course of the next few years.

Religious verse

Devotional poetry and *rímur* are by far the most voluminous kinds of medieval Icelandic verse we possess. The earliest of the religious poems, including some probably not composed before the fifteenth century, are in Finnur Jónsson's *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning* I–II (1912–15). The later poems are in Jón Helgason's *Íslenzk miðaldakvæði* I:2–II (1936–8).

Some of the oldest religious verse was discussed earlier in this book (pp. 111–114). These poems are counted as scaldic poetry, reasonably enough since the makers used scaldic forms and style, though they generally avoided kennings containing pagan allusions. This general mode was maintained to the end of the medieval period, but poets also introduced a number of new metres and stanza-forms in imitation of foreign models. Religious verse of this kind was intimately connected with veneration of saints, so the Reformation cut off its inspiration at source. The last of the makers of religious poetry we know was also the last Catholic bishop in Iceland, Jón Arason of Hólar, executed in 1550.

We may look more closely at a selection of the poems and at those authors whose identity is more or less established. The most famous of all such poems – no matter of what period – is *Lilja* – a hundred stanzas in *hrynhendur háttur* (p. 86) and firmly and elegantly constructed. The exordium, stanzas 1–25, tells the history of the world from the Creation to the Annunciation. In stanzas 26–75 we hear of the Annunciation itself and of the birth, life, passion and death of Jesus, then of the Ascension and finally of the Day of Judgment. This central part (the *stefjabálkur*) is divided by a pair of half-stanza refrains (*stef*) which come at regular intervals. The first is in stanzas 26, 32, 38, 44 and 50:

Sé þér dýrð með sannri prýði,	Glory be to Thee, and honour,
sunginn heiðr af öllum tungum	Sung by mankind's myriad voices,
eilífliga með sigri og sælu,	Everlasting bliss and triumph,
sæmd og vald þitt minnkist aldri.	Excellence and might unwaning.

The second is in stanzas 51, 57, 63, 69 and 75:

Ævinliga með lyktum lófum	Evermore with hands uplifted
lof ræðandi á kné sín bæði	Falling down on knees before Thee,

skepnan öll er skyld að falla,
skapari minn, fyrir ásján þinni.

Every man, in bounden duty,
My Creator, must adore Thee.
(Charles Venn Pilcher, *Icelandic Christian Classics*, Melbourne 1950, pp. 27, 33.)

The last part of the poem (the so-called *slæmur*), stanzas 76–100, contains the poet's personal confession and his prayers to the Virgin Mary, the lily who gives the poem its name. So the poet presents his work to Mother and Son together:

Inn krossfesti, kraftr inn hæsti,
Kristr er fjórir broddar nistu,
þér býð eg og þinni móður
þetta verk er í einn stað settag.

Thou, the Crucified, the Highest,
Christ, whom once the four nails piercéd,
I to Thee and to Thy Mother
Dedicate this composition.
(Charles Venn Pilcher, *Icelandic Christian Classics*, p. 45.)

But *Lilja* is neither a connected history of the world nor a simple paean of praise. The narrative element is conveyed by picturing the central events where mighty antagonists meet: powers of good and evil, Christ and his Mother opposed to the old enemy, Satan. And this great drama is brought home incisively to us by the poet's immediacy, he speaks to us and for us in his own person. We join him in his wonder and horror at what he has to tell and we listen with open ears to his string of invocations, which reach their height at the end of the poem in a despairing and anguished plea for mercy at the Day of Judgment.

This poem so impressed people in days gone by that it was said that "Every poet wishes he had composed *Lilja*." Its popularity can also be gauged from the fact that the great Lutheran bishop, Guðbrandur Þorláksson (1541–1627), included it in his notable anthology of Christian poetry, the *Vísnabók* printed in 1612, though with some modifications to excise the chief papistical elements. Many things help to account for this warm acceptance: the flowing eloquence, the grand scale of the conflict between good and evil, the poet's sincere and ardent devotion, and not least his easy style, simple word-order and straightforward diction, which made the work much more readily intelligible than the usual religious poetry of earlier periods. The twelfth-century *Harmsól*, for example, has disjointed syntax and a wealth of kennings, but the poet of *Lilja* opposes and avoids this style which he says is imposed by the régime of Snorri's *Edda*. He maintains that it is most important that

people should grasp the fundamental sense of the words, the true "understanding" of the poem:

Varðar mest til allra orða undirstaðan sé réttlig fundin, eigi glögg þótt Eddu regla undan hljóti að víkja stundum.	Most important 'tis that rightly Of all words be found the meaning, Though the rules obscure of Edda Must be set aside when needful. (Charles Venn Pilcher, *Icelandic Christian Classics*, p. 45.)

