

Old Norse-Icelandic Literature

A SHORT INTRODUCTION



HEATHER O'DONOGHUE



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Heather O'Donoghue

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350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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Chronology

793	Vikings sack Lindisfarne – conventional opening of ‘the viking age’
c.850	Composition of the earliest surviving skaldic poetry, attributed to the Norwegian Bragi Boddason
870–930	Settlement of Iceland
871–99	Reign of King Alfred the Great in England
930	First <i>Alþing</i> (national assembly) held in Iceland
946–54	Rule of Eiríkr blóðøx (Eric Bloodaxe) in York
978–1016	Reign of Ethelred ‘the Unready’ in England
999/1000	Conversion of Iceland to Christianity
1002	St Brice’s Day Massacre (of Danes living in England)
1016	Accession of the Danish King Canute (Knútr) to the throne of England
1030	Death of King and Saint Óláfr Haraldsson of Norway
1066	William the Conqueror establishes Norman rule in England
1068–1148	Life of Ari Þorgilsson, author of <i>Íslendingabók</i> (written between 1122 and 1133)
1117–18	Icelandic law committed to writing
1178/9–1241	Life of Snorri Sturluson, author of the <i>Prose Edda</i> , <i>Heimskringla</i> and perhaps <i>Egils saga</i>
c.1200	Family sagas begin to be written
c.1220–5	<i>Prose Edda</i>

c.1230	<i>Heimskringla</i>
1262	Iceland loses independence to Norway
c.1270	Compilation of the Codex Regius (manuscript of the <i>Poetic Edda</i>)
1550	Jón Arason, last Catholic bishop in Iceland, executed
1593	Arngrímur Jónsson's <i>Crymogæa</i> , a history of Iceland in Latin
1689	Thomas Bartholin's <i>Antiquitatum Danicarum</i>
1703–5	George Hickes's <i>Thesaurus Linguarum Septentrionalium</i> , containing the first piece of Old Norse-Icelandic literature translated into a modern European language (English) – <i>The Waking of Angantyr</i>
1763	Bishop Percy's <i>Five Pieces of Runic Poetry</i>
1768	Thomas Gray's 'Norse Odes' (written in 1761) published
1770	Bishop Percy's <i>Northern Antiquities</i> (a translation of Paul-Henri Mallet's <i>Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc</i>)
1780–2	James Johnstone's translations of Old Norse-Icelandic historical prose
1797–1804	William Blake's <i>The Four Zoas</i>
1822	Sir Walter Scott's <i>The Pirate</i> , an adventure novel using material from Thomas Bartholin
1839	George Stephens's translation of <i>Friðþjófs saga</i> – the first translation of a whole saga into English
1861	Sir George Dasent's translation of <i>Njáls saga</i>
1887	William Morris's <i>The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs</i>
1891–1905	William Morris and Eiríkur Magnússon's series of translations, <i>The Saga Library</i>
1944	Iceland declares itself a republic independent of Denmark at the <i>Alþing</i>

Preface

Iceland is a large island – about the same size as Ireland – in the North Atlantic. The Arctic Circle just skims the most northerly points of its coastline. Most of the interior of Iceland is completely uninhabitable: high snowy mountains and great rocky glaciers. In winter, the days are dark; around the solstice, the sun barely rises at midday. But at midsummer, there is almost perpetual daylight, and in spite of the high latitude, around the coast the climate is surprisingly temperate because of the warming effects of the Gulf Stream. These coastal landscapes, agricultural and natural, can be remarkably reminiscent of those in the west of Ireland, or the Western Isles of Scotland. But there are some dramatic differences. Iceland is a volcanic island: its sands are black, there are great stretches of old, hardened lava, and everywhere evidence of fresh volcanic activity in hot springs, bubbling mud pools and the pervasive smell of sulphur. Not for nothing did the poets Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell call their Iceland travelogue *Moon Country*, for it was here that American astronauts trained for their giant leap. Here too, in the early Middle Ages, pioneer settlers established not only a new nation, with sophisticated legal and parliamentary structures in place of monarchy and the feudal system, but also a unique literary culture quite unlike anything else in the Middle Ages. It is this literary culture – its origins, range, and political and literary influence – which is the subject of what follows.

This book is not a survey or a history of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Rather, it aims to introduce readers used to more familiar kinds of literature – medieval or modern or both – to the distinctive literary qualities of a very rich, diverse and extensive body of texts.

Iceland

The Beginnings

Iceland has no human prehistory. There are none of the megaliths of western Europe, no stone circles or dolmens. In fact, there is no reliable evidence of human habitation – neither archaeological remains nor textual reference – until the Irish monk Dicuil, writing at the court of King Charlemagne at the beginning of the ninth century, reports that Irish pilgrim monks – *peregrini* who habitually sought out the most isolated landfalls they could find – had been spending summers on Iceland. Until then, Iceland was little more than a learned rumour. The fourth-century BC Greek scholar and explorer Pytheas of Marseilles was reputed to have proposed the existence of an inhabited land six days sailing to the north of the British Isles; he called it Thule, and it was imagined as the most remote geographical point – Ultima Thule. This land came to be identified with Iceland (though it was more probably the Shetlands, or even Norway). The Venerable Bede, as later Icelandic historians were to record, alluded to sailings between Britain and an island believed to be Pytheas's Thule in his time, the eighth century. But only Dicuil's account records what is plainly first-hand knowledge of what we now call Iceland:

It is now thirty years since priests who lived in that island from the first of February to the first of August told me that not only at the summer solstice but also on the days to either side of it the setting sun hides itself at the evening hour as if behind a little hill, so that no darkness occurs during that brief period; but that whatever task a man wishes to

perform, even to picking the lice from his shirt, he can manage as precisely as in broad daylight.

When Dicuil was writing, the distant north was just beginning to make itself felt on the Carolingian empire – and indeed other western European nation-states – in the shape of viking raids. It was as part of the so-called viking expansion that the island of Iceland was itself settled by the people who were to produce the most remarkable vernacular literature in medieval Europe.

The term ‘viking’ is a major site of contention amongst scholars. Strictly speaking, it denotes marauding bands of Scandinavian pirates, but since a whole era in European history has been named after them, the term has been loosely applied to many aspects of the culture of that period. But the word does not denote nationality, and the phrase ‘viking settlers’ is seen by many historians as a simple contradiction in terms. On the other hand, it is not so easy to make a clear-cut distinction between, for example, those Norwegians and Hiberno-Norse who settled and farmed in Iceland, and the members of raiding parties who terrorized Christian Europe, for the sagas describe otherwise staid and law-abiding Icelandic farmers going on viking expeditions during the summer months, and as we shall see, the Icelandic text *Landnámabók* relates that one of Iceland’s first settlers raised his money for the settlement itself by raiding in Ireland.

The origin of the word ‘viking’ is uncertain. In Old English, the cognate word ‘wicing’ was first used by Anglo-Saxons to designate pirates of any nationality, and was never the only or even the standard word used to denote Scandinavian raiders of any sort. Our modern word ‘viking’ does not derive from this usage, but has come into English by a much more roundabout route: the first instance of its use recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is from the beginning of the nineteenth century, when it was adopted from modern Scandinavian languages – which had themselves reintroduced it from the medieval texts Scandinavian antiquarians were rediscovering.

It is customary to date the viking age from the notorious sack of Lindisfarne, in AD 793, which the Anglo-Saxon scholar Alcuin seems to identify as the first viking raid. However, it seems likely that elsewhere in Britain there had been earlier, less spectacular raids than the one on Lindisfarne. The end date is also hard to fix precisely, but certainly by the middle of the eleventh century the viking raids

characteristic of earlier centuries had ceased. And by then, William the Conqueror, himself a descendant of the vikings who raided and then settled Normandy, had not only become king of England, but also beaten off a series of attempts at Scandinavian counter-invasions, and completed the putting down of Scandinavian-sympathetic rebellion in England with the so-called Harrying of the North. Even more significant is the link with Icelandic history, for Iceland was converted to Christianity in the year 1000, and in the years following the conversion, the practice of writing down the Icelandic language in Roman letters on vellum manuscripts, and thus, the production of a developed body of literature, began.

For its first settlers, Iceland was to all intents and purposes *terra nova*. Dicuil's pilgrim monks in search of solitude and an ascetic life were not really settlers, since they never overwintered in Iceland. But they were all Iceland had in the way of native inhabitants, and later Icelandic historians, such as Ari Þorgilsson, the twelfth-century author of *Íslendingabók*, the book of the Icelanders, note their presence and explain, perhaps euphemistically, that they didn't wish to live alongside pagan Norwegian newcomers, and left. Thus these Norse emigrants established a nation which alone amongst all those in western Europe had a definitive point of origin.

There are two kinds of written evidence describing Scandinavians of the settlement period, the early viking age: the later records of native Icelandic historians, and the contemporary testimony of their literate, Christian victims, in other countries. Both are vivid, detailed and influential, and both are deeply flawed as historical source material, and highly misleading in their own ways, as we shall see. Wherever the vikings raided in Europe, their actions were chronicled in lurid terms by native clerics. In 793, vikings had raided the monastery at Lindisfarne, to the evident distress of the Anglo-Saxon scholar Alcuin, who wrote a famous letter of condolence from the court of Charlemagne, where he, like Dicuil, was an honoured guest, to King Ethelred of Northumbria:

Lo, it is nearly 350 years that we and our fathers have inhabited this lovely land, and never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race, nor was it thought that such an inroad from the sea could be made. Behold the church of St Cuthbert spattered with the blood of the priests of God, despoiled of

all its ornaments; a place more venerable than all in Britain is given as a prey to pagan peoples.

In the course of the next two and a half centuries, much of Europe – and indeed beyond – was to experience the unparalleled terror of viking raids, if the testimony of the monastic chroniclers who were their prime victims is to be believed. Our modern-day views of the viking invaders are based on such accounts from England, Ireland and the Frankish kingdom. But they tell a partial story in both senses of the word.

The activities of small, savage warbands, and larger-scale conquest and settlement, are obviously very different matters. But Anglo-Saxon annalists revile Norwegian raiders and Danish armies in exactly the same terms: they are all unspeakably evil heathen murderers, a scourge sent by God. And yet in the middle of the ninth century, when a sizeable Danish army ravaged England, and most of the northern and eastern parts fell under Scandinavian control, this area came to be known as the Danelaw – significantly, and perhaps unexpectedly, a name signifying a place where Scandinavian legal custom prevailed, not a wasteland of anarchy and terror. The word ‘law’ itself is derived from a borrowing into Old English from the Norse. No doubt there had been terrible outrages in the course of this Anglo-Danish war. But the death of King Edmund of East Anglia, who according to the Anglo-Saxon chronicles was simply killed in battle against these Scandinavian invaders, was soon transformed into a sensational example of Christian martyrdom at the hands of heathen savages sent by the devil himself. Other evidence – particularly from placenames – indicates that the outcome of the Danish invasions was a settled farming and trading community, whose members lived in harmony with their Anglo-Saxon neighbours and soon adopted Christianity. Less than a century and a half later, on St Brice’s Day 1002, Ethelred, king of England, ordered a massacre of all Danes living in his kingdom. In Oxford, the Danish population fled to the sanctuary of St Frideswide’s church, but this did not save them, because Ethelred’s soldiers burnt it, with the Danes inside. This is a dramatic reversal of the usual association of church burning and mass murder with the Scandinavian invaders. And though the earliest Scandinavian raiders would certainly have been pagans, Christianity had spread fast throughout northern Europe, and by the turn of the millennium, Iceland,

Norway and Denmark were all Christian nations, with Sweden not far behind.

In such contemporary evidence, we hear the testimony of those who saw Scandinavians as unwelcome outsiders, a heathen ‘other’ causing destruction, havoc and terror. But we do not hear the voices of the vikings themselves. Contemporary written evidence from the Scandinavians themselves does, however, exist, in the form of inscriptions carved in wood, or stone, or ivory, in the runic alphabet or *fupark*.

Language

The *fupark* was a native Germanic script which may date from as early as the beginning of the first millennium AD. It was named after its first six letters: each letter also had a name which was a common noun beginning with the sound of the runic letter. Thus the first six runes were called in Old Norse *fē* (cattle), *úr* (shower), *þurs* (ogre), *áss* (god), *reið* (riding) and *kaun* (boil). Some of the letters in the runic alphabet resemble familiar Roman forms, but the origins of most of them are unknown, although it has been suggested that they were modelled on Greek or Etruscan letters. The functionality of the alphabet was clearly the primary influence on the shape of its letters, however, which are largely made up of straight lines with only the odd broad curve: a set of carved staves, rather than a cursive script. Runic inscriptions tend, naturally, to be brief, and a substantial number, especially the earliest ones, are wholly or partly obscure in meaning. But the whole runic corpus – some thousands of inscriptions – as well as being the only written source from the viking age which records what the Scandinavians wanted to say about themselves (as opposed to the chronicles of their neighbours or descendants), is the earliest written precursor of the language now usually known as Old Norse – the language of the sagas.

The runic alphabet, with some modifications, could be used for inscribing any Germanic language – there are a number of runic inscriptions in Old English, and a handful of Frisian ones. But the earliest inscriptions, from Scandinavia, are in a language conventionally termed ‘Proto-Scandinavian’ – the ancestor of modern Icelandic, Norwegian, Danish and Swedish. The linguistic information they can

offer is limited, however, since most run only to one or two words, and insofar as they can be made out at all, inscribe proper names, or meaningless collections of often repeated letters. Many record on individual objects the names of the owners or creators of these artefacts; a good example is the Danish Gallehus horn from the fourth century AD, whose maker proudly carved ‘Ek HlewagastiR HoltijaR horna tawido’ – ‘I, HlewagastiR, [son] of Holt, crafted the horn.’ The whole inscription seems to reflect the kind of metre – a long line with a break halfway through, two stressed syllables in each half, the first two alliterating, together with the first of the second pair – which is characteristic of both Old Norse-Icelandic and Old English poetry.

At the beginning of the viking age, in the eighth century, the Proto-Scandinavian language of runic inscriptions begins to change quite markedly. Syllables are lost, and the vowels of those remaining are altered, but there was still, apparently, one language common to most of Scandinavia, though this may of course be the effect of there being so little evidence remaining, and of runic inscriptions using conventional and perhaps fossilized formulae; it tells us nothing about the variety of spoken language. But by the end of the period, in the eleventh century, philologists can distinguish East Norse – the languages of Denmark and Sweden – and West Norse, the language of Norway, and, by extension, of those colonies settled from there: the Faroes, Greenland, Scandinavian outposts in Ireland and the western British Isles, and most importantly, Iceland, where a whole literate, literary culture was recorded and invented. After the conversion, Icelanders adopted the Latin alphabet for their literature, with the inclusion of the runic character ‘Þ’, usually called by its English name, ‘thorn’, and therefore probably taken not directly from the Scandinavian *fupark* but from English orthography, where it remained in use until Chaucer’s time.

For the next couple of centuries, the West Norse spoken and written in Iceland and Norway was common to both countries. This explains the confusing terminology of Old Norse-Icelandic studies: the common language is usually termed Old Norse (more precisely, Old West Norse), even though most of the literature in which it was written took shape in Iceland. Some scholars therefore make a distinction between Old Icelandic literature and the Old Norse language. But since Norwegian and Icelandic are virtually identical at this time, it isn’t always possible to be sure in which country some of the texts

were produced. The most inclusive term possible for the literature is Old Norse-Icelandic, and I shall use Old Norse as the name of the language.

As time went on, the primary link between Iceland and Norway began to fade, and Norwegian began to develop separately, while medieval Icelandic – the language more commonly known as Old Norse – continued with very little change. This was due partly to the geographical situation of Iceland, and its increasing cultural isolation throughout the early modern period. The result is that the language of the sagas is very little different from the language spoken and written in present-day Iceland, although of course the lexis has greatly increased to accommodate modern conditions. New terms have usually been constructed from native elements, rather than borrowed from other European languages, or based on Greek or Latin words. Modern Icelandic is thus full of constructions such as *smjörlíki*, the word for margarine (literally, ‘butter-substitute’) or *ljósmynd*, literally, ‘light-image’, that is, photograph.

Although at first sight these modern Icelandic words look very unfamiliar, in fact with practice (and hindsight) it is possible to relate many of them to English words. This is because all the Scandinavian languages, including Icelandic, on the one hand, and English, together with Dutch, German and Frisian, on the other, trace their ancestry back to a common Germanic original. English and Icelandic are therefore cognate languages, that is, they have a cousinly relationship to each other. However, since Modern Icelandic has changed relatively little from its medieval form, while English has changed a great deal, the correspondences between individual word elements are not always immediately apparent. Thus, for instance, the first element in *smjörlíki*, margarine, is related to the Modern English verb ‘to smear’; the Old English noun *smere*, fat or grease, has not survived into Modern English, and in Icelandic it had the specialized meaning of dairy fat, that is, butter. The second element is even trickier. The word *líki* looks as if it is cognate with the English word ‘like’, and indeed there is a very similar Icelandic word – *líkur* – which does mean ‘like’. But in this case, the element *líki* is cognate with a word which has now all but disappeared from Modern English, though it was the standard word for body, form or shape in Old English, *lic*. Its only survival in contemporary English, to my knowledge, is as the first element in ‘lych-gate’ – the entrance to a churchyard, and the place where the

coffin, and therefore the dead body, was set down before entry into the church. A similar form, also meaning 'body', survives in the name for a long-distance footpath – the Lyke Wake walk – across the North Yorkshire Moors. The walk was named after a Cleveland dialect poem, the 'Lyke Wake Dirge', which describes the journey of a soul after death; the walk itself is imagined to follow the kind of arduous routes mourners might have used when carrying coffins from isolated farmsteads to the thinly spaced churches of the moors.

Many words in Icelandic are extremely similar to Modern English forms: the word *handrit*, for instance, is easily guessable as 'manuscript', literally 'writing by hand' – though one might confuse it with *rithönd*, which means 'handwriting'. Similarities between the two languages were more evident in the early period, and in the viking age, Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians would probably have been able to understand one another. But this is not evident from contemporary texts, because Old English literature mostly survives in a standard, literary language known as Late West Saxon (we know relatively little about other regional, spoken versions of it), and the standard Old Norse literary language dates from well after the viking age; Old Norse-Icelandic literature was written down during the later twelfth century, when the viking age was over. We can only guess at the pronunciation of both languages; the northern variants of Old English in particular may have sounded surprisingly close to Old Norse – just as, for example, contemporary north-eastern dialects are believed by some to be intelligible to Norwegians, especially if delivered at full volume.

From the Anglo-Saxon period onwards, contact between the English and the Norse led to many Old Norse words being borrowed into the English language. To begin with, this borrowed vocabulary apparently reflected the new technology which the vikings introduced: the terminology of ships and sailing. But as more and more Scandinavians settled permanently alongside the Anglo-Saxons, so the number of loanwords increased. Not only individual words, but also idioms, syntactical patterns and grammatical features were borrowed into English, so much so that post-viking age English – which, with the admixture of a French element after the Norman Conquest, is the basis for Middle English, the language of Chaucer – has been called an Anglo-Scandinavian creole, that is, a mix of two languages which forms the basis of a new mother tongue. Such intensive borrowing was of course made easier by the inherent similarity of the

two languages. And this is the reason why many words of Norse derivation – which include such basic items as ‘die’, ‘take’, ‘husband’, ‘them’ and ‘their’, ‘window’, ‘happy’, ‘wrong’ and, as we have seen, ‘law’ – do not strike native speakers as ‘foreign’, or out of place in English. It is sometimes impossible to distinguish what was originally a Norse loanword from an item derived from a close Anglo-Saxon cognate. In the northern parts of the British Isles – Northern Ireland, Scotland and the north of England – the influence of Norse is especially evident in dialectal loanwords and Scandinavian-influenced pronunciation. English and Icelandic share the same linguistic roots, but during the viking age, the contact between their speakers intensified the already close relationship between them.

Cultural Heritage

Though the earliest runic inscriptions are mostly too short to provide much historical information, viking age runic texts – the vast majority of the three-thousand-odd examples carved on to memorial stones – provide extraordinary insights into the lives and deaths of those continental Scandinavians who commissioned them and whom they commemorate. The runestones taken as a group confirm modern conceptions of the vikings as adventurers, traders and fighters. The central importance of the viking ship in all these activities is reflected in runic texts, and there are approving references to heroic virtues such as loyalty, fellowship and honour, as well as condemnation of their counterparts: betrayal, murder and disgrace. But the prominence of women in the runic evidence – primarily as the commissioners of runic monuments, but also as the beneficiaries in complicated property deals – is more unexpected, and the degree to which poetry is preserved in inscriptions suggests another side to viking culture. The function of memorial stones as records of legal inheritance and affinities also testifies to an ordered, relatively regular society, and one which valued the stability which genealogical records could confer. This was also a society on the cusp of a major transformation from paganism to Christianity. Runestones thus reveal to us not only an image of marauders and travellers quite close to that recorded by their contemporary clerical victims, and enthusiastically taken up by later societies, but also a less sensational, and more impressive, social culture.

Reading the runes – an idiom which has, incidentally, come to be used in contemporary English for the activity of foreseeing the political and economic future, though there is no reason to suppose that genuine runes ever served any divinatory purpose – presents a number of practical problems. Sometimes inscriptions have been damaged or worn away, and those who carved them seem on occasion to have made mistakes which render an inscription meaningless without careful amendment. Sometimes it seems that inscriptions were plain meaningless. However, the clarity of some of these messages is startling, and the information they provide is invaluable. For instance, we learn from runic inscriptions that vikings may have referred to themselves as such. The Tirsted stone from Lolland in Sweden contains a longish inscription with a whole series of what are apparently mistakes on the part of the rune carver: words missed out, or written twice, and some unintelligible series of letters. But the whole text seems to record that two men, Asrad and Hilvig, set up the stone in memory of a relative of theirs, Frede, who fought with Fregge and was killed, and the inscription appears to sum them up: aliR uikikaR – all vikings. They were certainly doing what we expect vikings to do: fighting, getting killed, and praising kinsmen.

It is also not unexpected that words for ships and sailing, for parts of ships and for their crews and captains are relatively common on viking age inscriptions. The amazing extent of viking exploration, in pursuit of both war and trade, is everywhere evident. Names of foreign lands figure largely on memorial stones, which often record death far from home: westwards, in England – several stones record that the deceased received tribute there: *giald*, the infamous Danegeld – or Ireland; or eastwards, around the Baltic Sea, or in Novgorod, Byzantium, Jerusalem, or ‘Serkland’, the home of the Saracens. Such public monuments would serve not only as pious or respectful memorials, but also, more practically, as unequivocal notices of deaths which were otherwise – especially in the absence of a body – unverifiable. They also make public the obvious entailments of familial relationships: inheritance claims, and the right to ownership of land and property.

Sometimes a runic inscription includes a simple declaration of ownership: ‘This farm is their *odal* and family inheritance, the sons of Finnviðr at Ålgesta’ is the concluding note on a memorial to one of these brothers. But an inscription on a rock at Hillersjö, in the

Swedish district of Uppland, sets out a complicated history which might well have given rise to fierce dispute if its details were not unalterably set in stone:

Geirmund married Geirlaug when she was a girl. Then they had a son, before he [Geirmund] drowned, and the son died afterwards. Then she married Gudrik . . . Then they had children, but only a girl lived. She was called Inga. She married Ragnfast of Snottsa, and then he died, and a son afterwards, and the mother [Inga] inherited from her son. Inga afterwards married Eirik. Then she died, and Geirlaug inherited from her daughter Inga.

This stone, with its unusually long inscription, belongs to a group of six, all of which record details of the same extended family. Four of them were commissioned by Inga herself, the wife of Ragnfast, and the Hillersjö inscription makes plain how it was that she had the wealth and standing to commission such a rich body of memorial stones: she was already the only surviving child of two marriages, and thus the sole heir. One of Inga's stones details how she had also inherited property from her father. But the climax of the Hillersjö story – even, we might want to call it, saga – is its revelation that when Inga died, everything reverted to her mother Geirlaug. Geirlaug must have become a rich woman, and such accumulated wealth would be likely to have caused resentment: on one of the stones it is recorded that Ragnfast had sisters, but not that they inherited anything. The runic inscription explains how it was that Geirlaug came to inherit everything.

Simple inscriptions on objects which we can assume were gifts – 'Singasven polished this for Thorfrid', inscribed on a knife handle, or 'Gautvid gave this scales-box to Gudfrid' on a bronze mount – are testimony to traditional relationships between men and women familiar throughout history: men as the commissioners or makers of the piece, and women as recipients. But women figure very largely as the commissioners of memorial runestones, and the most obvious reason is that since so many of them commemorate men who died fighting abroad, it would often fall to their widows to set up the memorial to them, even though these women would not have the right to inherit from their husbands if there were children from their marriage. And some runic inscriptions commemorate women, none more touchingly than a stone set up in Rimsø by Thorir in memory

of his mother, which concludes: ‘muður is dauði sam uarst maki’ – a mother’s death is the worst (thing) for a son. The last part of this lament is inscribed backwards, as if such personal grief should not be broadcast so baldly on a public monument.

Most viking age poetry has survived in the later prose works of medieval Icelanders, quoted, ostensibly from oral tradition, to substantiate or embellish their narratives. But a number of runestones include verses in their inscriptions. The earliest to do so, the Rök stone, which has been dated to the ninth century, quotes, in the midst of a lengthy and mostly obscure genealogical catalogue, eight lines apparently from a poem about Theodric, king of the Franks in the sixth century, and the subject of later Old Norse heroic literature. The metre of the lines, and the form and content of its poetic diction – Theodric is called ‘stilliR flutna’, leader of sea-warriors – is familiar from Old Norse verse only preserved in post-viking age manuscripts. On the Karlevi stone, from Öland, in Sweden, a whole stanza in the complex metre known as *dróttkvætt* – the metre of the court – is meticulously inscribed. Stanzas in this metre consist of eight short

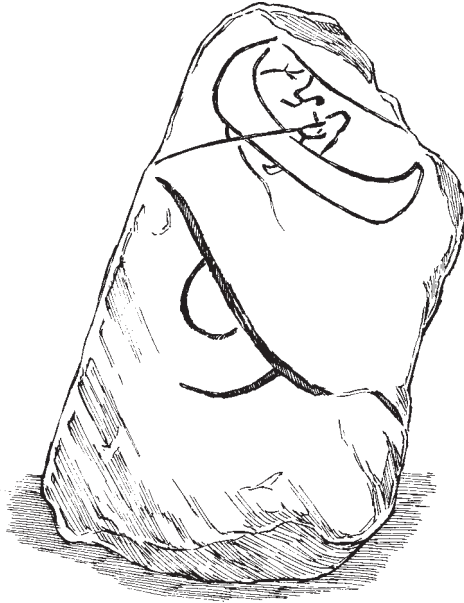


The Karlevi stone, Öland, Sweden, dating from about the year 1000. One complete skaldic stanza is legibly incised in runes on the stone.
© Corbis

(six-syllable) lines of highly alliterative and consonantal wordplay. Since much of this early poetry – if we include those stanzas quoted in later texts – is praise poetry, either publicly celebrating the deeds of a live leader, in the hope of financial reward, or respectfully commemorating one who is dead, then it is exactly what we might expect to find on grand public monuments such as runestones. The compressed intricacy of the skaldic stanza is ideally suited to the needs of the rune carver, whose craft would have been far too laborious to accommodate more expansive narratives in verse or prose. The Karlevi stanza praises and commemorates a Danish ruler who is designated by an elaborate string of epithets – battle-strong chariot-god of the great land of the sea-king. This can be decoded as sea captain, since the great land of a sea king is, paradoxically, the sea, and vehicle-god of the sea is one who commands a ship. Such circumlocutions are known as kennings, and are the most distinctive feature of Old Norse skaldic verse. Here, then, the runic evidence shows that fully developed skaldic verse was being practised in the ninth century, that is, as early as later Old Norse sources suggest. And the language of the Karlevi verse identifies its skald as a Norwegian or an Icelander, even though the runic letters are in Danish style, corroborating later Old Norse sources which identify Norwegians and Icelanders as masters of the art.

In Old Norse tradition, the god of poetry, Óðinn, is apparently credited with the invention, or at least discovery, of runes, and two Swedish runestones call their alphabet ‘of divine origin’. The word ‘rune’ itself – *rún* in Old Norse – is related to other Germanic words associated with secrecy, and some surviving inscriptions include curses or charms, often directed towards potential vandals, as on the Glavendrup stone (commissioned by a woman), which ends with the imprecation ‘May he become [a] *riti* who damages the stone or drags it away.’ No one knows what the word *riti* might mean; but one can speculate. Meaningless strings of runic letters on stones and objects may be magic formulae.

The Glavendrup stone also includes the laconic charm ‘þur uiki þasi runar’ – ‘may Þórr hallow these runes’. But in general, the inscriptions provide very little information about Scandinavian paganism. They are bearers and broadcasters of secular information. By far the most evidence of pagan belief comes from viking age picture stones, with their vivid and often highly detailed scenes. It can be hard to work out what exactly is being depicted. Sometimes, the incised



The Hørdum stone, Thy, Denmark. This depicts the god Þórr on a fishing expedition; on the end of his taut line, but out of the picture, is the mighty world serpent.

Museet for Thy og Vester Hanherred, Thisted Museum

picture is accompanied by some runic text, as with the famous Swedish Ramsund stone, for example. Scenes from the celebrated story of Sigurðr the dragon-slayer are contained within a frame formed by a snake's body, and runic letters spell out the inscription – not an explanation of or a commentary on the illustration, but a conventional commemorative formula. The relationship between the picture and the words seems to be simply the association of the dead man with a great legendary hero.

We would hardly be able to interpret the scenes on these stones at all were it not for the survival of later, written texts, which either allude to or recount in detail mythological episodes. But while literary texts can help to interpret the pictures (though many remain completely obscure), the stones, which can be dated to the early viking age, are in turn clear evidence that literature preserved in later texts is recounting, at least in broad outline, myths which were known in the earlier period. The Hørdum stone, from North Jutland, depicts, in a few

laconic, expressive strokes, the god Þórr – unmistakable in his distinctive pointed helmet – at sea, the stern of his rowing boat braced at an improbably steep angle, and his foot poking through the bottom of the little boat. All the energy and tension of the scene are focused on Þórr's fishing line, but the picture on the rock is fragmentary, and we cannot see what extraordinary creature might be on the end of that taut, fine line. Old Norse accounts in both prose and verse of Þórr's dramatic encounter with the World Serpent make clear the significance of this scene: in the poetry especially, it appears that the World Serpent is figured as a massive living belt holding together the whole world – much as the runic snake encompasses the illustrated history of Sigurðr the dragon-slayer on the Ramsund stone – a world which is, literally, hanging by a thread in this scene.

Memorial stones, in conventional formulae still familiar today, commend the dead person to Christ, and hope for mercy from a Christian god. Some couch this prayer in disarmingly frank terms, such as the Lilla Lundby stone, which enjoins 'God defend his soul better than he knew how to deserve it.' Perhaps the single most famous, and most impressive, Christian runic monument is the Jelling stone, which has been dubbed 'Denmark's baptismal certificate' – a phrase worth repeating because it underlines the place and function of runic inscriptions in a society which was pre-literate in the conventional European sense of producing documents in Latin script on vellum.

The Jelling stone is part of a complex of Danish monuments set up by King Gorm the Old and his son Harald Blacktooth, who ruled Denmark in the second half of the tenth century. The first Jelling stone commemorates Gorm's queen, Thyre, who is elegantly described – though the runes are rather inelegantly carved – as 'Denmark's adornment'. Gorm was a pagan, and it is recorded that he once refused permission for a Christian bishop to engage in missionary work in his kingdom. The second Jelling stone is by contrast a magnificent piece of work, beautifully decorated as well as bearing the highly significant runic declaration: 'King Harald commanded this monument to be made in memory of Gorm his father, and in memory of Thyre, his mother – that Harald who won the whole of Denmark for himself, and Norway, and made the Danes Christian.' On one face of the stone, the so-called 'Jelling beast', an elaborately carved monster, is framed by a serpent. On the other is a picture of Christ, arms outstretched in victory.

Runic inscriptions and picture stones are partly textual (and thus historical) and partly material (and thus archaeological) sources for the past. Other material remains of viking age culture tend to confirm the picture we have so far, of raiders and traders, pagans and Christians, farmers and craftworkers. Ships, swords and helmets (*not* the horned ones of Victorian fantasy) are evidence of both the distribution of viking activity, and the nature of it, just as documented in the written sources of their victims. Hoards of coin and other precious objects can also indicate the extent of viking adventuring, though it is not always clear whether an individual collection of foreign coins and exotic items is evidence of fair trading or forced tribute. The elaborate craftsmanship of Scandinavian artefacts suggests not only a highly developed sense of the aesthetic, but also, together with more recent evidence of viking age settlements both at home and abroad – the workshops, shipyards and trading centres at viking towns such as York, for instance, or Ribe, or Hedeby – a complex and cohesive social set-up. Charms or amulets which probably depict the god Þórr reflect his status – confirmed by personal and placename evidence – as the most worshipped of the pagan pantheon. Perhaps the most evocative material evidence of viking culture as one which straddled the pagan and the Christian is the manufacturer's mould from North Jutland, from which both a Þórr's hammer and a Christian cross could be cast, according to the customer's preference.