In a sixteenth-century manuscript the author of the poem is referred to as Brother Eysteinn. Old sources, annals and documents, introduce us to a monk of Elgeseter in Norway called Eysteinn Ásgrímsson, who held high offices in the Icelandic Church around 1350 and in the years following. Early annals also speak of a Brother Eysteinn of the Þykkvabær monastery, who was alleged to have beaten his abbot in 1343 and was fettered by the neck in punishment. Later writers conflate these pieces of information and think they all refer to the same man, but scholars nowadays are inclined to doubt whether this is justified. They consider it more likely that Eysteinn of Elgeseter was a Norwegian, and consequently unlikely to have composed such an intensely Icelandic poem as *Lilja*. In that case, choice must fall on the frail and fractious monk of Þykkvabær – if one is in fact prepared to put any trust in the rather late sources that purport to give us the name of the poet of *Lilja*.

As one might expect, *Lilja* proved extremely influential. The *hrynhendur háttur* was more often than not referred to as *Liljulag*, and many resounding poems in praise of holy men and women were composed in that measure and in the uncomplicated style favoured by the *Lilja* poet. The longest of these, and the best-known after *Lilja*, is called *Rósa*, another of the Blessed Virgin's many symbolic names. A sixteenth-century manuscript attributes it to Sigurður the Blind (cf. p. 397). In reality, however, his name and the title are prefixed to another poem in the manuscript, a poem properly known as *Milska*. Since little is known about Sigurður the Blind, this does not matter much. It has been said of *Rósa* that it would have seemed a notable poem if *Lilja* had been lost. With one hundred and thirty-three stanzas *Rósa* is longer than *Lilja*, but in other respects it generally falls short of its great model.

We are better informed about two makers of devotional poetry who lived at the end of the Catholic period in Iceland. Hallur Ögmundarson

was a priest in the northwest of the country in the first half of the sixteenth century. Numerous poems are attributed to him. The most famous of them is *Gimsteinn*, also called *Krossdrápa*, one hundred and twenty-five stanzas in the *Lilja* metre, skilfully composed – as are his other poems – but with little trace of originality or deep personal feeling.

Apart from the half-apocryphal Brother Eysteinn, by far the most celebrated poet of pre-reformation times was Bishop Jón Arason – though it may well be that his fame has caused him to be credited with more verse than he actually composed. There is no doubt of his authorship of two poems, *Píslargrátur* and *Davíðsdiktur*. The latter is preserved only in Bishop Guðbrandur's *Vísnabók* of 1612, and it may be that the Protestant editor found it necessary to purge it of Roman blemishes. Its subject-matter is limited and not particularly papistical – an exposition of Psalm 51, David's repentance and prayer for mercy when Nathan the prophet came to reproach him after he had sinned with Bathsheba. The poem is marked by moving eloquence and deep devotion, and shows that Bishop Jón deserved his reputation as a maker of religious verse, even if the sources which cite him as the author of other poems are not entirely trustworthy. The finest and most famous of these other poems is *Ljómur*, "Beams of light". It is on the history of man's salvation, like *Lilja* and *Rósa*, but the poet makes swift progress for in the principal manuscript in which it is preserved the poem contains only thirty-seven stanzas. The stanza-structure is the same as in *Davíðsdiktur* and it has a similarly eloquent style. People have noted with interest that stanzas 31–2 voice the belief that on Judgment Day the intercessions of the Virgin and St John win grace even for the damned. The poem was very popular in Iceland and in the Faroes too – where it is still sung as a hymn:

Hæstur heilagur andi,	Highest, holy spirit,
himna kóngurinn sterki,	heavens' rule fulfilling,
lofligur líttu á mig,	lauded, look on me;
signaður á sjó og landi,	orb's and ocean's merit,
sannur í vilja og verki,	earnest in work and willing,
heyrðu eg heiti á þig:	hear me hailing thee:

A cope used by Bishop Jón Arason (d. 1550), made in the early sixteenth century, probably in Arras in Flanders. Photo: Gísli Gestsson.

Forða þú mér fjandans pínu og díki,
svo feikna kvölunum öllum frá
mér víki,
mér veit þú það, Maríu sonurinn
ríki,
mæla kynni eg nokkuð svo þér líki.