All this runic and archaeological evidence is not of course directly applicable to Iceland. The unique conditions of the settlement – the very newness of Icelandic society – would have radically altered social relations both amongst the settlers themselves, as they struggled with the basics of survival in what was for much of the year a fiercely harsh environment, and between these pioneers and the societies they had left behind, especially given the difference between Iceland as a republic, and the Scandinavian nations as monarchies. And it must be remembered that though most of the runic evidence comes from Denmark and Sweden, Iceland was settled by Norwegian emigrants, together with a Celtic admixture whose culture and language would have been completely different. None the less, the picture we derive from archaeology and runic inscriptions is a striking one. The language of the runes – at first, Proto-Scandinavian, and then, into the viking age, common Scandinavian – is easily identifiable as a close forerunner of Icelandic. But from the content of the inscriptions, we

learn of values, both heroic and personal, as memorial stones praise the dead and denigrate their opponents. We see the commissioners and craftworkers of these memorials as poets and historians, caught up in dense and powerful webs of kinship and friendship bonds. We have a picture of a society in which women might wield power and influence. And it is a society which valued the commemoration of the past, and its links to the present through genealogy and poetry. Perhaps most significantly of all, as a prefiguration of a new society which was to found a great literary culture, what the runic inscriptions indicate is a people who were concerned to record, and not just remember: to transform information into art. There are no runic memorial stones in Iceland, a new land which no one inherited from his or her ancestors. But it may be that a literary culture took their place, as Icelanders textualized not only their own settlement, their conversion and the lives of generations immediately preceding their own, but also the history and mythic prehistory of Norway and Denmark

Discovery and Settlement

Since there was no indigenous population in Iceland when the pagan Norsemen arrived, it was left to later Icelandic historians to chronicle the settlement. They record that during the ninth century a series of Scandinavian travellers sailed to Iceland. According to one source, the first was Naddoddr, a Norwegian viking – perhaps exiled, presumably for criminal activities – who was heading for the Faroes, but was driven ashore on Iceland, which he named, disparagingly, Snowland. A Swede called Garðarr was intrigued enough to make a purposeful search for this unpromising place, guided by his mother, we are told, who had second sight, though it's not clear whether her clairvoyance revealed to him anything about Iceland's future, or simply provided him with the necessary directions. He formed a better opinion of it than Naddoddr, and called it Garðarshólm – Garðarr's Island. The name Iceland was given by Floki Vilgerðarson, a Norwegian who was following in Garðarr's footsteps. Floki is said to have taken three ravens to sea with him, and he was able to measure how close to the new land he was by whether the birds flew backwards, upwards or forwards. One of Floki's party reported – somewhat proleptically! – to

Norwegians back home that in this place butter dripped from every blade of grass. Iceland, as represented by its native historians, had become a talked-about destination, and a newly emerged refuge for those who, like Noah, had searched the seas for a place to settle.

Landnámabók, the book of settlements, or more literally, land-takings, is a compilation – now extant in medieval fragments or seventeenth-century copies or redactions – of information about the first settlers of Iceland: where they settled, who their families were, and who they were related to; and it is from *Landnámabók* that most of our information about these early travellers to Iceland comes. Perhaps because it mostly makes no attempt at a continuous narrative form, *Landnámabók* has usually been regarded as historically reliable. But when we read about how the first permanent settler made his land-taking on Iceland, we may begin to suspect that the material is not as dependable as the form of the text suggests. *Landnámabók* is a probably a version of Iceland's origins shaped by the ideologies of the descendants of the original settlers: the settlement as they would have wished it to be.

Both *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók* stress that Iceland was settled by Norwegians. As we have seen, the existence of Irish monks on Iceland is not air-brushed from the record, but it is passed over swiftly. The first two actual settlers are named in *Landnámabók* as a pair of Norwegians, Ingólfr and Leifr. The account in *Landnámabók* of the events which lead up to the emigration of Ingólfr and Leifr is a short story in itself, and bears all the hallmarks of the storyteller's art. Ingólfr and Leifr are blood brothers – actually, second cousins – whose great-grandfather is Hrómundr Grípsson, a legendary hero celebrated in Old Icelandic tradition. The brothers team up with the three sons of a Norwegian earl, rather formulaically named Hásteinn, Hersteinn and Hólmsteinn. One winter, celebrating their viking exploits together at a feast, one of the earl's sons vows that he will marry Ingólfr's sister, or marry no one. This oath is not well received 'by people', the narrator non-committally notes, although Leifr goes red in the face, something which indicates anger in Old Norse narratives. The next we hear is that Ingólfr and Leifr mount an attack on the earl's sons, killing one of them. The following year, the second of the earl's sons makes a revenge attack, but is killed himself. The earl and his one surviving son are offered compensation, and they demand the total assets of both blood brothers. Ingólfr and Leifr get a ship ready and

set off for Iceland. Having decided on a place to settle, they part company. Ingólfr puts all his money into settling permanently in Iceland, while Leifr goes on a viking expedition to Ireland, where he gathers together much plunder (including money and a sword from inside a pitch-black gravemound, which the sword, wielded by the mound's ghostly occupant, mysteriously illuminates; and ten Irish slaves, of whom five are named). Almost as an afterthought, we are told that he had by this time married Ingólfr's sister.

There is no way of determining how much of this little story is 'true', in the conventional sense. On the other hand, there are plenty of fictional features: the pair of heroes, the three sons of the earl, the matching fights. Characteristic of Old Norse adventure stories are the impressive ancestry of the heroes, their brave show against aristocratic opponents, and the recovery of treasure and weapons from inside a gravemound (even the Old English poem *Beowulf* relates how its hero descends into a dark cavern lit by a sword and inhabited by a hostile monster). But perhaps most striking is the way this story reflects some of the key features of Old Norse saga writing. The syntax and style are straightforward and unpretentious; there are remarkably few adjectives. The narrative is presented simply as a report of events, without any comment, interpretation or other intervention from the narrator. He only tells us what any observer might have heard or seen – for instance, that Leifr flushed red, rather than telling us directly that he became angry. The author does not presume to tell us *why* Leifr was angry; alert readers or listeners may make the correct inference at the time – that Leifr himself wanted to marry his blood brother's sister, and resents the young aristocrat's presumption – or it may dawn on them at the end of the story, like the key to a puzzle. But it has been purposefully withheld until the end of the account. And yet in spite of all this evidence of literary shaping at work, the clear implication is that the author is only telling us what he knows – only five slaves are named, and he clearly does not see it as his business to invent any more names, or by implication to elaborate anything else in this account. 'What he knows' may of course be the story, fictional or otherwise, which he has inherited. But the impression given is of the recording of a factual tradition.

There are problems of a different sort about the historical reliability of Ingólfr and Leifr's settlement. After their adventures with the earl's sons, Ingólfr makes his way to Iceland, but not before he has held a

major pagan sacrifice, and carried out rituals of divination to determine whether or not this new country is a propitious destination. When he first catches sight of Iceland, Ingólfr performs another act of pagan piety: he throws overboard his high-seat pillars. It seems likely that these formed part of the throne on which the head of the family might sit on formal occasions, and that they might have been carved, and had a religious significance. Ingólfr trusts that they will indicate, according to where they are washed up, a place in Iceland favoured by his family's gods back in Norway. The author of *Landnámabók* is in no way apologetic about Ingólfr's pagan practices, and this model of settlement is implicitly contrasted with Leifr's. Leifr disdains sacrifice to the gods, and does not throw any high-seat pillars overboard in the hope of an omen. And his attempt at settlement is a farcical failure.

Leifr and his Irish slaves, far from enjoying divine direction, drift helplessly off the Icelandic coast. Finding himself short of drinking water, he improbably acts on his slaves' inexplicable advice to make a mixture of flour and butter to relieve thirst. Their name for the result is *minnþak*, apparently a Norse approximation of the Irish term 'menadach', a sort of porridge or polenta. The only use found for the *minnþak* is the coining of the placename 'Minnþakseyrr', which no doubt explains the existence of the whole bizarre story, for a timely shower of rain relieves the drought on board, and the *minnþakr* goes mouldy, and is thrown overboard in a messy parody of the high-seat pillars ritual; it is washed up at Minnþakseyrr.

Once ashore, Leifr puts his Irish slaves to pulling the plough, and they rebel, and kill Leifr and his companions. They settle in the Vestmannaeyjar – the islands of the men of the west (the Irish) – and are eventually tracked down by Ingólfr, who wipes them out. Their leader gives his name to the place at which he meets his death – Dufþakskör – and the place at which the slaves jumped over a cliff is also named after them. In other words, placenames which might seem to indicate Irish presence are explained not as Irish settlements, but as commemorating how this Irish element was decisively erased. This is the Icelandic account of the settlement of Iceland: Norwegian ancestry, untainted by any Celtic admixture, and sympathetic acceptance of the pagan culture which went with it. Incidentally, this picture of pure Norwegian ancestry has been undermined by modern genetic research, which indicates a strong Celtic element in the

Icelandic gene pool. The earliest Icelandic accounts of the settlement are not reliable as history.

What we learn of the settlement of Iceland from later native sources may be unreliable on two counts: the history may be at best selective, at worst deliberately distorted; or the narrative may be framed in a way which makes modern readers suppose it to be history even though it may be fiction. When we come to look at the Icelandic family sagas, which take as their subject the lives of the families of these settlers, similar blurring of historical fact and naturalistic fiction, compounded by the saga authors' adherence to a style more historical than fictional, means that the picture we have of early Icelandic society may be authentic, invented, or somewhere between the two. For our purposes, more significant than the rather partial information early Icelandic historical sources can offer is the narrative form they take: poised between history and fiction, they are strongly told stories with vivid characters and dramatic events, yet with one foot firmly in a real historical world. These histories herald the family sagas.

The Saga

What Is a Saga?

Even readers who know very little of Old Norse-Icelandic literature will mostly have heard of the Icelandic sagas, but far fewer have a clear idea of what actually constitutes a saga. The Icelandic word *saga* is related to the Old Norse verb *segja*, ‘to say’: this may indicate something about the origins of saga literature in that early period of Iceland’s history before texts were written down, but very little about the form of what is told. *Saga* is comparable with the English word ‘story’, which can similarly be used to designate a wide variety of writing. The term *saga* does not even distinguish between a fictional narrative and an historical account. There are thus many kinds of saga in Icelandic literary tradition, but the most celebrated is the so-called ‘family saga’ – the *Íslendingasaga*, or saga of Icelanders.

The family sagas constitute a literary genre unique to Iceland, and the major part of this chapter will be devoted to describing and defining them. But in Icelandic tradition, several more familiar medieval genres are also called sagas: saints’ lives (such as *Maríu saga*, for instance, or *Andreas saga*, lives of the Blessed Virgin and St Andrew); clerical biographies (the so-called *Byskupa sögur*, or lives of the bishops); translations of *chansons de geste* or French romances (*Karlamagnús saga*, the story of Charlemagne, or *Tristráms saga ok Ísöndar*, the romance of Tristan and Isolde); historical biographies of Scandinavian kings (*Sverris saga*, the life of King Sverrir of Norway, amongst many others, or *Knytlinga saga*, a history of the kings of Denmark, named after their progenitor Knútr); or legendary heroic

sagas (the so-called *fornaldarsögur*, stories about olden times). There is one common denominator: sagas, fictional or historical, fantastical or naturalistic, native or translated, religious or secular, are all continuous prose narratives about the past. Within this huge variety, I want to concentrate on sagas which are native, secular and naturalistic: the family sagas or *Íslendingasögur*.

The past in which the family sagas are set – the *söguöld*, or saga time – is the period leading up to the settlement of Iceland in AD 870 on until the first few decades after Christianity, around 1030. During this brief period, Iceland established itself as a nation, and its settlers set up a strong and workable parliamentary and legal system. Iceland functioned as an imperfect but extraordinarily precocious democracy, with elected judges and legislators. Much power in this society was still in the hands of hereditary chieftains, or *goðar*, but there were no kings, and the great power struggles with the church were still centuries in the future. Essentially, Iceland was a scattered but cohesive community of independent farming settlers, pioneers fighting for survival in the face of a harsh climate and a recalcitrant landscape. These two contrasting contexts – a sophisticated political and intellectual milieu together with a very basic fight for physical survival – form the backdrop to the events of the family sagas.

Family sagas were first written down in manuscript form in the thirteenth century. The authors and audience of family sagas can only be conjectured. The preferred image of medieval Iceland is of a highly literate and relatively unified society. None the less, it is likely that saga authors were clerics (and of course male), and that sagas were perhaps commissioned by the leaders of powerful families. The first sagas may have been orally composed, but it's hard to imagine that extemporization could sustain the complexity and subtlety of the existing family sagas; more probably they would have been read from manuscripts. But their audience may well have been very mixed, in terms of status, learning and age. Saga authors relate in a naturalistic, even matter-of-fact way, the day-to-day life of these ninth-, tenth- and eleventh-century Icelanders. Much of the substance of the sagas is an exploration of personal and social relations – of how neighbours form alliances or foster lethal feuds; of how families develop into invincible kin groups through the generations, or fragment under the pressures of life in Iceland. As one might expect, disputes both between and within families arise over land, livestock or vital food

stores. The quality of relationships between individuals naturally plays a vital part in this larger network. The stability which results from strong, loyal, loving marriages, filial or sibling bonds, or firm friendships is set against the disastrous – if dramatic – effects of the violence which so often ensues from their opposites: betrayal, rivalry, hatred and deceit. The law figures largely in such conflicts; sometimes the violence precipitates legal action, but the law itself might also decree – or at least condone – violent revenge as a fit penalty. The legal process – conducted at the *Alþing*, or national parliament, which was held annually at Þingvellir (the assembly plains) – might not contain the spread of violence, but rather, advance it. But, perhaps unexpectedly for the modern reader, what is celebrated in the sagas is not the triumph of the physically strong, but the intellectual ability and goodwill of those who strive to maintain social order.

Are Family Sagas Medieval Novels?

Given that family sagas are secular, naturalistic prose narratives dealing with individuals and society, the literary genre which they most closely resemble is the novel, especially the novel in its most traditional form. A modern reader coming to family saga literature for the first time will be struck by the similarity even before he or she starts reading, because editions of modern translations of individual family sagas even look and feel like novels, or collections of novellas. Contemporary readers may well feel uncomplicated empathy with the actions and situations of saga characters, as if their values and morals are part of a shared understanding which can transcend historical context. With only the most perfunctory nod to the special circumstances of life in medieval Iceland, the apparently universal humanity of these characters can seem directly accessible to us; we can sympathize with their predicaments, admire their virtues and deplore their failings. But the characters and events in sagas are shaped by a culture more different from our own than we may suspect, or can easily allow for, and their distinctive, even unique, manner of storytelling tends to obscure these radical differences. We need to learn to read family sagas. Two examples will illustrate this: the story of a successful marriage, and that of an unsuccessful one, both apparently immediately transparent in terms of a modern reader's engagement

with what's happening, but the second in fact much stranger and harder to gauge than a novelistic surface might lead us to expect.

In *Gísli saga*, the hero, Gísli, is on the run from his enemies. Unable to stay at home, he builds himself a farmhouse in a remote fjord. His wife Auðr would rather share his outlawry than be parted from him, and he would rather stay with her from time to time and risk being found by his enemies than be parted from her: he has an underground hideout made at their farm. One day, his enemies, led by a man called Eyjólfur, call on Auðr, and offer her a deal: they will pay her a great deal of money if she will betray Gísli's whereabouts. Eyjólfur vividly describes to Auðr the misery of her present situation, separated from friends and family, exiled in an isolated farmhouse. He even promises to arrange a better marriage for her, once he has killed Gísli – and he assures Auðr that they will take care that she will not actually see the killing. Auðr listens, and concedes that money can be a consolation to the bereaved. She asks to see the silver. As Eyjólfur begins to count it out, Auðr's foster-daughter panics, and runs out of the farmhouse to warn Gísli that Auðr is about to betray him.

Gísli is completely unmoved by the girl's story. He is confident that Auðr will never betray him. But when the girl returns to the farmhouse, Auðr is weighing up the three hundred pieces of silver in a large bag. Having checked with Eyjólfur that she can do as she likes with the money, she suddenly swings the heavy bag into his face, and blood spurts from his nose. He is humiliated, and Gísli's trust is vindicated.

It is impossible not to respond instinctively to this scene as it unfolds: Eyjólfur's ruthless nastiness, the apparent possibility of a *volte face* by Auðr – especially when she hears the description of her own miserable situation – the girl's panic, and the double meaning of Auðr's establishing that she can do whatever she wants with the money. We may feel that with only trivial allowances made for cultural and historical difference, the morality of the events and the sympathy or otherwise due to the characters is self-evident and transhistorically accessible. In fact, naturalistic as Auðr's loyalty may seem, it may be interpreted as part of a highly literary pattern governing the whole saga. Gísli is a medieval Icelander whose tragedy is that he lives according to the imperatives of a heroic society which by this time exists only in older Germanic literature. Gísli's sister is married to the brother of a man murdered by Gísli, and she betrays Gísli's

guilt to her husband. In doing this, she directs her loyalty very clearly to her husband's family. Gísli deplores her disloyalty to himself, and compares her bitterly and unfavourably to women in heroic legend who, caught between natal and marital bonds, defend their brothers. It is ironic, then, that Gísli himself should benefit from the unconditional loyalty of a marital relationship, whilst lamenting the unreliability of a sibling one. Gísli's own difficult relationship with his brother – brotherhood being one of the strongest bonds in the old heroic literature – constitutes a tense and dramatic faultline throughout the whole saga. Thus, an Icelandic audience well versed in traditional poetry and heroic legend would see the relationship between Gísli and Auðr in the context of changing patterns of loyalty in literature and society. Nevertheless, in its essentials, the scene between Auðr and Eyjólfur is almost archetypal: we can imagine it being replayed in any literary or dramatic context, in any place or time, in which loyalty is tested, seems to teeter on the brink, and emerges triumphant.

In *Njáls saga*, however, the case of an unsuccessful marriage is much harder to read. An Icelander called Höskuldr suggests to his brother Hrútr that he should think about marriage, and proposes Unnr, the very eligible daughter of a prominent lawyer in the district. The brothers negotiate a marriage settlement with Unnr's father, and all three men agree that the wedding shall take place in three years' time, to give Hrútr the opportunity to travel to Norway to claim an inheritance. In due course, the wedding feast is held, but the bride does not seem to be happy. The saga narrative delicately alludes to the fact that the relationship of the bride and groom is a little cool. The next spring, Unnr asks her husband if she may accompany him to the annual assembly, to see her father. Hrútr agrees, and rides with her. Alone with her father, Unnr cries, and tells him she wishes she had never married Hrútr. Her anxious father at once fetches Hrútr and his brother, and questions them on how Unnr is being treated. Hrútr invites Unnr to make a complaint about him, if she wishes, but no complaint is made. Unnr's father impatiently notes that all the evidence (he is a lawyer, after all) suggests that she is being well treated, and he sends her home. But the following year, Unnr plucks up courage, and tells her father Mörrðr that she and Hrútr have a sexual problem: their marriage has never been properly consummated. Mörrðr at once works out a way for her to divorce Hrútr.

It seems natural to feel sympathy for Unnr here. Depending on our own cultural circumstances, an immediate response may be to deplore a marriage agreement which is made quite without reference to the bride herself, and ascribe her lack of enthusiasm at the marriage feast to her powerlessness. But most readers will recognize that this would be to impose contemporary norms on a medieval narrative. Much more directly affecting is Unnr's embarrassment at having to discuss such an intimate matter with her father – but since he was responsible for arranging the marriage, it is to him that Unnr must turn – and how overfacing she finds the challenge from her husband and father to specify just what it is she has to complain about. The dynamic of gender relations seems remarkably familiar here. And how enlightened, we may feel, that Unnr's father at once recognizes that an arranged marriage, however outwardly successful, is a hopeless project if the partners are not sexually compatible.

But a closer examination of this story, and especially with regard to the way it is presented by the saga author, reveals that it's all much stranger, and richer, than it seems. Hrútr, the man who can't consummate his marriage, is presented as an admirable and honourable figure. As is customary in saga narrative, he is introduced along with a brief sketch of his qualities and status: he's good-looking, even-tempered, reliable and shrewd. This information is presented not as the personal assessment of the saga author himself, who characteristically does not pass comment on his characters or events as the authoritative narrator in a nineteenth-century novel tends to. Rather, the information assumes a sort of public status; it's not the uniquely privileged opinion of an omniscient author, but an uncontroversial consensus. And Hrútr's personal qualities are confirmed by being openly revealed in his actions. When his brother Höskuldr shows off his pretty young daughter, Hrútr cannot help but notice – and point out – that she has a dishonest look to her (an insight amply fulfilled later on in the saga, as one might expect). Perhaps more appealingly, when Höskuldr describes his brother's good qualities (and what the Victorian novelist would describe as his 'prospects') during the betrothal negotiations with Unnr's father, Hrútr modestly and gently warns Mörrör that his brother is overstating the case on account of brotherly love. The reader is thus predisposed to see Hrútr as an admirable and sympathetic figure.

When Hrútr travels to Norway, to lay claim to an inheritance, he attracts the attention of the king's mother, Queen Gunnhildr, who commands him to sleep with her. While Hrútr does not initiate this arrangement – which continues all year – nevertheless, he does not protest. The saga author's habitual refusal to speculate on his characters' inner life – how they feel about a particular situation, as opposed to what they say or do about it – contributes greatly to the wry humour of the story. But it also prevents the reader from forming a moral judgement about Hrútr's behaviour; it is left to us to decide whether he enjoys his relationship with the queen. When Hrútr begins to get homesick for Iceland – at least, that's what he tells Gunnhildr; is he rather tiring of her, and longing for marriage with the eligible Unnr? – the queen charges him with having a woman in Iceland. Hrútr flatly denies this – why, exactly? – but Gunnhildr does not believe him. She puts a spell on him, that he will never enjoy sexually the woman he has set his heart on in Iceland, even though he will experience no such problems with any other woman.

This, then, is the context in which we must place the unconsummated marriage. In the midst of a story about marriage negotiations in Iceland, and a business trip to Norway, we are suddenly confronted with an element which, disturbingly, seems to belong more to the world of fairytale: a wicked queen jealously casts a spell. Family sagas are full of such switches from naturalism to the supernatural. We can read this as an aspect of the belief system of medieval Icelanders, something we as modern readers must simply make allowance for, or we can compare it with so-called magic realism. But it's striking how often in the family sagas an apparently supernatural event motivates some circumstance for which we would find it easy to provide another explanation. Gunnhildr's curse is a case in point: I suspect that a contemporary psychotherapist might attribute Hrútr's sexual dysfunction to a natural response to guilt about his relationship with the queen mother. In *Grettis saga*, an old woman acting on behalf of the hero's, Grettir's, enemies, also casts a spell: this time she carves the spell in runes on a log of wood, and smears the runes with blood. The log is washed up on the otherwise impregnable island on which Grettir is hiding out, and when he attempts to chop the log into firewood with his axe, the blade slips and cuts his leg, which then becomes infected. Disabled, Grettir becomes a more manageable

prey for his pursuers; the log which is instrumental in his downfall is both cursed – supernaturally – and yet also poisoned in a perfectly plausible way.

While we are told that Unnr did not look happy during the wedding feast, we are not told why this might be, since the saga author characteristically does not speculate on what motivates his characters, or more generally, on what they may be thinking on any particular occasion. There are a number of possibilities, of course, and the lack of authorial guidance positively invites speculation. Perhaps Unnr is unhappy about having a marriage – even to a husband as eligible as Hrútr – imposed upon her. That this cannot be easily dismissed as no more than an anachronistic response on our part is to some extent supported by another storyline in *Njáls saga* – that of Hrútr's dishonest-looking niece Hallgerðr, who is furious when her father Höskuldr arranges a marriage for her without consulting her. On the other hand, Hallgerðr is negatively characterized from the beginning in *Njáls saga*, especially as a young woman notorious for insisting on having her own way. What we lack here – and this is especially evident in the absence of the narrator's guiding voice – is any sense of societal norms against which we can measure Unnr's behaviour. Because the characters seem so natural, so believable, and so familiar as psychological types, it is deceptively easy to interpret their actions according to our own unexamined standards. Even if we remind ourselves that different cultural norms apply, it's hard to know what those norms actually were. Almost the only evidence of how society operated in saga age Iceland is the sagas themselves. The first large histories of Iceland use the evidence of the sagas quite uncritically as socio-historical source material. But distinguishing fact from fiction in family sagas is an almost impossibly difficult task – as we shall see later on in this chapter. One recourse is to compare behaviours and responses as depicted elsewhere in the literature itself – as, for instance, comparing Unnr's response to an arranged marriage with Hallgerðr's. Though this is for obvious reasons an uncertain and delicate business, we can at least work with the notion 'saga society' – a society minutely and apparently naturalistically depicted in the sagas themselves – which allows us to defer the question of whether this society is historically actual, and authentically portrayed. An important reason why such a procedure can work well is that the picture of society evident from the family sagas – a body of almost fifty texts – is remarkably

consistent. It is, in fact, as consistent as if saga authors *were* describing an actual historical society.

To return to Unnr: it seems that if we could only know more about wedding and betrothal customs – whether as depicted in the saga literature, or in Icelandic actuality – we might be able to get to the bottom of her low spirits. For example, in some peasant cultures, the wedding feast itself takes place after the consummation of the marriage – if this were the case in Iceland, then Unnr would by this time have discovered the problem which undermines their marriage. But to my knowledge, no such evidence exists. This does not mean that such practices did not occur, or that they were not a feature of ‘saga society’ (a text in which they might have been depicted may not have survived). But whatever the actual or textual truth of the matter, modern readers will feel in a disadvantaged position to interpret what is going on. In this interpretative vacuum, other possibilities present themselves. Perhaps Unnr has heard gossip about Hrútr’s adventures in Norway. With regard to novels and plays, of course, such speculation would be ruled invalid, like the celebrated mistake of pondering how many children Lady Macbeth had. But it is also possible that the saga author is not really telling us anything at all about Unnr’s disposition, but is simply signalling to his reader or audience that things are not right. As it turns out, Unnr had reason to be sad, whether or not she knew it at the time; absence of a specific explanation does not make her sadness implausible.

In this extended analysis of one minor storyline in *Njáls saga*, we have already touched on a number of features of saga narrative which highlight the necessity of recognizing the alterity, or ‘otherness’, of this kind of literature. There remain yet more aspects of the story of Hrútr and Unnr to take account of.

The saga author has not presumed to know or tell what Unnr’s private feelings about her relationship with Hrútr were, and he has certainly not presumed to air their personal or sexual relations beyond noting what would have been evident to the whole household – that they were a little cool with each other. But when Unnr confides in her father, quite privately – the saga narrative tells us that the two of them went off to somewhere no one might overhear them – then the saga author does assume a fly-on-the-wall omniscience, and reports what Unnr says. We should note that elsewhere, the saga author takes advantage of his non-omniscient stance and purports

to be unable to record private conversations: this enables him to increase narrative tension by withholding from his audience advance knowledge of some plan which his characters are hatching. A good example occurs in *Eyrbyggja saga*. One neighbour approaches another for advice on how to deal with a pair of Swedish berserks (as they are described in the saga prose: we may simply naturalize them into frighteningly thuggish foreign farm workers, liable to uncontrollable violence). The two neighbours take themselves off to a place where they can't be overheard, and the saga author leaves them there to discuss what to do next. We as readers only learn what plan they have worked out when that plan is put into action, dramatically, and successfully.

Without full access to the exchange between Unnr and Mörðr, we as readers might assume that Hrútr could not consummate his marriage because of impotence. But as we learn from the saga author's intrusive reportage, this is very far from being the case. As Unnr eventually brings herself to tell her father, when she and her husband try to have sex, Hrútr's penis becomes so large that penetration is impossible. Gunnhildr's curse has an effect which, far from diminishing Hrútr's manhood, almost farcically amplifies it.

As with Gunnhildr's original curse, a range of readerly responses is possible here. One might suspect the operation of some kind of crude humour, for example. Humour is notoriously culture-specific: it is an area in which a reader's personal judgement will depend even more than usual on his or her own time and place. And as we have seen, saga authors tend not to intervene with any guidance on interpretation. But there may be other clues in the narrative, if only we knew how to interpret them. Is it simply coincidence, for instance, that Hrútr's name means 'ram' in Icelandic?

Another approach to the effect of Gunnhildr's curse is to set Hrútr's affliction in the context of attitudes towards sexuality in 'saga society'. One of the least attractive aspects of social mores in family sagas is the contempt accorded to men whose manliness – either social or sexual – is questioned. Accusations of cowardice, for example, might be framed as insults about effeminacy. To be branded as the passive partner in a homosexual relationship was deeply shameful, and even legally entitled the victim to kill in revenge whoever perpetrated the slander. Such slander is referred to as *níð*, and both Icelandic and Norwegian law books attest to the seriousness of the offence given

and taken. The insult might be verbal, but there are accounts in family sagas of the setting up of what is called a *níðstöng*, literally an ‘insult pole’, which consisted of a crude wooden representation of two men, one standing close behind the other, as a publicly displayed visual insult about the alleged effeminacy of the passive partner. But the law codes from medieval Iceland and Norway do not offer us the non-fictional perspective on society we so often feel the lack of in reading family sagas. Historians have always recognized that laws tend by their very nature and function to be unrepresentative of societies: they treat what is transgressive of and marginal to the norms of society – though one can to some extent make allowance for this in using them as evidence. However, the chief Icelandic legal codex – *Grágás*, or ‘Grey Goose’, named for the colour of the manuscript’s binding – presents other difficulties. It seems to be a compilation of laws – sometimes contradictory ones – from different periods in Icelandic history, more an antiquarian anthology than a workable reference book. It is hard to tell whether saga and law independently depict an actual society, or whether a saga author himself has used law codes for some authentic detail, as an historical novelist might.

To return to Unnr and Hrútr: to suppose that their marriage was not consummated because Hrútr was impotent would have been to situate Hrútr in a category generally despised in saga narrative: that of the ‘unmanly man’. His bizarre sexual problem might not be a crude, macho joke, but a way of explaining the failure of the marriage without consigning Hrútr to the realm of the mocked and pitied. But there is a further twist to the story. Some version of Hrútr and Unnr’s marital problems has clearly leaked out. Visiting his brother’s farm on one occasion, Hrútr overhears some children playing at being himself and Mördör. One child suggests that he ‘be’ Mördör, who sued for divorce on his daughter’s behalf, and his playmate takes on the role of Hrútr, ‘who wasn’t able to have sex with his wife’. In his fury and embarrassment – and we might remember at this moment that the marriage was all his idea in the first place – Höskuldr, Hrútr’s brother, lashes out at the child. But Hrútr gives the child a gold ring, and is praised for his manliness – ironically, in his response to a game which with careless cruelty acted out what everyone must have thought was his lack of it. The child tells Hrútr that he will always remember what Hrútr has done, and this is of course realized by the narrative itself.

The aftermath of this story of a failed marriage is curious. Mörrðr, as I have noted, does not hesitate once Unnr has brought herself to tell him exactly what is wrong. He at once devises a plan for her divorce. This is not a straightforward matter, because as we have seen, Unnr has nothing she can complain about in her husband's public treatment of her. From instances elsewhere in the family sagas, it seems that women did have certain grounds for initiating divorce – a further irony is that a husband's effeminacy was one of them. In *Laxdæla saga*, for instance, the resourceful but ruthless heroine Guðrún engineers a divorce from a husband foisted on her by male relatives by tricking him into wearing a shirt cut like a woman's blouse. However, the implication of *Njáls saga* is that Unnr must not only observe a series of legal niceties, but also keep what she is doing secret from Hrútr, presumably because he would try to prevent her from leaving him. Her father Mörrðr – the lawyer – outlines a careful and ingenious plan.

Unnr is to behave affectionately to Hrútr, and thus lull him into a false sense of security. In spring, when he is scheduled to make a trip away from home, Unnr must take to her bed, pretending to be ill. Mörrðr predicts that Hrútr will be all solicitude, and will make no awkward inquiries into what is the matter with her (is it at all possible that Mörrðr expects Hrútr to suppose that his wife may be pregnant?). Once Hrútr has left, Unnr must name witnesses and declare her divorce from Hrútr in two locations: by their marital bed, and by the main door of their farmhouse. She must then escape – taking an unpredictable route – to her father's house.

The procedure set out in the saga narrative may actually represent an authentic pre-Christian divorce ritual, and it was perhaps open to women as well as men. But the clear implication of the story is that Unnr must plan a secret escape, and could not make an open declaration. On the other hand, it is hard not to feel that Hrútr is being taken advantage of: especially uncomfortable is the plan that Unnr should act the compliant (and satisfied?) wife, and use the pretended illness to play on Hrútr's kindness and good nature. When Hrútr finds out that his wife has left him, he behaves with dignity. Faced with Mörrðr's legal claim for the return of the dowry (plus the money Hrútr himself had contributed to the deal), Hrútr accuses Mörrðr of greed, and challenges him to fight a duel for the return of the money. Mörrðr refuses the challenge, and is mocked by everyone at the assembly. Although

the saga narrative now turns to other matters, the dowry dispute, and the bitterness between Hrútr and Mördör, remain unresolved, to emerge a little later as the root of one of the major conflicts in the whole saga.