Safe I pray from Satan's pit
restore me,
from searching torments keep me
I implore thee,
of that, O Mary's mighty son,
assure me,
may my words find favour yet
before thee.

In addition to the poems attributed with some degree of probability to named individuals, there is a great deal of anonymous devotional verse preserved. Just as the most extensive prose works of hagiography are concerned with the life and miracles of the Virgin, so too the greater part of the religious verse is in her honour. The poems are sometimes hymns of praise, sometimes accounts of her life on earth, sometimes celebrations of a single miracle performed through her intercession to bring cure and comfort to the afflicted. These lyrical sequences are sometimes pearls of poetry, with a keener thrust than the grand treatments of Creation and Salvation and more expressive of personal feeling and a trusting heart. A Mary poem printed in *Íslenzk miðaldakvæði* II 162–8 (and well-known from Sigurður Nordal's *Íslenzk lestrarbók 1400–1900*, 1924) offers a good example, though too long to quote in full here. The opening verse will show that the form is one of those harmonious stanza-structures adopted from abroad in the late middle ages, with Icelandic alliteration added – a stanza-type which remained popular with poets down to the nineteenth century:

Heyrðu hjálpin skæra,
himnaríkis blóm,
mig tekr mörg að hræra
mótgjörð viskutóm,
það er hin hæsta huggan mín
að dikta nokkuð, drottins brúðr,
um dýrðarverkin þín.

Hear me, helpmeet candid,
heaven's blossom sweet,
much are against me banded
mischiefs indiscreet –
it is the chiefest cheer of mine
to turn my singing, sovereign bride,
to saving works of thine.

Secular poetry

Early in this century Jón Þorkelsson planned to publish a complete edition of all the verse-texts, other than *rímur*, known from the period 1400–1550, but only a single volume appeared, and then not until 1922–7 (Jón died in 1924). The title-page issued with the third part in

1927 calls the work *Kvæðasafn eptir nafngreinda íslenzka menn frá miðöld.* The collection did not however include poems attributed to Jón Arason. Some of the ascriptions are dubious – as in the case of *Skíða ríma* (cf. p. 384) – and some of the authors are no more than names to us. Jón Helgason's new edition of the religious poetry in *Íslenzk miðaldakvæði* – starting where Finnur Jónsson's *Skjaldedigtning* stops – made up for the varied deficiencies of Jón Þorkelsson's work. A good deal of the secular verse of the later middle ages has also been published: works attributed to named poets are in Jón Þorkelsson's inadequate *Kvæðasafn* (along with religious verse also associated with named poets), and another important source is Ólafur Davíðsson's *Íslenzkar þulur og þjóðkvæði* (1898–1903). We may look at a small selection of these late medieval poets and poems.

An otherwise unknown poet called Snjólfur made a poem in *runhent* metre on the battle fought at Grund in Eyjafjörður in 1361, when the governor of Iceland, Smiður Andrésson, and the lawman, Jón Guttormsson, were killed. But we have no other verse commemorating contemporary events until the time of the Reformation around the middle of the sixteenth century.

Loftur Guttormsson (died 1432) of Möðruvellir in Eyjafjörður, governor of half-Iceland 1427 and one of the richest and most powerful men in the country, has long been looked upon as the outstanding poet of the fifteenth century. Paper manuscripts from later centuries attribute a *clavis metrica* to him, or rather two, usually called *Háttalykill hinn skemmri* and *Háttalykill hinn meiri* – the "shorter" and the "bigger key of metres". The latter longer one is not really a *clavis* but a chain of love-poems and verses, some of which also exist in independent circulation. In fact, there are no valid grounds for associating this collection with Loftur, and the attribution, which is only found in a single manuscript from the latter part of the eighteenth century, should be dismissed. If variant versions of the "shorter" *Háttalykill* are conflated, it expands to all of ninety stanzas, but the earliest manuscript – itself not older than the sixteenth century (Stock. perg. 4:o nr 23) – contains only twenty-eight stanzas and does not mention the name of the poet. There are linguistic reasons for rejecting some of the additional stanzas in later manuscripts. A work on the Reformation in Iceland ascribed to Jón Gizurarson of Núpur (c. 1590–1648; printed in *Safn til sögu Íslands* I) retails a legend about the *Háttalykill* composed by Loftur. He is said to have made it for his

mistress, Kristín, and sent her a few verses of it at a time, ten times ten all told, and they were found in the sleeve of his doublet when he died. One may believe this or not, but the concluding verse in some manuscripts, and as printed in *Kvæðasafn*, p. 64, suggests there may be some truth in it:

Loptur ljóðum sleppti	Loptur loosed these verses
við líneik sína Kristínu.	for his lady, Kristín.

Two other poems, *Mansöngur* and *Maríuvísur*, attributed to him in some manuscripts and printed as his in *Kvæðasafn*, are certainly products of a later age. So we leave Loftur, once a poet of national stature, with his glory and worldly wealth intact but stripped of most or all of his poetic treasure. It may be some comfort in the circumstances to find that *Háttalykill* resembles its early medieval precursors, Rögnvaldr's *Háttalykill* and Snorri's *Háttatal*, in the way in which the exigencies of metrical illustration are met at the expense both of substance and poetic verve.

In his *Kvæðasafn* Jón Þorkelsson ascribes another comic poem besides *Skíða ríma* to the poet called Svartur Þórðarson of Hofsstaðir. This is the *Skaufhalabálkur*, which might indeed be from the same period as the *ríma*. Jón Þorkelsson's evidence comes from the end of the poem which goes like this in a late manuscript:

Hefur bálk þennan	This sequence,
og barngælu	a children's rhyme,
sett og samið	shaped and styled
Svartur á Hofsstöðum.	Svartur of Hofsstaðir.

The difficulty is that in *Grænlandsannál* from the first part of the seventeenth century *Skaufhalabálkur* is ascribed to Einar fóstri, said to have been a poet in the service of Björn Einarsson the Jerusalem-farer (died 1415); and to prove it a final stanza is quoted:

Hefur bálk þenna	This sequence,
og barngælur	children's rhymes,
ort ófimlegur	composed unskilful
Einar fóstri.	Einar fóstri.

Perhaps the stanzas originally belonged to different poems, but how we are going to tell which is rightly attached to *Skaufhalabálkur* is hard to say.

The poem tells of an old fox, *Skaufhali* – "bushy-tail" – who is nagged by his dragtail wife to go ahunting. He kills a polled grey wether and is homeward bound – but things turn out for the worse because up comes a shepherd with his dog. Reynard dives deep into a hole among the rocks but the shepherd jabs his staff into the hole and breaks three of his ribs. He drags himself home in a bad way and on his deathbed tells his story and recalls his past exploits, like the champions of the heroic sagas. He chiefly comforts himself with the thought that a still more vicious sheep-biter will be born in his line:

Hann mun mann gera	He will un-flock
margan sauðlausan	many a man
og aldri upp gefa	and never cease from
illt að vinna.	working evil.

This poem is notably tripping and entertaining, the diction simple and clear – not that there is anything poverty-stricken about the vocabulary, as an accumulation like the following may show:

Hef eg með ströndu	I have regularly made my way
strokið jafnliga	along the shore
og heima jafnan	and sniffed the middens
um hauga snuðrað,	at the farms;
bitið hef eg álar,	I have chewed straps,
bellt klippingum,	fallen upon shorn skins,
rifið af þönum	ripped from the frame
rétt húð hverja.	every stretched hide.

The fun partly lies in the way everyday things are described in high-flown terms. This is reminiscent of *Skíða ríma* and it could well be that the two poems are the work of the same man. And *Skaufhalabálkur* joins *Skíða ríma, Kötludraumur* and the best of the ballads as the prime examples of Icelandic poetry of late medieval origin which modern readers find easiest to appreciate.

The most impressive poem of the later middle ages, however, belongs in a different line – a "complaint" called *Heimsósómi*, "World's disgrace", by Skáld-Sveinn – unknown except for his name. The diction is vigorous but with some traces of foreign influence that point to a date late in the period: but hardly later than the opening of the sixteenth century because in the *Vísnabók* of 1612 it is counted among "old" poems. There is no easy and empty preamble but a burst of unusual poetic energy right from the start:

Hvað mun veröldin vilja?
Hún veltist um svo fast
að hennar hjólið snýst.
Skepnan tekur að skilja
að skaplig setning brast
og gamlan farveg flýr.
Hamingjan vendir hjóli niður
til jarðar,
háfur eru til einskis vansa
sparðar,
leggst í spenning lönd og gull
og garðar,
en gætt er síður hins er meira
varðar.