It may seem odd that Unnr fades out of the narrative; intuitively, we expect to follow characters through the saga, while instead it's the progress of events – the legacy of the failed marriage and the dowry dispute – which drives the onward narrative. Any judgement we may come to about the rights and wrongs of the marriage – and it is appealing to imagine some original audience eagerly debating the situation – is thus of little use to us as we read on in the saga. We are not required to build up a picture of Unnr's character which will enable us to judge – or predict – subsequent events, because Unnr does not figure in them. The rights and wrongs of her behaviour do not carry over into any assessment we might want to make about the progress of the dowry quarrel, which involves new opponents for Mördör, and leaves the circumstances of the marriage failure far behind. The impression, characteristic of the family sagas as a whole, is that the narrative is event-driven rather than character-driven; that characters, however vividly portrayed, enter the narrative and leave it as the occasion demands. They, like us as readers, are caught up in the complex onward sweep of events, but they drop out as events move on and new figures take their place. It is almost as if the author is not himself the controller of these events, but that they have – or had – a life of their own. It is as if, in fact, the author were recording what happened. Hrútr reappears sporadically in the continuing narrative, not because he is the subject of it, but because he is involved, with his brother Höskuldr, in the negotiations over the marriage of Höskuldr's daughter. Hrútr's role is that of a wise and respected authority, a man of powerful integrity; for him, the debacle over the marriage to Unnr is over, though as I have said, the dowry remains unpaid.

It is high time to draw together some of the issues raised by this extended analysis of one small storyline in *Njáls saga*. Saga characters are depicted as strongly believable, naturalistic creations, whose situations may seem familiar and sympathetic even to modern readers. This may encourage us to approach sagas as if they were medieval novels. But this is simply misleading. The most striking difference is that the whole apparatus of what Wayne C. Booth called 'the rhetoric

of fiction’ – all those ways in which the novelist tells his or her reader more than simply ‘what happened’ – is almost completely lacking. As Booth points out, we may no longer expect to be directly addressed by an author – the ‘dear Reader’ trope – or to be engaged by him or her in a mock dialogue about our opinions of what has been related as story. But we may still, consciously or unconsciously, expect the author to insert his or her opinions about what is going on into the narrative prose, to describe the unspoken thoughts and feelings of the characters, and to help the reader to evaluate both character and event. In saga narrative, focalization – the way events are presented from the viewpoint of one or more of the characters in the narrative – is typically wholly external, that is, events are seen from the perspective of a narrator who stands outside the world of the narrative.

The virtual absence of the rhetoric of fiction means that we as readers must work at interpreting characters’ behaviours for ourselves, but we have only the evidence of other sagas, and the equivocal information we can glean from surviving law codes, with which to build up a picture of society against which we can measure what is happening. On the positive side, we can very often infer from the bare details in the narrative a rich and coherent subtext to events – as, for example, when we remind ourselves that Höskuldr has particular reason to be infuriated by the children playing at the marriage between Unnr and Hrútr, since it was he who suggested the whole thing, or that Unnr’s father Mörðr, in inviting Hrútr and Höskuldr to testify about Unnr, and Unnr to state her case against them, is behaving like the professional lawyer he is. W. P. Ker, one of the earliest saga critics, summed up this characteristic of saga psychology with an illuminating metaphor based on the face of a clock:

The brevity and externality of the saga method might easily provoke from admirers of Richardson a condemnation like that of Dr. Johnson on those who know the dial plate only, and not the works. The psychology of the sagas, however, brief and superficial as it may be, is yet of the sort that may be tested; the dials keep time, although the works are not exposed.¹

Nevertheless, we may also have an uneasy feeling that judging the behaviour of the characters is not precisely what is being required of us: events move on, and there is little sense that characters are built

on and developed in any systematic psychological way which would invite moral assessment – indeed, it would be hard to see how this might happen, given that we so rarely find out what they are thinking. The fundamentally moral imperatives of the novel are perhaps not in question at all here. Should we, in fact, be reading the sagas not as a variety of fiction at all, but as a variety of history?

Are Family Sagas Chronicles of Time Past?

The simplest and most obvious way of determining whether any given narrative is history or fiction is to pose the question, ‘Is it true? Did these things really happen?’ But we can only rarely check the sagas against any other source. In part because it seemed so unlikely that medieval fiction should operate in such a naturalistic mode as the family sagas do, and in part because the authors of family sagas adopt a mode of presenting their material so much like a non-fictional chronicle, scholars and critics traditionally treated them as reliable historical sources, until doubts about their veracity set in, and the pendulum swung the other way, so that sagas were deemed completely useless as historical sources. Once this swing took place, another way of distinguishing fictionality and historicity became apparent: to try to identify fictionality – not just by default, that is, consigning what cannot be true to the category of fiction, but, more subtly, by recognizing the fictionality of what might nevertheless plausibly have happened – a plausibility which may actually be part of the author’s inventive skills.

Hrafnkels saga, the story of the priest-chieftain Hrafnkell Hallfreðarson, who killed his neighbour’s son when he disobeyed a prohibition not to ride a stallion which had been dedicated by Hrafnkell to the god Freyr, is one example of a saga whose historicity was first challenged, in the middle of the twentieth century, on the grounds that it did not match up with such facts as are known about its main characters. Unlike most other family sagas, *Hrafnkels saga* has only one main storyline: the chieftain is unexpectedly toppled from power by the socially insignificant father of the murdered boy when Hrafnkell is prosecuted by law for the killing. But exiled from the district, his farm and most of his goods confiscated, Hrafnkell buckles down and rebuilds his standing and authority in a neighbouring area. Re-established

as a chieftain even more powerful than before, he takes unexpected revenge and reclaims what he has lost, thus doubling his assets, and leaving, at his death, two great estates for his two sons to manage and govern. (See the appendix for a translation of the whole of this saga.)

There is evidently nothing in this broad outline which could not have happened in an actual historical world. The saga author flirts with the supernatural: the murdered boy, Einarr, rides the forbidden horse in an attempt to round up some of Hrafnkell's sheep which have gone missing, and though he is fully aware of the taboo on the horse, he finds that all the horses at his disposal unprecedentedly shy away from him, while Freyfaxi, the stallion, stands stock still, almost inviting the transgression. And having been ridden, Freyfaxi bolts off down to Hrafnkell's farmhouse, and neighs loudly outside, as if to betray Einarr himself. However, such events as these might easily have occurred in the real world; they are precisely the kind of occurrences which, when we encounter them today, lead us, half-seriously, to talk about fate, or guardian angels. They are not inexplicable without the supernatural gloss.

But we must turn from plausibility to historicity: not '*might* the events of the saga have happened?' but '*did* they?' There are two kinds of written sources we can set against *Hrafnkels saga* in an attempt to measure its historicity. First, there are other family sagas. This might seem to be a hopelessly circular undertaking, but in fact one of the remarkable features of the family sagas is that the most important and powerful families depicted in them, and their location, remain more or less consistent throughout the texts: there seems to be a sort of unspoken consensus about the make-up of Icelandic society in the saga age, which corresponds closely to the consistency I referred to earlier in the presentation of how that society operated. It is as if the main characters in a Dickens novel were to appear as extras in Thackeray or Trollope. This naturally gives the impression of an actual population, and that the family sagas are indeed based on reliable and authentic traditions which derive, eventually, from those very people and their descendants. Of course an equally probable explanation is that the authors of family sagas all turned to the same sources for the bases of their narratives, like historical novelists researching the past in the pursuit of authenticity. In medieval Iceland, the obvious recourse would be the compilation known as *Landnámabók*,

the book of land settlements, which sets out apparently historical information about the first settlers in Iceland, which families they belonged to, and where their settlements were. As we saw in chapter 1, there are stories in *Landnámabók* which cannot be taken completely literally. But because the work as a whole does not impose a coherent or continuous narrative structure on the material, *Landnámabók* has usually been accepted as a valuable historical resource.

In *Landnámabók*, we hear of a settler called Hrafnkell Hrafnsson, who established himself in the east of Iceland. A brief story is told about him: he misses a landslide by the skin of his teeth when he rests briefly in Skríðudalr (landslide valley) on his trek inland to set up his new farm, and is warned by a dream to wake up and move. In his haste to escape the rockfall, he leaves behind some of his livestock, and they're buried beneath it. This seems to me to be just the kind of story, its roots in plausible actuality, which might be preserved in a collection of historical traditions like *Landnámabók*. But *Hrafnkels saga* tells a different story: the original settler is Hrafnkell's father, Hallfreðr, and the landslide buries a farmstead he has built for his first overwintering in Iceland. In his dream, he is not so much warned to escape a landslide as advised that he will prosper better if he establishes a farm elsewhere. And the animals he leaves behind (though since he doesn't leave in any rush, it's hard to understand why they were left at all) are different: two goats, rather than a boar and a bull.

These differences can be explained in two ways: either the author of the saga had only a vague and imperfect memory of the *Landnámabók* story, or was even recalling another version of the same basic tradition; or else he deliberately altered the story for his own purposes. The first possibility suggests that the tradition was authentic, and that the saga author was reproducing it. The second would reveal an author of historical fiction at work, adapting his sources.

Another small difference is the name of the original settler's farm: in *Landnámabók*, it's Steinrøðarstaðir; in *Hrafnkels saga*, Hallfreðarstaðir. This is not the insignificant difference it might appear. The element *staðir*, 'steads', refers to the farm building; the rest of the name is the personal name of the farmer to whom it belongs. In *Landnámabók*, we do not know who Steinrøðr was, or why Hrafnkell settled in a farm which was already named after someone. In *Hrafnkels saga* the first settler starts afresh – there was no one there before him – and his

move there was guided by what we may identify as a *genius loci*, a spirit of the land, Iceland, who favoured Hallfreðr's settlement in the same way as his son Hrafnkell seems to have the spirits of the land on his side when, exiled from his first estate, he prospers in his resettlement, helped by mild weather and unusually prolific fishing. The author of the saga has developed a story of favoured and prosperous settlement.

Hrafnkels saga consists very largely of conversation, which is highly likely to be authorial invention. But dialogue, even if inauthentic, doesn't call into question the overall historicity of events. Even the rhetoric of fiction can be part of the lively presentation of history. And interestingly, in this saga we do have two instances of the highly unusual practice of the saga author presuming to tell his audience what his characters were thinking. In both instances, what we are told subtly but firmly informs our responses to each character's behaviour. Einarr, faced with missing sheep and a herd of shy horses, has to make the decision whether or not to disobey the order not to ride Freyfaxi. We are told that Einarr rode the stallion in the belief that Hrafnkell wouldn't find out about it. The saga author, free to invent any motivation he pleased, could have credited Einarr with a much more exculpatory motive: that he thought that Hrafnkell would rather have had his sheep found, even if it meant the horse being ridden, for instance. Einarr would then have been the victim of an innocent misjudgement on his part. But it seems that the saga author did not want to present Einarr as an innocent victim. Hrafnkell, in his turn, kills Einarr in the belief, as the saga author tells us, that he ought to abide by the solemn oath he has sworn. The saga author, free to invent, might have credited Hrafnkell with some regret about killing Einarr – or even some sadistic pleasure in the punishment. But instead, we learn that Hrafnkell feels that he has no choice. In both cases, the motivation ascribed to the characters serves to prevent the reader from either sympathizing fully with Einarr, or fully deploring or condoning Hrafnkell's violence. The saga author's intervention actually confuses the balance of our moral sympathies, just as we found it difficult to take the side of either Unnr or Hrútr in *Njáls saga*. We are distanced from both characters, rather than invited to identify with one or other of them.

Even such authorial inventions as these do not compromise the historicity of the whole text: the real challenge to the saga's authenticity

as a record of tenth-century events comes with an examination of the identity of the great men from the north-west of Iceland who help Hrafnkell's opponents to take him on. And much of what happens in *Hrafnkels saga* is actually incompatible with the information which *Landnámabók* sets down. Hrafnkell is accused of murder by the cousin of the boy he killed. This man, Sámr, is a skilled lawyer, and seems to have a good case. But he needs the backing of powerful chieftains if his prosecution is to be successful; the saga author is neither naive nor sentimental about the relationship between might and right in saga society. However, everyone knows that Hrafnkell is a formidable opponent, and has always routed any opposition. Just as Sámr is about to give up – the archetypal narrative moment, by the way – help comes to him in the form of two powerful men from the remote and distant western fjords of Iceland. We are given much convincing-sounding detail about these men, their family connections and background. Their brother, for example, is said to be related by marriage to the celebrated poet Egill Skalla-Grímsson, the hero of *Egils saga*. But though he is briefly mentioned in *Landnámabók*, there is no mention of him in *Egils saga*, in which the woman in question is said to be married to someone else entirely. And while in *Landnámabók* there is plenty of information about the great men of the west of Iceland, there is simply no space, either textual or geographical, for the other brothers. Here is the historical novelist at work, attaching to a figure for whom there is (very slight) historical evidence a series of fictional connections, and hence, events. Taking all these points – and a number of others – together, as Sigurður Nordal did in his pioneering study of the fictionality of *Hrafnkels saga*, it begins to seem merely perverse to insist on the saga's historicity. The saga now appears to us as historical in form, or mode, but as fictional in substance. Paradoxically, the appearance it gives of historicity is part of its literary aesthetic.

If we can feel confident that the events which form the basis of the narrative of *Hrafnkels saga* are likely to be fictional, it becomes easier to separate out the historical mode from the fictional substance. We may notice that the saga, in common with many others, begins in a factually 'top-heavy' way with a genealogy. As it happens, this genealogy is consistent with what we learn from other, more reliably historical, Old Norse-Icelandic texts. But it records not the ancestry of the saga's leading characters, but the widely accepted genealogy of

the kings of Norway. This serves the historical impression the saga gives in two ways: it dates with patent accuracy the beginning of the saga (it was, we are told, in the days of King Harald the Fine-Haired that Hrafnkell's father emigrated to Iceland), anchoring the events of the saga to real historical time, and it establishes the saga author as an historian, a man who deals in facts, and can tell you things that are true about the ninth century, and even earlier. In similar ways, the care taken by the saga author to give the origins of the many placenames in the saga both anchors the story geographically – many of these names were not only current in the centuries following the settlement, the saga author's own time, but are still current today – and also establishes the author as authority. The derivations of some of the placenames – for instance, Arnþrúðarstaðir, rather implausibly said to have been named after a foreign slave woman who died there the first winter – also serve to insert the story of Hrafnkell into a non-fictional landscape. And finally, the many and detailed references to the topography of eastern Iceland, its valleys, glaciers and rivers still identifiable and bearing much the same names, complete the impression of verifiable historicity. Towards the beginning of the saga, the author tells us that Hrafnkell and his father made frequent visits to each other, but that the most direct route between their two farmsteads was difficult to travel over, being both stony and boggy. Hallfreðr finds a longer but drier way across the moor, and the saga author slyly notes that this is a path which only those who are most knowledgeable about the district know: its inhabitants, and the saga author himself.

What we have in *Hrafnkels saga*, then, is a series of almost certainly fictional events taking place against a backdrop which includes, but is not limited to, real places, landscapes, people and history. The likelihood is that this blend is characteristic of the family sagas as a whole. Just how much of either events or backdrop is fiction is impossible to determine. It may be too that the society presented in family sagas is a non-fictional part of the backdrop, preserved in its essentials by oral tradition and collective memory: the events may not have happened, but if they had, they would have happened in just this way. On the other hand, it may, as some scholars have argued, owe more to the society of those who finally shaped the family sagas in the centuries following the saga age. It's simply not possible to determine how historically authentic it is, but it's internally consistent

to a remarkable degree and, as I have said, has its own integrity as 'saga society', whether it's a textual construct or a long-remembered actuality. In a plausible recreation of a possible world, the author tells his story as if it were something quite separate and distinct from his telling of it, as if it had independence and autonomy, and he were merely its transmitter. Such deference to the integrity of the story is reinforced by the saga author's use of phrases such as 'as the story goes', or 'as it is said', or 'at this point it happened that'.

It always seems more appropriate, when speaking of saga narrative, to refer to the course of events, or simply 'what happened', than to the plot of a saga. There are two main reasons for this. First, what I have described as the primacy of event over character, and the way characters come and go as events dictate, mean that one of the chief functions of plot in the classic literary sense – a means of delivering praise and blame to the characters – is defunct. And second, plot, in the sense of a rearrangement of a sequence of events to achieve some artistic or moral end, is almost entirely lacking in saga narrative. Events in a saga are presented in rigorously naturalistic chronological order. Both of these conditions have the effect of producing a narrative which is more like chronicle than prose fiction.