What will the world be wanting?
It revolves so hard
that its wheel spins and spins.
Creation begins to understand
that fitting order has failed
and deserts its ancient course.
Fortune turns her wheel down to the
ground,
possessions are put to every evil use,
lands and gold and estates are all
at hazard,
but less heed is paid to what is more
important.

(The word *háfur*, fem. pl., is from German *haben.*)

Heimsósómi is an outspoken onslaught on lords and leaders who oppress poor peasants, despise good men and think only of enriching themselves more and more. The criticism is general, no explicit references are made, and it is doubtful whether it is possible or worth trying to identify individuals as the objects of the poet's attack. He does not fail to remind the rich that their goods are of no benefit to them in the next world:

Þú ert ei gerr af grjóti
og getur ei klæðzt með stál,
þú flytur ei fé með þér.

You are not made of stone
and cannot clothe yourself in steel
– you take no money with you.

The poem is one of the many "complaints" made far and wide in the countries of Europe in the late middle ages. Others are known in Iceland too, but *Heimsósómi* is so greatly superior to them in vigour and eloquence that none of the others provides a possible model or worthy parallel. The stanza-form is of foreign origin but became established in Icelandic – it is the same as in *Davíðsdiktur* and *Ljómur* (p. 388 above). The "complaint" became a popular genre in Iceland – from post-reformation times may be mentioned such notable examples as Bjarni Borgfirðingaskáld's *Aldasöngur*, Hallgrímur Pétursson's *Aldarháttur*, and several poems by Stefán Ólafsson and Eggert Ólafsson. The general attitude remains the same but naturally the particular criticisms change from age to age and in accordance with the personal circumstances of the poets.

A standard eddaic metre, *fornyrðislag* (p. 33), was kept alive in the late middle ages in a variety of narrative poems. Their subjects are no longer ancient heroic legends but folk-tales and fairy-tales – which accords with the fashion in other popular literature of the period, *fornaldarsögur, riddara sögur* and *rímur*. Admittedly we cannot be precise in dating such narrative *fornyrðislag* verse but it seems most likely that its origins are to be sought in the last decades of the pre-reformation age. The oldest manuscript sources are from the seventeenth century, when the poems circulated orally and were regarded as ancient works by unknown poets. They were recorded from various informants and consequently exist in variant versions. They have not yet been satisfactorily edited and those available in print are chiefly to be found in Ólafur Davíðsson's *Íslenzkar þulur og þjóðkvæði*.

The substance of the poem called *Snjáskvæði* is closely related to the folk-tale about Snotra printed in Jón Árnason's collection (*Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri*, ed. Árni Böðvarsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 1954–61, I 109–11). The tale has a stanza, *Deildu tvær um dauðan kálf*, which also appears in the *kvæði* but in *fornyrðislag*:

Man eg að deildu,	I remember they contended –
minnstu þess, konungur,	recall that, king –
drósir ungar	damsels youthful
um dauðan kálf.	over a dead calf.

Kringilnefjukvæði tells of a lady under enchantment who brings up her niece and marries her to a prince and so frees herself from the spell. At the end of the poem there is a variant of the folk-tale *þula, Köttur úti í mýri*. *Gullkársljóð* tells the story of a princess who was put in a castle and forced to sew, but she could make no progress until the dwarf Gullkár came to help her: he is really a prince under a spell.

These story-poems are generally told in an even style, nimble but not ambitious. But sometimes a note of melancholy beauty is heard, as in a stanza like the following, which is reminiscent of the laments of eddaic poetry:

Svo er okkar	Love between us
ást í milli	likened may be
sem hús standi	to a house leaning
hallt í brekku,	lorn on hillside:

svigni súlur,	braces buckling,
sjatni veggur,	balks subsiding,
sé vanviðað,	it's frail-timbered –
völdum bæði.	faults on both sides.

The best known of all the story-poems is *Kötludraumur*, which is found in many copies and with large variations. The folk-tale it tells is associated with people known from *Landnámabók*. Katla – who in the early source is Þorkatla – was the wife of Master Már on Reykjanes. While he was away at the assembly, she fell asleep and slept soundly for four days. One of the hidden people, Álfvör, lures her to her home and forces her to sleep with her son, Kár. There were all kinds of splendour in the elfin hall and the entertainment was of the finest, but Katla can take no pleasure there:

Miklu ann eg	I love Már
Mávi heitara	far too ardently
en eg með yður	to be able to take
yndi taki.	delight in your company.

Kár then gives her leave to go home but tells her on parting that they will have a son. As she leaves, she hears his heart break. The son Katla had by her supernatural lover was Ari Másson, a respected chieftain and the forefather of a notable line.

Love-poetry of various kinds stood in high favour in the late middle ages. It tends to be fragmentarily preserved. Good examples are to be found in Jón Samsonarson's *Kvæði og dansleikir* (II, pp. 37–199). They have much in common with the *mansöngvar* of the *rímur*, one poet repeats another, seldom with any note of personal experience or genuine emotion. But the matter itself – love-longing and love's joyful celebration – is enough to conjure up grand images and start the blood pulsing through our veins:

Þó að eg fari um Ísland allt	Even though I go through the whole
eyðisveitir að kanna,	of Iceland to explore its deserts,
út í heim, austur um geim,	out into the world and east over
fæðist engin fegri nein	the ocean, I shall find no one
leynt hjá ljúfum svanna.	hidden away who is born fairer than
	that darling maid.

Related to these love-lyrics are various songs in sad mood, rigmaroles

and children's rhymes, some of which are attributed to elves or other supernatural beings. The little child of a human mother and one of the hidden people cries and cries and will not be comforted. Then someone comes to the window and sings a cradle song which has since been known as *Ljúflingsljóð* (*ljúflingur*, "dear one", is a name for an elf-man). It begins:

Sofi, sofi sonur minn.	Sleep, sleep, my son,
Sefur selur í sjó,	The seal sleeps in the sea,
svanur á báru,	the swan on the wave,
már í hólmi –	the gull on the islet –
manngi þig svæfir –	nobody lulls you –
þorskur í djúpi.	the cod in the deep.
Sofðu, eg unni þér.	Sleep, for I love you.

As the end of the Catholic period draws nearer, we have better information about some named poets but even now there are many doubts about attributions and naturally we must assume the loss of a mass of material which could have filled out the picture for us. A stanza supposed to have been composed by Jón Arason in 1530 refers to the four leading poets of the age, one in each Quarter of the country:

Öld segir afbragð skálda	People say that in the west
Einar prest fyrir vestan,	Einar the priest is the chief of poets;
Hallsson hróðrar snilli	in the south the son of Hallur
hefur kunnað fyrir sunnan,	has understood the genius of poetry;
Blind hafa bragnar fundið	in the east men have found
bragtraustan fyrir austan,	Blindur a trusty maker;
Gunni get eg að sönnu	truly I say that in the north
greiðorður sé fyrir norðan.	Gunni has a fluent tongue.

Einar prestur was probably Einar Snorrason (father of Bishop Marteinn of Skálholt, died 1576), who held the benefice of Staður on Ölduhryggur, but we know no verse that can be attributed to him. Jón Hallsson was a respected magnate in the south country who died well on in years in 1538. There are three poems on old age in the 1612 *Vísnabók*, all called *Ellikvæði*, one of which is ascribed to him. It is a well-made poem, beginning with an amusing description of the tribulations of old age and ending with words of contrition and an injunction to exercise Christian resignation. Sigurður blindur was allegedly the poet of *Rósa* (p. 387) and late sources say that he also composed *rímur*, though Björn K. Þórólfsson is doubtful whether he can be the author of all that are

attributed to him. Gunni must be Gunni Hallsson who spent many years at Hólar in the first part of the sixteenth century. A seventeenth-century manuscript refers to him as *Hólaskáld* and ascribes to him the so-called *Ólafsvísur* (on St Óláfr, the fourth set of verses with that title in Jón Helgason's *Íslenzk miðaldakvæði*, II 444–59).

If Jón Arason really made the stanza just cited, we can understand why he did not mention the other outstanding poet in the north, because that was himself. In addition to the devotional poems that are certainly or doubtfully said to be his (p. 388 above), various pieces of occasional poetry are associated with his name. It is doubtless again the case that his fame has caused him to be credited with more than he is entitled to, but we may be confident that he composed some of it, not least the very personal poem on his dealings with Bishop Marteinn and others of the Lutheran reformers. This is in fact the first poem we have had on contemporary affairs for the best part of two centuries:

Víkur hann sér í Viðeyjarklaustur,
víða trúi eg hann svamli hinn gamli.
Við Danska var hann djarfur og hraustur,
dreifði hann þeim á flæðar flaustur
með brauki og bramli.

He turns aside to the Viðey monastery:
I think the old man splashes far and wide.
Against the Danes he was bold and brave,
he scattered them onto old tubs of boats
with noise and tumult.