The absence of plot as a device for delivering praise and blame is very evident in *Hrafnkels saga*. Because the saga is much shorter than most family sagas, and follows only one narrative thread – the career of Hrafnkell himself – it is easier to distinguish true plot from the tremendously rich complexity of a saga such as *Njáls saga*, which has a huge cast of characters and storylines, all intersecting and connecting rather as conventional plotlines do. In *Hrafnkels saga*, the young lawyer Sámr unexpectedly wins a case against Hrafnkell. But although the Icelandic legal system seems to have worked very well, it completely lacked any executive body to put into practice any of the verdicts which were delivered. Thus, if the prosecutor of a case won an award of damages or compensation from his opponent, it was up to him to claim the money, and there was no institutional sanction against the defendant who simply didn't pay up. Perhaps partly for this reason, outlawry was a common penalty: it meant that the aggrieved party could take vengeance on the guilty party by killing him and seizing his property. Sámr has to be persuaded into taking this action by the chieftains from the north who have given him their support: as they point out, his legal victory is meaningless if Hrafnkell

is allowed to carry on with his life as if nothing had happened. But Sámrr simply doesn't have the killer instinct (unlike his powerful and, ultimately, successful opponent). He confiscates Hrafnkell's property and tortures and humiliates him, stringing him up from a washing line. But in the end, against the advice of his patrons, he offers Hrafnkell the choice between exile and execution, and Hrafnkell moves out of the district. The rest of the saga tells how Hrafnkell prospers in his exile, building up a large and powerful estate. When Sámrr's brother returns from a glamorous career abroad, Hrafnkell kills him – instead of taking his revenge on Sámrr directly – and Sámrr, lacking the initiative or the courage to take matters into his own hands, asks the brothers from the north for help again. But they now decline to help him, and Hrafnkell's return to a now redoubled power is complete.

This story completely lacks what we might want to call poetic justice. Sámrr's show of mercy to Hrafnkell not only proves to be his downfall, but also seems to mark him out as a weak character who doesn't deserve further help. Can the 'moral' of the saga really be that Sámrr should have killed Hrafnkell when he had the chance? Hrafnkell, by contrast, does not hesitate to kill a man – Sámrr's brother, against whom he has no grievance at all – as a strategic move: had he killed Sámrr, the impressive brother from abroad might well have proved a more troublesome opponent than Sámrr, who has demonstrated his weakness by showing mercy to Hrafnkell, and forfeited the support of the brothers from the north. They are not interested in the rights and wrongs of the matter; they only see that Sámrr will never be able to assert himself as a ruthless leader, and can see no future in propping him up. Hrafnkell is the winner in the end, with two estates, two chieftainships, and two sons to pass them on to. This narrative lacks any moral gratification for the modern reader. The course of events has rewarded the strong and humiliated the weak, but weakness and strength are figured as mercifulness and ruthlessness, which is a morally uncomfortable equation. The effect is more like history – these things happen – than like a traditional fictional narrative, in which a reader may expect, if not the simplicity of a happy end, then at least the sense of life rearranged to make some moral sense. In fact, the overall shape of saga narratives suggests non-fictional subject matter: *Hrafnkells saga*, beginning with Hrafnkell's father's emigration to Iceland, and ending with Hrafnkell's death, with a brief note about his sons taking over his authority, reads, in its whole structure, like a biography.

The ordering of events in a saga narrative also gives an effect which is more reminiscent of chronicle than of fiction. Narratologists make a simple, primary distinction between the substance of the events related – what the Russian formalists termed *fabula* – and the reordering of them which is, as they saw it, the essence of fictional narrative, to produce *sjuzet*, the storyline, or plot. Of course, narratives differ greatly in the degree to which the order of events is creatively manipulated. The Old English poem *Beowulf*, for example, begins with an account of the early history of the royal house of Denmark, progressing chronologically until the ‘present time’ of the poem, during which stories from various points in the distant past are introduced into the narrative as the recitations of court entertainers, or the reminiscences of the poem’s main characters. This radical reordering of events encourages the poem’s audience to see events and characters related not only causally – ‘this happened and as a result this followed’ – but also typologically: ‘this happened, and we can compare it with something else which happened at a different time in a different place’. Authors of crime fiction – especially classic murder mysteries – conventionally begin with the discovery of a body, which is in fact the final action in a *fabula* which the investigator begins to piece together, working backwards towards the conditions and events which led up to the murder. We only find out what happened in the beginning at the very end of the story.

Saga narrative, by contrast, presents a *sjuzet* which closely, even precisely, follows the *fabula*: events are told in the order in which they happen. They stand in a completely naturalistic chronological relationship to each other – which additionally has the effect of reinforcing the fundamental causality of any course of events. Sometimes, as I have noted, the saga author may hold back information – ironically, by adhering to a strictly historical stance, and not overhearing private conversations in which plans are laid and plots are hatched. And sometimes, when a character passes out of the narrative, the saga author may briefly allude to what happened to him or her in the long term – that he or she will play no further part in the saga narrative, but lived on in the district until old age, for instance. While this is technically a manipulation of strictly linear chronology, the effect of historicity it gives is obvious. Sometimes, there may be a brief attempt to sustain parallel storylines – ‘and meanwhile . . .’. But there are no flashbacks. This in itself may be understood as part of the

saga author's stance with regard to the story he tells; after all, as Wayne Booth points out, the manipulation of narrative event is one aspect of the rhetoric of fiction, one of the ways in which the author's presence is indicated or betrayed in the narrative itself. One of its effects is that the ideal audience of a saga must be constantly alert to the possibility that an event or character in the early stages of a saga may only assume significance much later on; causality in saga society could remain dormant for a long time, with long-held grudges and long-bided times. For example, in *Hrafnkels saga* the lawyer Sámr takes up the case against Hrafnkell at the beginning of the saga, and is introduced early on. He has a brother, Eyvindr, who is introduced at the same time, since they are brothers, and co-exist in the world of the narrative. Eyvindr is away on his travels when the saga opens, and doesn't return until the closing stages of the narrative. But we should not forget his presence. As well as giving the naturalistic, historical impression that Eyvindr exists as a figure in Icelandic society whether or not he is active in the narrative, introducing him early can set up a degree of suspense: what will happen when Eyvindr returns? Similarly, we are told that Hrafnkell has dedicated a stallion to the god Freyr, and has sworn to kill anyone who rides it, before the boy who eventually breaks the taboo has even asked Hrafnkell for the job which brings him into contact with the stallion. Again, this has two effects. First, the taboo assumes a kind of autonomy from the course of events in the narrative, and thus the appearance of reality – it was there all along, and doesn't seem to have been introduced by the saga author to fulfil the needs of a plot. And second, the intuitive reader will expect the taboo to be broken, and interpret succeeding events in the light of this. The reader will feel that he or she knows what is likely to happen, and the course of events may seem even more naturalistic because of this.

Although there are no flashbacks in saga narrative, there are some instances of prefigurations, couched as either the dreams or the wise projections of characters whose wisdom about how events are likely to unfold makes them almost prescient. As we saw with other supernatural events, prescience and clairvoyant dreams work alongside the naturalism of the narrative, and are in any case presented as part of the real world of the saga.

It is sometimes possible to be sure that certain elements are fictional. For instance, we may recognize the essentials of a story borrowed

from another literary tradition. In much European medieval literature, this happens all the time; medieval authors constantly reworked and recycled familiar stories, which form the basis of a Canterbury Tale, or a metrical romance, or one of Boccaccio's *Decameron* stories. Medieval saints' lives regularly imported story elements from one another. But this happens much less in Icelandic literature. It's partly because the sagas are so very firmly based in a specific time and place; their chronotope, to use Mikhail Bakhtin's useful term, is early medieval Iceland, and the conditions and customs of continental Europe can't be translated into this strongly realized context. And it's partly the result of Iceland's geographical and cultural isolation during the period: to some extent a physical necessity, but also the result of an intensely insular nationalism.

In many family sagas, even when plausible events succeed one another in a natural chronological way and are related as if they were history, those events all seem to illustrate a theme or particular area of life. Thus, for example, after the opening story of Hrútr and Unnr in *Njáls saga*, the story moves apparently naturally on to negotiations about the marriage of Hrútr's niece, Hallgerðr, a lethally unsuccessful alliance. Hallgerðr's next marriage is happier, but ends in tragedy. As we have seen, the dowry dispute is still smouldering on, and this brings into the narrative Gunnarr, a distant relative of Unnr's, who is called on to pursue the money. Gunnarr falls in love with Hallgerðr, a love match which also turns out disastrously. It begins to look as if the saga author is not recounting 'what happened', but is, in time-honoured literary fictional fashion, exploring a theme. And indeed the saga continues with incidents based on sexual relations, good and bad. Either the saga author has selected carefully from a vast array of true stories from Icelandic tradition, or we are dealing here with historical fiction.

Similarly, the structure of *Hrafnkels saga* can be described as creating a number of binary contrasts, in terms of both character and event. Every action has a contrasting or complementing counterpart, every character his equal or opposite. This might be interpreted as reflecting the essential contrast in the whole saga, between weak Sámr and powerful Hrafnkell, or even the bipartite shape of the narrative, in which Hrafnkell is first overcome by, and then in turn overcomes, his opponent Sámr. Certainly, the high degree of such patterning in the narrative suggests literary artifice. And yet it remains difficult, in a

genre in which the highest art is the most convincing impersonation of history, to disentangle traditional truth from novel fiction. In any case, in these postmodern times, the distinction between fact and fiction is probably to be found not in the text, but in the author's intention. A good example is Ari's *Íslendingabók*; as he makes clear in his prologue, he means to be an historian; he not only repeatedly substantiates the information he gives us by naming his informant, but also explains that he has revised a previous version of the text 'as [the information] became better known to me', and enjoins us to continue in this vein: 'as for whatever is incorrectly stated in these historical records, it is one's duty to prefer what proves to be truer'. Even though his history may be partisan, and even if his facts are wrong, his intention makes the text a history. In family sagas, which do not have helpful prologues, we lack any statements, explicit or implicit, of intent.

I want next to present three extracts from three family sagas; although I hope the extracts will speak for themselves, I will in each case draw attention to whatever in them suggests fictionality or historicity.

Three Extracts: *Egils saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Laxdæla saga*

Egils saga describes the life of the poet and viking Egill Skalla-Grímsson, who seems to have been an actual historical personage, an Icelander who was born about a decade after the beginning of the tenth century, and died within a decade or so of its end, that is, just before Christianity was adopted in Iceland. Egill's personality dominates the saga: he is difficult, wilful and savage, a remarkable poet (though the authenticity of the verses which are quoted in the saga prose and attributed to him is uncertain) and capable of both great affection and great hatred. Unusually for a family saga, we are told a great deal about Egill's adventures abroad: like his father and grandfather before him, Egill has hostile relations with the rulers of Norway (including Queen Gunnhildr, who cursed Hrútr in *Njáls saga*), and he barely escapes execution at the court of Eiríkr blóðøx (the infamous Eric Bloodaxe) in York. But he is highly regarded by the English king Athelstan, and the saga gives him a leading role in Athelstan's

victorious campaign against the Scots. After relating a lifetime of warlike exploits and poems, the saga author ends with a poignant account of Egill's impotent, but still raging, old age:

It was during the early part of the reign of King Hákon the Great, when Egill Skalla-Grímsson was in his eighties, and he was then a fit man in all respects, apart from being blind. One summer, when men were getting ready for the Assembly, Egill asked Grímr to ride to the Assembly with him. Grímr responded without enthusiasm. And when Grímr and Þórdís talked together, Grímr told her what Egill had asked for: 'I want you to find out what lies behind this request.' Þórdís went to talk to Egill, her kinsman; it was then Egill's greatest pleasure to chat with her; and when she came to him, she asked: 'Is it true, kinsman, that you want to ride to the Assembly? I'd like you to tell me what your plan might be.' 'I'll tell you', he said, 'what I've thought out. I intend to take with me to the Assembly those two chests, both of which are full of English silver, which King Athelstan gave me. I'm going to have the chest taken to the Lawrock, when it is most crowded there; then I'm going to sow the silver, and I'll be very surprised if they all share it nicely between them; I expect that there would be kicking and punches, or it might end up with everybody at the Assembly in a fight.' Þórdís says, 'This seems to me a great plan, and it's bound to be spoken of as long as the country is inhabited.' Then Þórdís went to speak to Grímr and told him Egill's plan. 'He must not be allowed to put such a monstrous plan into action.' And when Egill came to speak to Grímr about the trip to the assembly, Grímr completely dissuaded him, and Egill stayed at home during the assembly, and he wasn't very pleased about that; he frowned a lot. At Mosfell, there was a shieling, and Þórdís was at the shieling during the Assembly. One evening, when people were getting ready for bed at Mosfell, Egill called up two of Grímr's slaves; he told them to get a horse for him, 'I want to go to the hot springs.' And when Egill was ready, he went outside and he had his two chests of silver with him; he mounted the horse, rode then down along the homefields to the bank which slopes away there, and that was the last people saw. But in the morning, when men got up, then they saw that Egill was wandering around on the hill to the east of the farm, and he was leading his horse behind him; they now go to him, and brought him home. But neither the slaves nor the chests ever turned up again, and there are many theories about where Egill has hidden his treasure. To the east of the farm at Mosfell a gully runs down from the mountain; and it has been remarked that in sudden thaws the water flows down fast, and after the water has flooded out, English coins have been

found in the gully; some men reckon that Egill must have hidden the money there. Down below the homefield at Mosfell there are big marshes, extremely deep; many believe it to be true that Egill must have thrown his money in there. South of the river there are hot springs, and a short distance away great holes in the ground, and some people think that Egill must have hidden his money there, because over in that direction gravemound fire is often seen. Egill said that he had killed Grímr's slaves, and that he had hidden his money, but he told no one where he had hidden it. The next autumn, Egill became ill, and that illness led to his death. And when he was dead, then Grímr had Egill dressed in good clothes; then he had him taken down to Tjaldanes, and a gravemound made, and Egill was laid in it, together with his weapons and clothing.

This depiction of Egill as an old man is both touching and shocking. Egill's helplessness, unable to travel to the assembly without the support of his kinsman Grímr, and the ease with which the woman Þórdís at first wins his trust and then humours him, are in terrible contrast to the depiction of Egill in his youth and prime in the main body of the saga, which he completely dominates through his physical and verbal superiority. Egill is celebrated as a warrior and a poet, and overmasters kings and earls with his fearsome skills in both war and poetry. But even without knowledge of the rest of the saga, we feel for the weakness of an old man: having gone missing the previous evening, Egill is found wandering around near the farm, and the servants bring him home. This picture of senility transcends cultural and historical differences; the forgetful old man could come from any place or time, and anyone who has to deal with very elderly people will feel a guilty sympathy with Þórdís's unflinching hypocrisy, as she congratulates Egill on his appalling plan, and goes straight off to tell her husband.

Knowing more about the relationship between Egill and Þórdís greatly intensifies the poignancy of the episode. Egill's older brother, Þórólfr, was everything that Egill was not: handsome, popular, easy to get on with, and happy to make a career serving the rulers of Norway. He marries Ásgerðr, the beautiful daughter of a rich and powerful Norwegian chieftain. But Þórólfr is killed – to Egill's intense sorrow – fighting for King Athelstan against the Scots. It is now that King Athelstan gives Egill the two chests of silver, declaring that the money is for Egill's father, compensation for the loss of his son Þórólfr.

The saga author notes, however, that ‘it is not related’ whether Egill did in fact pass on his father’s share of the English silver; we only learn the truth at the very end of the saga, in our extract, when Egill disposes of the chests.

Egill takes his leave of King Athelstan on the grounds that he must look after his brother’s widow. He breaks the news of Þórólfr’s death to Ásgerðr, and offers to look after her and her baby daughter. He stays with them during the autumn, but becomes more and more withdrawn. His friend Arinbjörn urges him to get over the death of his brother, but Egill eventually confesses to another kind of heart-sickness: he is in love with Ásgerðr, his brother’s widow. It is at this point that the alert reader may remember that Egill fell ill just before the wedding feast for his brother and Ásgerðr was celebrated. The saga author, of course, gives us no guidance: was Egill always half in love with his glamorous older brother’s beautiful wife? Or is he greedily wise to the advantages of keeping this Norwegian heiress in the family? Or both? He and Ásgerðr marry, and seem to have had a happy marriage, to judge from the little the saga author tells us about their relationship. When Ásgerðr dies, Egill leaves their farm, and moves in with his now married stepdaughter, whom, we are told, Egill loved more than any other living person. And this woman is Þórdís, a baby when Egill married her mother, now Egill’s favourite person in the whole world, and the betrayer of his plan to disrupt the Icelandic Assembly.

Egill’s half-senile malevolence, his rage against his own impotence, and his contempt for what he sees as the civilized posturing of the new Iceland, in which men solve their disputes by recourse to the law rather than violence, is dramatically figured in his plan to destroy this façade by exposing greed for gold – something which, as we have seen, Egill himself knew the power of – as a stronger force than respect for the law and democracy. It is of course hard, if not impossible, to judge whether an original audience would have been appalled, or secretly, even guiltily, thrilled, by the prospect of such anarchy. Þórdís certainly has no hesitation about how to act.

It may be that Egill’s plan was modelled on an episode in Icelandic tradition: the legendary hero Hrólfr kraki, pursued by a Swedish army led by King Aðils, delays their pursuit by *sowing* gold on the path behind him, so that the Swedish warriors leap from their horses to pick it up, and fight amongst themselves for the larger share of it.