Bishop Jón was beheaded in Skálholt in the autumn of 1550. His execution marked a sharp cleft between old and new. The literature which had been intimately associated with the outlook and customs of the Catholic Church, and which had been predominant in Iceland since the Conversion at the beginning of the eleventh century, died there with him. By then, it is true, the old culture had become petrified and sterile in many ways, and to some extent the Reformation introduced a new freshness and flowering. But with it also came greater concentration of authority in the hands of the Danish monarchy, increasing Danish interference in Icelandic affairs, and a degrading degree of impoverishment among the Icelanders. Jón Arason's farewell verse may be counted a fitting epilogue to the long medieval chapter in Iceland's history, a last sigh for the country's independence and its old forms of Christian culture:

Vondslega hefir oss veröldin blekkt,
vélað og tælt oss nógu frekt,
ef eg skal dæmdur af danskri slekt,
og deyja svo fyrir kóngsins mekt.

Shamelessly has the world
deceived us,
impudently enough tricked and
cheated us,
if I am to be condemned by men
of Danish breed
and so die a victim of the king's might

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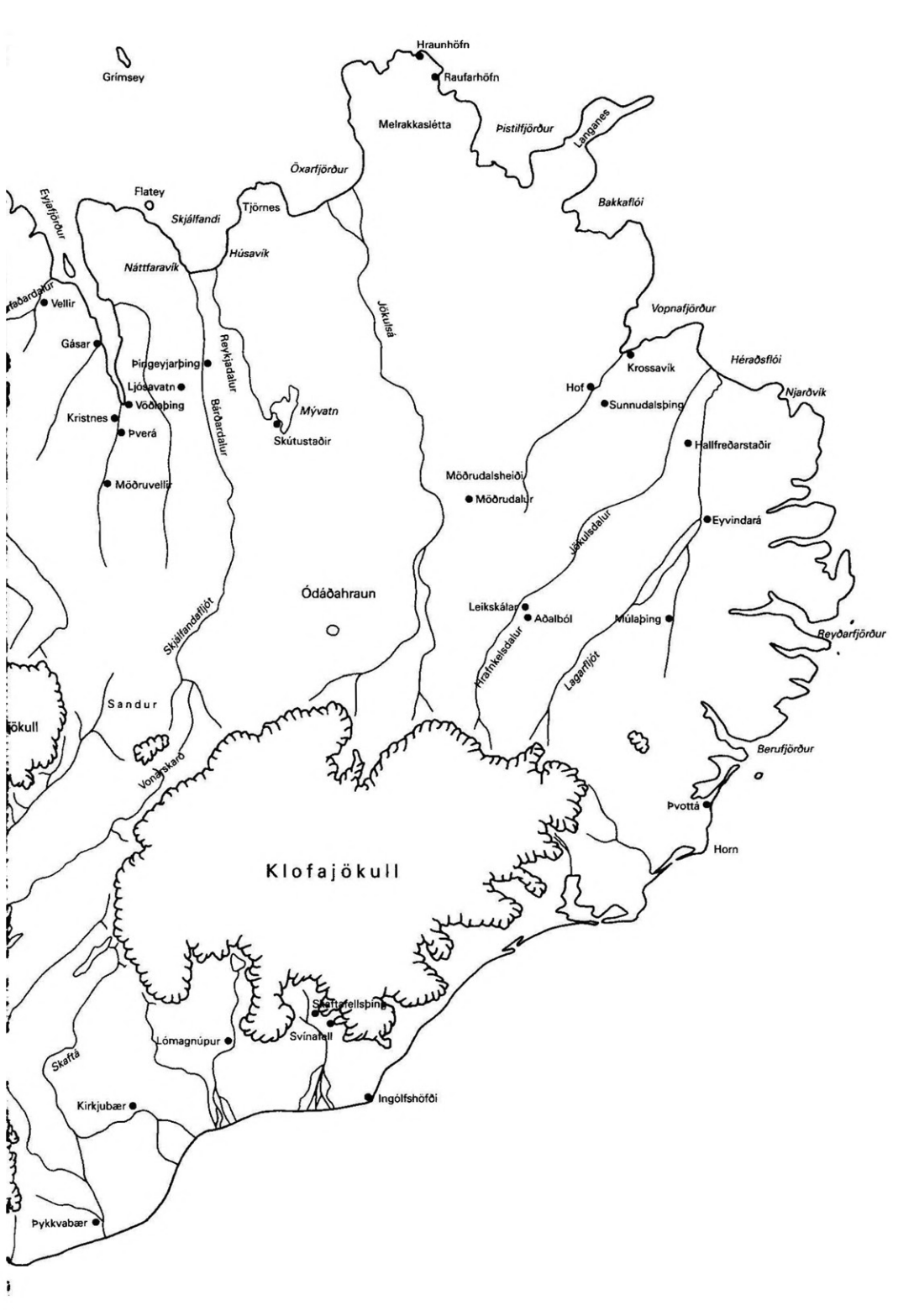
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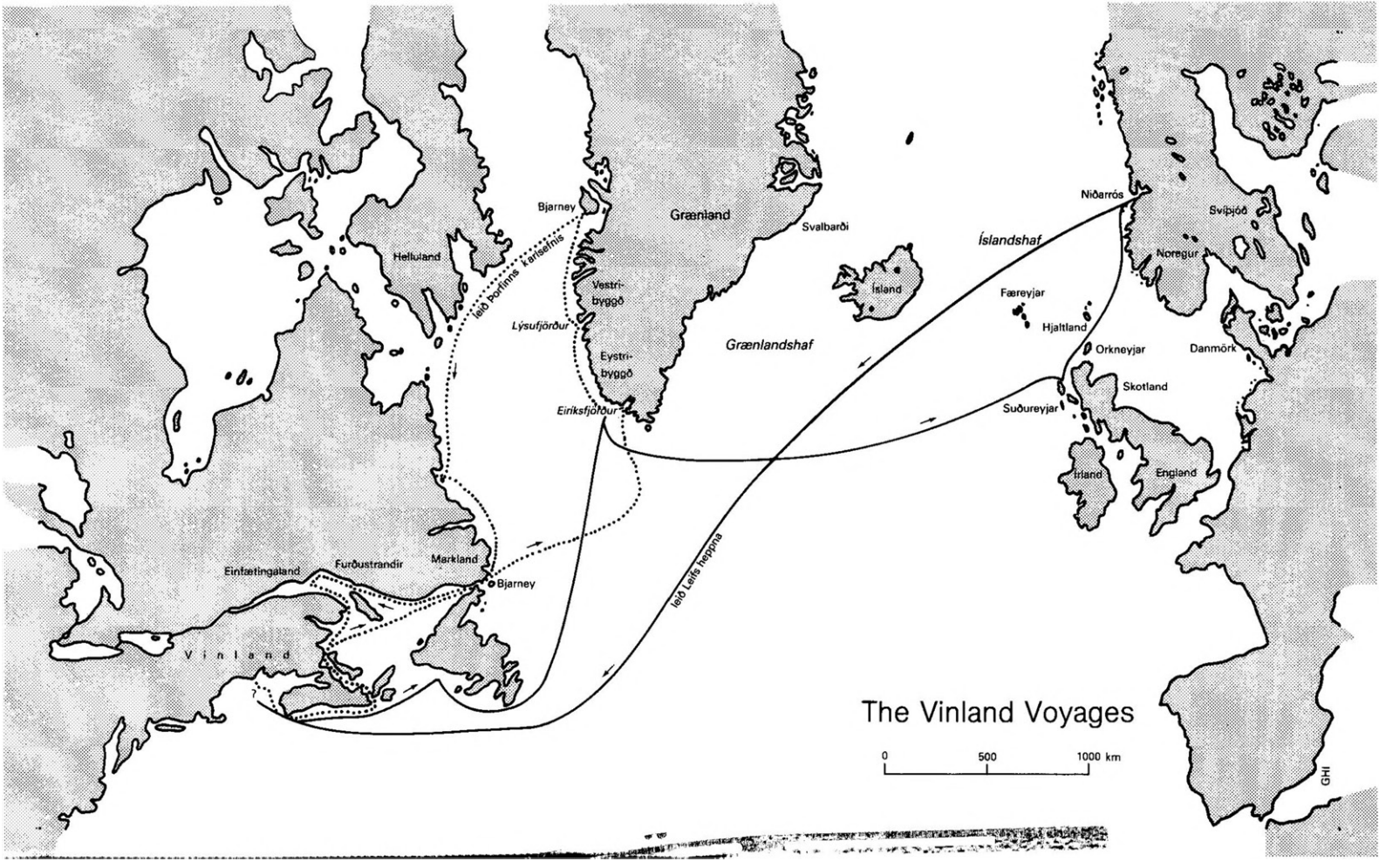
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