Snorri Sturluson tells this story in his thirteenth-century handbook of skaldic poetry, *Skáldskaparmál* ('the art of poetry'), as an explanation of why, in the riddling diction of skaldic verse, gold is referred to as 'the seed of Kraki'. Egill is presented to us as a skilled and celebrated practitioner of the art of skaldic verse; the plan to subvert the Assembly is thus both appropriate to him, as a fictional character, and a plausible idea coming from an actual skaldic poet. The secret conversations between Þórdís and Egill, on the one hand, and Þórdís and her husband Grímr, on the other, have a novelistic air to them (though it's not impossible that Egill's plan could have been spoken of – ironically, as Þórdís herself predicts – even though it was never put into action). But the passage as a whole is presented as if the author were transmitting actuality. It opens with the careful historical contextualizing of the time of the events – the early part of Earl Hákon's notorious reign. The saga author's implicit claim not to know the whereabouts of Egill's treasure (or, indeed the fate of the two slaves, who are never seen again: how helpless *was* Egill?) is not in itself an historical attitude, but is characteristic of a kind of playful fictionality. However, close attention to the tenses of the verbs in this passage makes it clear that the saga author is relating the episode as if it really happened. There are many theories, he tells us, about where Egill *has* hidden the treasure. And the present tenses used for the description of the landscape and its natural features – the gully which runs down from the mountain, the deep marshes below the homefield, and the hot springs to the south of the river – all seem to confirm the actuality of the episode, though strictly they only attest to the actuality of its setting. The uncertainty of what constitutes the historical record is stressed by the saga author: he offers, as a historian might, three possible theories about what might have happened to Egill's money, but slyly notes that each of them is believed to be true by some people. The final irony is that one of the theories about the location of the treasure depends on a belief in gravemound fire – the supernatural light which emanates from the treasure traditionally to be found in gravemounds, a feature familiar from Icelandic *fornaldarsögur*, fictional tales about legendary heroes and their adventures with the supernatural. It is hard to know whether the saga author himself believed in gravemound fire, or whether he is mischievously complicating still further the extraordinarily complex blend of historicity and fictionality in his work. The sober account of

Egill's last illness and death, with a respectful and proper pagan burial organized by his son-in-law Grímr, carefully but restrainedly recreates the funerary practices of a pre-Christian Iclander.

It has been suggested that the author of *Egils saga* may have been Snorri Sturluson, Iceland's premier medieval historian, the author of a celebrated collection of the biographies of the rulers of Norway, *Heimskringla*. It may be, then, that in *Egils saga* we have a fictionalized biography written by an historian. The next extract, from *Vatnsdæla saga*, is written in familiar family saga style, but its fictionality is rather easier to diagnose.

Vatnsdæla saga follows the fortunes of a great Norwegian chieftain, Ingimundr, who, unusually in saga literature, supports King Haraldr of Norway in his attempt to bring the whole country under his sole rule, and he emigrates to Iceland not as a rebel, escaping the king's displeasure, but because he believes a new life in Iceland to be what fate has ordained for him. He becomes a model chieftain in Iceland, and every possible praise is accorded to him by the saga author. His three sons continue this tradition after his death, and in the following extract, they try to right what they see as a social wrong:

Þorgrímr from Kárnsá had a child by his mistress, who was called Nereiðr, and on the orders of his wife the child was exposed. The brothers, the sons of Ingimundr, were all great friends, and often went to visit one another. On one occasion, Þorsteinn went to visit Þórir, and Þórir walked with him back to the road. Then Þorsteinn asks Þórir which of the brothers seemed to him the most impressive. Þórir said that it was not a matter of opinion 'that you are the most impressive of us in terms of good ideas and common sense'. Þorsteinn replies, '[Our brother] Jökull is in front of us with regard to all kinds of bravery.' Þórir said that he was the least impressive of them 'because a berserk-frenzy comes over me whenever I least wish it, and I'd love it, brother, if you could do something about it'. 'The reason I've come here is that I've heard that Þorgrímr, our kinsman, has had his child exposed on the orders of his wife, and that's a bad thing to have done. And it seems to me to be a great pity that you are not normal in your temperament.' Þórir said he would do anything to rid himself of this. Þorsteinn said that he wanted to propose a remedy, 'but what are you willing to do?' Þórir answers, 'Whatever you want.' Þorsteinn said, 'There is one thing I would like for myself, and that is the chieftainship to be held by my sons.' Þórir said that should be so. Þorsteinn said, 'Now shall I call on

him who has created the sun, because I believe him to be the most powerful of all, that that affliction may leave you; I will do this in return, for his sake: I will help with the child, and bring it up, so that he who has created mankind may later turn him to himself, because I think this fate has been allotted to him.’ Then they mounted their horses, and rode to where they knew that the child was hidden, and Þórir’s slave had found it near Kárnsá, and they saw that a cloth had been spread over its face, and it was pawing at its nostrils, and it was then nearly dead. They picked up the child, and took it back to Þórir’s house, and he brought up the boy, and he was called Þorkell the Paver; and Þórir never had another berserk-frenzy; and that was how Þorsteinn obtained the chieftainship.

Anyone who has experienced the elaborate etiquette with which traditional societies handle the tricky business of making a deal or a request part of a social occasion will recognize Þorsteinn’s refined politeness in not raising the real reason for his visit to Þórir until the very last moment – as his brother is seeing him off, even though he knows that the baby is at risk. The deal which Þorsteinn is brokering is a double or deferred one: in essence, he is offering to heal his brother in exchange for inheriting their father’s chieftainship, but he sees the saving of the exposed baby as a way of bargaining with God; he will bring up the child in exchange for God’s healing Þórir. The underlying morality of the scheme is troubling: Þorsteinn is not only saving the baby because it’s the right thing to do, but also because he sees it as a way of getting the family chieftainship for himself and his sons. The exchange with his brother is conducted with impeccable politesse: notice how Þorgrímr steers the conversation so that he does not have to patronize Þórir by bluntly bringing up the subject of his abnormality himself, but delicately prompts Þórir to mention it first in the context of a comparison of the qualities of the three brothers. This whole exchange is without doubt a strikingly naturalistic recreation of acutely observed social norms in Icelandic society.

Unidealized aspects of Icelandic society seem to be evident in other aspects of the story. It is striking that Þórir’s mysterious affliction – referred to in the Icelandic as a *berserksgangr* (literally, a berserk-going) – is the occasion not of sensationalism or militaristic awe, but of regret verging on embarrassment: it is something which hits him at especially inappropriate moments. Perhaps the saga author has in mind a condition such as epilepsy, or episodic schizophrenia, or

mania. Whatever the reality of the condition, Þórir is willing to do anything to be cured of it.

The exposure of babies was probably a fairly common practice in pre-Christian Iceland, though strongly condemned by the church. In the account of the conversion of Iceland in Ari's *Íslendingabók*, the exposure of newborn babies was one feature of heathen practice which was specifically allowed to continue under the new Christian law, though Ari is quick to point out that it was soon discontinued. There is no reason to believe that the practice of exposure was a peculiarly heathen perversion: it is more likely to have represented both an economic necessity – a form of primitive family planning – or a means of controlling the balance of the population in terms of gender and disability; in other words, the potentially weakest in society, female and disabled babies, were the most likely to have been exposed.

Porkell krafla ('the Pawer') is marginal to society because he is the child of a married Iclander and his mistress – the name Nereiðr may be Irish, in which case she might well have been a Celtic slave. But the baby which is saved because it fitted in with a long-headed plan by Þorgrímr to advance his sons (we may note that Þórir knew where the baby was, but had no plans to rescue it) has a remarkable future: Porkell becomes the pre-eminent man in the Vatnsdalr district, and the saga author tells us that he embodies all the virtues of the greatest of the Vatnsdalr chieftains of old – except that he surpasses them because, in fulfilment of Þorsteinn's prophecy, he is a Christian. Þorsteinn's remarkable anticipation of Christianity in his recognition of the Almighty who created mankind and the sun is plainly the invention of a Christian saga author who wished to present his hero as more than just a righteous heathen. The healing of Þórir is almost a miracle story.

But even more plainly fictional is the story of Porkell, the abandoned baby: like Moses, or Oedipus, he is the castaway whose life hung in the balance when he was a baby, but who rose to great things and unchallenged pre-eminence. The story of Porkell krafla is, in other words, a mythic archetype presented in naturalistic terms as part of the everyday history of Iceland. And yet the picture of the newborn baby, fighting for life, stays with us in its vivid naturalism. The verb *krafla*, from which Porkell's nickname came, can mean two things: either the pawing action, as I have translated it above, used of the desperate attempts of someone struggling for a hand-hold, or

the slow, recurrent bubbling of lava, that swelling and collapsing movement which was perhaps mirrored in the movement of the cloth over the baby's face as the child fought to take its feeble, but still visible, breath. Either way, the fictional archetype is presented in unforgettably real terms.

The final saga extract comes from *Laxdæla saga*, which relates the story of the families who settled around Laxárdalr. Its remarkable heroine, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, is the most prominent of a number of vividly depicted female characters who eclipse the male characters in the saga. In this extract, we see Höskuldr (whom we remember from the story of his brother Hrútr's marriage, in *Njáls saga*) caught between the two women in his life, his wife and his mysterious mistress, when he returns home from a trip abroad with more than a cargo of wood:

Höskuldr landed at the mouth of Lax River; he has his cargo unloaded there, but his ship laid up further up the river, and he builds a boatshed there, and the ruins can be seen there, where he had the boatshed built; he set up booths there, and that is called Búðardalr. Then Höskuldr had the wood taken home, and that was easy, because it wasn't a long way; Höskuldr rides home after it with a few men and gets a great welcome, as is to be expected; and his farm had prospered in the meantime. Jórunn asks who the woman might be who had travelled with him. Höskuldr replies, 'You're going to think that I'm answering you with mockery; I don't know her name.' Jórunn said, 'There are two possibilities: that the report which came to me must have lied, or you must have said enough to her to have found out her name.' Höskuldr said that he wouldn't deny this, and tells her the truth, and said that the woman should be well treated, and said that his preference was that she should live at home with them. Jórunn said, 'I'm not going to fight with a slave woman you've brought from Norway, however little she knows about how to behave properly, and that seems to me to be as clear as anything, if she is both deaf and dumb.' Höskuldr slept beside his wife every night from then on, and didn't have much to do with the slave woman. That she was a woman of distinction was plain to everyone, and also that she was not stupid. And towards the end of the winter, Höskuldr's slave woman had a baby boy; then Höskuldr was summoned, and the child shown to him; it seemed to him as to others that he'd never seen a more handsome or aristocratic-looking child. Höskuldr was asked what the boy should be called. He wanted the child to be called Óláfr, after his uncle Óláfr feilan, who had

died a short time before. Óláfr was a most outstanding child. Höskuldr loved the boy very much.

The following summer, Jórunn said that the slave woman would have to do some work, or else go elsewhere. Höskuldr told her to act as a servant to himself and his wife, and to look after her son as well. And when the boy was two years old, his speech was perfect, and he ran about on his own like a four-year-old. One morning, it so happened that Höskuldr had gone out to see to his farm; the weather was good; the sun shone but was still low in the sky; he heard people speaking; he went over to where a stream flowed down along the slope of the homefield; he saw there two people and recognized them; his son Óláfr was there, with his mother; the realization comes to him that she was not dumb, because she was talking freely with the boy. Then Höskuldr went up to them, and asks her name, and said that there was no point keeping her identity a secret any more. She agreed; they now sit down on the meadowbank. Then she said, 'If you want to know my name, I am called Melkorka.' Höskuldr told her to say more about her family. She replies, 'My father is called Myrkjartan; he is a king in Ireland. I was taken captive from there when I was fifteen.' Höskuldr said that she had kept quiet for rather a long time about such a noble origin. Then Höskuldr went in, and told Jórunn about the new thing he'd learned while he was out. Jórunn said she didn't know about the truth of what she had said; she said she didn't like mysterious outsiders, and they break off this discussion; Jórunn treated her no better than before, but Höskuldr did. And shortly afterwards, when Jórunn was going to bed, Melkorka was helping her off with her shoes and socks, and she laid them on the floor. Jórunn picked up the socks, and hit her around the head with them. Melkorka became angry and punched her on the nose, so that it bled. Höskuldr came in and separated them. After that he moved Melkorka and gave her a farmstead farther up the valley; it has been known as Melkorkustaðir ever since; it's deserted now; it's on the south side of Lax River.

The evident humour of this situation does not eclipse its underlying drama and pathos; the saga author brings out both in his elegant and psychologically acute narrative. Höskuldr's first exchange with Jórunn shows her ostensibly having the upper hand: she has already heard about Melkorka, and disdainfully dismisses Höskuldr's rather sheepish introductions. Her lofty refusal to take issue with Melkorka – 'I'm not going to fight with a slave woman' – and her contempt for Melkorka's apparent disability seem to be the response of a dominant

character. But Jórunn's resentment and humiliation are inevitable. She is introduced into the narrative as a proud, clever woman, and we are told in this extract that the farm had prospered while Höskuldr was away, that is, while she was in charge of it, but at first no work is required of this distinguished stranger. And is it evident to everyone that she is of some noble origin because of what she looks like, or on account of the way she behaves? Melkorka's arrival is only the first in a series of setbacks for Jórunn. The birth of the handsome, precocious and unmistakably aristocratic boy Óláfr, so much loved by Höskuldr, is a blow to her; and the news of Melkorka's identity the last straw. Her defiant scepticism – why should anyone believe what this strange woman says? – is hollow and unconvincing, and there is a poignant irony in her dismissal of Melkorka as beneath her. And finally, we can imagine how galling it would have been for Jórunn to see Höskuldr – a man who bought the slave woman in an attempt to look impressive, but who cannot dictate terms to his wife (he tentatively expresses the preference that Melkorka should live at the farm with them, and unresistingly obeys Jórunn's command that she should do some work) – treating Melkorka more considerately now that he has found out about her aristocratic lineage. We may be reminded of W. P. Ker's remark about sagas, which I quoted earlier: we are shown only the surfaces of saga characters, but behind this apparently superficial narrative, a rich and naturalistic psychology can be readily inferred. And it is remarkable how very often our speculations about the characters' motives and feelings are confirmed by tiny, apparently circumstantial details in the narrative.

The account of how Höskuldr comes to discover Melkorka's identity is a masterly piece of scene-setting: the saga author recounts Höskuldr's early morning walk across his fields, the fine weather and the low sun. He hears voices before he sees the mother and son, because of the lie of the land. Perhaps, too, the detail of the stream flowing reflects the unexpected fluency of Melkorka's speech. This quietly idyllic scene is economically depicted with absolute conviction. On the other hand, Höskuldr's little epiphany is framed by slightly awkward attempts by the saga author to establish the fundamental historicity of the episode. We have the oddly detailed account of exactly where Höskuldr's ship was unloaded, and was beached, with the corroborative detail that the ruins of the boatshed he built are still to be seen, and an explanation of a placename which still exists. The

narrative is repetitive and halting here as if the author were more concerned with information than with artistry. We have the same feeling at the end of the passage, as the author piles up ostensibly factual detail about Melkorka's farmstead.

That Melkorka should turn out to be an Irish princess is clearly the stuff of fairytale, though the names are authentic – Melkorka is a good representation of the Irish name Mael-Curchaich, and King Mýrkjartan corresponds to the well-attested Muircertach. What is significant is that these names figure in *Landnámabók*, and may very well have been historical. And Óláfr's son, who is to become a leading figure in *Laxdæla saga*, is named Kjartan after his distinguished Irish great-grandfather. *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* both efface as far as possible any Celtic element amongst the first settlers, and saga authors were hard pressed to explain the evidently Irish names of some of the leading figures in saga literature – not only Kjartan, but Njáll (Niall) and Kormakr (Cormac), for instance. In *Laxdæla saga* we have a fairytale explanation: Kjartan's name is inherited neither from the embarrassing presence of some Irish slaves who accompanied the first settlers, nor from a mixed Hiberno-Norse second settlement from Northern Ireland and the Western Isles of Scotland, but from a great-grandfather who was one of the high kings of Ireland, and a grandmother who was a princess in disguise. The story might even be true.

I have cited Jórunn's reaction to Melkorka as an example of the psychological realism of the saga author, with Jórunn's eventual physical attack on Melkorka as the inevitable outcome of her frustration and anger. And yet there is a close analogue to Jórunn's behaviour, which might otherwise seem so natural, in one of the poems of the *Poetic Edda*, a collection of stanzaic poems of unknown age put together in Iceland, probably in the thirteenth century. *Guðrúnarkviða* ('the lay of Guðrún') focuses on the terrible grief of Guðrún on hearing of the death of her husband Sigurðr, the legendary dragon-slayer. Other women at the court tell of their own sorrowful pasts, and one foreign queen, Herborg, relates how she was taken as a captive in war, and forced to act as a servant to the war-leader's wife. Specifically, she had to dress the woman in her finery, and tie on her shoes each morning. Out of jealousy, the poem laconically tells us, the woman beats Herborg, who notes, obliquely but revealingly, 'Nowhere did I find a better man of the house, and nowhere a worse woman.' Jórunn's explosion of violence against Melkorka is essentially the same scene,

transformed to fit its setting in an Icelandic farmhouse. In fact, the central story in *Laxdæla saga*, a frustrated love affair between Guðrún and Kjartan, which ends with Guðrún marrying not Kjartan but his foster-brother Bolli, and finally exhorting her husband to kill Kjartan, itself closely follows the story told in this and related poems in the *Edda*, based on heroic legend, in which Sigurðr is murdered at the instigation of a tormented lover, Brynhildr, who has had to marry someone else. In other words, the saga author has turned to what is very likely to have been his own literary (or pre-literary) heritage to produce a scene which matches perfectly the naturalistic emotional currents of his narrative.

These three extracts exemplify both the delicate balance between historicity and fictionality, and the characteristic style of saga narratives. What cannot be demonstrated with extracts, however, is the overall structure of family saga narratives: their sweep and scope, and the complex making and unmaking of innumerable social and sexual relationships over several generations. This is in part because of the sheer length and complexity of very many saga narratives: the word 'saga' nowadays is applied especially to either lengthy, generational novels, such as *The Forsyte Saga*, or, more colloquially, to long-drawn-out and perhaps even frustratingly complex negotiations: the saga of one's fight for justice from the Inland Revenue, for instance. But the difficulty is also bound up with the style of saga writing, which is all incident and dialogue. As we have seen, the narrative is surprisingly closely confined to the reporting of 'what happened'. The so-called rhetoric of fiction is virtually absent. Descriptions of the physical appearances of individuals are brief and formulaic, and very largely confined to the introduction of a character in the narrative. And although the forms of the Icelandic landscape play a large part in family sagas, there is very little description for its own sake. When an ambush is related, it may be necessary to describe in some detail the lie of the land, to give a clear picture of how things happened, but the Icelandic landscape of the family sagas is precisely that of their later audiences; there is no need to set the scene for aesthetic or nostalgic reasons. In *Njáls saga*, there is one brief moment when it does seem that the landscape of the south of Iceland is valued for aesthetic, or sentimental, reasons. Gunnarr, the hero of the first half of the saga, has been exiled for three years as a result of a law suit, and as he rides from his farm at Hlíðarendi, his horse stumbles, and he falls facing the

farmstead he is leaving. With one of the most-quoted utterances in saga literature, Gunnarr describes what he sees – the ripe fields of corn, and the meadow whose hay has been newly cut – and declares that he will not leave home.

The most obvious interpretation of this turning point in the saga narrative (for the decision to stay in Iceland leads ultimately to Gunnarr's death) is that the beauty of Hlíðarendi overcomes Gunnarr's rationality. But this is surely a romantic view of the power of landscape to affect the individual. The response of a farming community might have been different: what Gunnarr sees is hard-won prosperity, a farm operating as it should, facing the coming autumn in good shape. Of course, there may be a metaphorical undertone, and for a Christian author and audience especially, the intimation of a coming harvest will seem full of meaning. But essentially, Gunnarr's vision is of farmland, not natural scenery; a landscape transformed by human endeavour.

Given, then, the way saga narrative operates, it is hard to summarize the story of any family saga without simply retelling the whole saga. One can point out that family sagas characteristically begin with events in Norway which lead up to the emigration of one or more families, and that this sometimes takes the form of a prefatory 'mini-saga', in which the events of the main body of the narrative are obliquely or directly prefigured. The settling of Iceland by this and subsequent generations may then take up the whole of the rest of the saga – or the saga may include in its narrative an account of the conversion of Iceland, inviting the reader, as some critics have suggested, to make comparisons about behaviour and ethics before and after this momentous event in Iceland's history. But saga authors in general are neither secretive nor obtrusive about the pagan beliefs of their pre-Conversion ancestors. If pagan belief is a necessary part of 'what happened' in a saga narrative – such as Hrafnkell's vow to the god Freyr that the stallion Freyfaxi is too sacred to be ridden – then we hear about it. For the most part, though, saga characters occupy a secular space, rather like the characters, to return to our opening comparisons, of nineteenth-century novels. Finally, the quality of saga writing which has the greatest effect on our experience of the overall shape of the narrative is the way character and event never seem to be plot-driven. Saga narratives end not with denouement, but when causality finally runs out of steam, or when characters, having often lived longer or shorter lives than they deserved, die.

New Knowledge and Native Traditions

Latin Learning

Iceland's transformation from an oral to a literary culture hinged on the community's constitutional conversion to Christianity around the year 1000. Icelanders adopted the Roman alphabet (probably as introduced to them by Anglo-Saxon scholars) and began building up the textual scholarship fundamental to a Christian nation. In the centuries following the conversion, there was an insatiable appetite for the new learning of what has been called the twelfth-century renaissance in Europe. Though the earliest manuscripts from Iceland date from the very end of the twelfth century, throughout the previous hundred years key texts were being produced – works of Christian doctrine; genealogies; laws; grammar books – and these productions were not in Latin, but in the vernacular.

Amongst the earliest surviving manuscripts is the Old Norse-Icelandic translation of a theological encyclopedia, the *Elucidarius*, composed in Latin about a century earlier; this manuscript is itself probably a copy of an earlier one. Ari's *Íslendingabók*, a source for the settlement and early constitutional history of Iceland, can be dated to the years between 1122 and 1133, since Ari acknowledges in his preface the help (or interference!) of two bishops from that period. But Ari refers to an earlier version of his work, with royal genealogies in it. The mid-twelfth century also saw the first of a series of so-called grammatical treatises: linguistic handbooks modelled on Latin rhetorical textbooks, but again – crucially – in the vernacular. The author of the *First Grammatical Treatise* shows in great detail, and with precocious

linguistic sophistication, just how the new Latin alphabet could be made to serve the existing phonological system of Old Norse. There are also large collections of sermons and saints' lives dating from the early period, and even in translated texts, the language is straightforward and idiomatic, with surprisingly little stylistic imprint from their Latin originals.

Alongside this mass of new, learned material there must have existed an almost unimaginably rich oral literary culture: myth, legend, fictionalized history, factual history, folklore, and storytelling of all kinds. And spinning off from twelfth-century learning, this oral treasury is, by the thirteenth century, being written up, copied down, collected, compiled, analysed, commented on, recycled, reshaped, extended, developed and refined. In both prose and verse, traditional and even archaic forms were used, but so too were new, unique forms – such as the family saga – created. It is a truism amongst medievalist scholars that no oral text was ever left unchanged when it was committed to script, not least because its new handlers would have been Christians who were unlikely to have been able to resist adapting the material to reflect – or at least not undermine – Christian doctrine. But in Iceland, one of the very furthest outposts of western Christendom, this process seems to have been much less intrusive than almost anywhere else in Europe. Icelanders deeply valued their literary heritage, their history, their language and even their pagan ancestry; the church did not manage to reserve literacy to itself, and never in medieval Iceland exercised the authority it did elsewhere. The result is the survival of a considerable amount of pre-Christian literature, the unbroken development of literature using native forms, themes and styles.

Eddaic and Skaldic Verse

The poetry of medieval Iceland can be divided into two distinct genres – Eddaic and skaldic verse. In brief, Eddaic verse – which takes its name from the medieval anthology in which it is mostly preserved, the *Edda* – is stanzaic, alliterative poetry on mythological and heroic subjects. Eddaic poetry is anonymous and virtually undatable, and concerns itself with the distant past, whether mythic or legendary, typically framing its material in dramatic, even theatrical monologues

or exchanges; its speakers are gods, or giants, or heroes. Skaldic poetry (some of which is also mythological in theme) derives its name from the Old Norse word for poet, *skáld*, and many stanzas are preserved in narratives which attribute individual strophes to named poets, ninth-, tenth- and eleventh-century Icelanders and Norwegians who often feature elsewhere in Old Norse-Icelandic historical and literary traditions. The name of the patron to whom a poem is dedicated may also be preserved. Reading skaldic verse, our sense of the poet's authorship of the verse is very strong, both because the poet self-referentially alludes in the stanza to his own actions in composing or reciting the poetry, and because the flamboyant, cryptic intricacy of skaldic metres and poetic diction makes each stanza self-evidently the bravura product of its maker's verbal ingenuity. And unlike Eddaic verse, much skaldic verse can be attached with reasonable certainty to an actual historical context.

Metre and diction

Eddaic poems are stanzaic – itself unusual in Germanic verse – and stanzas consist of short lines, each with two main stresses, and a variable but small number of unstressed syllables. In regular *fornyrðislag* ('old story metre') stanzas, eight short lines are arranged in four pairs, the first of each pair containing one syllable (one of the two stressed ones) which then alliterates with one of the two stressed syllables in the following short line. The opening stanza of the heroic poem *Hamðismál* (see p. 81) illustrates this (alliteration in bold):

Sprutto á **tái**
tregnar íðir,
groeti álfa
in **g**lýstömo.
Ár um **m**orgin
manna bölvu
sútir hverjar
sorg um kveykva.

In *ljóðaháttir* (song, or chant, measure) each pair of alliterating short lines is followed by a third short line with its own separate alliteration on each of its two stressed syllables. There are minor variations on

these two basic metres: in *málaháttir* (speech measure) there are more unstressed syllables than is usual in *fornyrðislag*, which gives a looser, more relaxed style of narration; *galdralag* (the metre of spells) is a sporadic elaboration on *ljóðaháttir* such that each third short line is repeated, with a slight variation; this gives the stanza an incantatory feel.

The metre of skaldic verse is also based on alliteration and regular patterns of stress, but is much more intricate. Skaldic stanzas consist of eight short lines (though in the manuscripts both Eddaic and skaldic poetry are set out as prose). Each line has six syllables (with occasional elision), and always ends on an unstressed syllable. The odd lines contain two alliterating syllables, and this alliteration is picked up by one syllable of each following even line. But skaldic metres also demand internal rhyme and assonance. In the odd lines (where the alliteration is strongest) there are two assonating syllables; in the even lines (in which only one syllable picks up the alliteration from the preceding line) there are two fully rhyming syllables

A skaldic stanza by the poet Þormóðr praising King Óláfr (see p. 88) illustrates this (alliteration in bold, full and half rhymes italicized, syllables counted on the first line):

1	2	3	4	5	6
Ört	vas	Áleifs	<i>hjarta</i> .		
Óð	framm	konungr	<i>blóði</i> ,		
rekin	bitu	stál ,	á <i>Stiklar</i>		
<i>stöðum</i> ,	kvaddi	lið	<i>böðvar</i> .		
Élþolla	sák	<i>alla</i>			
<i>Jalfaðs</i>	nema	gram	<i>sjalfan</i> ,		
reynðr	vas	<i>flestr</i> ,	í <i>fastri</i>		
<i>fleindrífu</i>	sér	<i>hlífa</i> .			

The precise relation between stress, alliteration and rhyme is open to complex variation, so that the basic form of skaldic metre – *dróttkvætt* (the metre or poetic practice of the court) – covers a multitude of possibilities. Furthermore, it's not always clear whether irregular *dróttkvætt* is the result of poetic licence, corruption in oral transmission, or variation of the basic metre. In the third part of his *Edda* – the *Háttatal*, or list of metres – Snorri Sturluson (of whom more below) composed a sequence of 101 stanzas, each one exemplifying a subtly different version of *dróttkvætt*.

The word order of Eddaic verse is characterized by the kinds of stylization and inversions familiar in many poetic traditions, but the word order of skaldic verse is almost completely dictated by the exigencies of its extraordinary metre. Each stanza is a densely packed word puzzle, and such crypticism is extended by the single most distinctive feature of skaldic poetic diction, the kenning. A kenning is a poetic periphrasis which is much easier to illustrate than to define. A base word – proper or common noun – is given definition by another noun which is linked to it in a genitival relationship. The base word alone may have only the most oblique – or even a paradoxical – connection with the object finally denoted by the kenning; it is the defining noun which hauls the base word into appropriateness. For example, the phrase ‘the ship of the desert’ – denoting a camel – is one of the few instances of the kenning form in modern English. The base word ‘ship’ is highly inappropriate: the camel is animate, a ship inanimate. But more significantly, a ship is precisely what one would *not* associate with a desert. To solve this riddle, we must discover the much broader category to which the term ‘ship’ belongs, and then be guided by the defining term ‘desert’. In other words, we recognize that a ship is a kind of vehicle, and then ask what kind of vehicle might be associated with the desert. Answer: a camel.

Of course, a kenning offers not just a little word game, but at best some metaphorical quality. The poetic value of the term ‘ship of the desert’ is quickly evident. There is not only an implied analogy between the rocking movement of a ship and the characteristic gait of a camel, but even more strikingly, between the featureless, shifting landscape of the ocean, and the (on reflection) surprisingly similar contours of extensive sand dunes. In fact, the kenning presents us with a witty blend of associative similarity which is evident in spite of ostensible dissimilarity, or even gross inappropriateness.

In skaldic poetry, the base word for kennings which denote men or women can be the name of a god or goddess. The defining noun may then be an object associated – often by synecdoche – with humans: weapons or jewellery; wealth or household objects. A man may be called the Óðinn of spearpoints, or a woman the Freyja of linen. Base words can also be non-specific in themselves, such as agent nouns like brandisher (of weapons, say) or impeller (of a ship), or intensifier (of battle). Such phrases as these are clearly literal, rather than in any

way paradoxical, but the final twist on the Old Norse kenning is the principle of infinite regression: that each defining noun may itself be denoted by a kenning. If the phrase 'horse of the ocean' can denote 'ship', then in turn, 'home of the whale' can denote ocean. A kenning for a seaman might then run 'impeller of the horse of the home of the whale'. Given the fact that word order in skaldic stanzas is usually radically disrupted, and further, that many kennings rely on mythological references (I have already noted the kenning for gold – the seed of Kraki – alluding to the action of a legendary hero who scattered it on the ground), the meaning of skaldic stanzas is often disputed (depending for example on which defining nouns one chooses to link to which base words, and in what order) and often simply elusive to a modern audience.

Eddaic verse is, by contrast, much more straightforward to read. But the difference, though mostly very striking, is actually one of degree. Like skaldic verse, Eddaic verse also uses poetic synonyms, and even some kennings; and its two-stress, alliterative metre is not wholly distinct – though very distant in terms of intensity – from highly wrought skaldic measures. There are some poetic texts which critics label 'semi-skaldic' – in a metre looser than *dróttkvætt*, but not quite as relaxed as the Eddaic metres – which demonstrate that the metrical distinction between the two genres is not always absolutely clear cut.

Preservation and context

The other major distinction between Eddaic and skaldic verse is the contexts in which the two genres were preserved in written form – at times variously, and unknowably, later than their original composition. The *Edda* is an anthology of alliterative, stanzaic poems on mythological and heroic subjects which was copied up in Iceland some time in the thirteenth century. The manuscript itself is now known as *Konungsbók* (King's book) or the Codex Regius, and when it came to light in the seventeenth century, it was wrongly believed to be the work of a celebrated eleventh-century Icelandic scholar called Saemundr, whose reputation for learning survived, though none of his works have. Many of the poems in this manuscript are quoted in the work of Snorri Sturluson, a thirteenth-century Icelandic historian, mythographer, literary critic and saga author. One of Snorri's

works is a three-part *ars poetica* which has remained our primary source for Icelandic mythology and its poetic tradition. This work came to be known as Snorri's *Edda* because it is so described in one of its manuscripts, though it is far from clear what the word *Edda* means (some people have related it to the Icelandic word for grandmother, implying the traditional knowledge transmitted in Snorri's text; others have suggested word play on the Latin verb *edo* (I compose), given that the Latin *credo* (I believe) has given rise to the Icelandic verb *kredda*). The poems of the Codex Regius were believed to be the ancient source of Snorri's text, and so it happened that two seminal texts in Icelandic literary tradition share the same name: the *Poetic Edda*, no longer attributed to Saemundr, and the *Prose Edda*, Snorri's treatise which quotes some of the poems in it.

Anthologizing poems, as the original compiler of the *Poetic Edda* has done, radically decontextualizes them. Without a good deal of editorial information – of which there is none in the Codex Regius except the possibly editorial indications as to which character is speaking in the dialogue poems, and some prose links between the poems – we can infer very little about the date, authorship, provenance or milieu of the poems. There are some distinctive copying errors in the existing text, which show that the Codex Regius was not the first written version of these poems, but apart from this, the poems themselves stand completely independent of historical or cultural context. Because of their loose alliterative metre, which easily accommodates changes in language over time, the poems can't be dated on linguistic grounds, and as always, attempts to date literary texts on the basis of style, tone or sentiment tend more to reflect the historical situation of the critic than to have much objective value. The scholarly consensus is that the poems date variously from around AD 850 to about 1150, but there is still plenty of disagreement about relative dating within these limits.

The most significant questions – are the poems of the *Poetic Edda* the very finest surviving alliterative poems (at least in the view of the compiler); or are they the *only* surviving examples; or are they no more than a small representative sample of a much larger body of poetry which has not survived? – are also unanswerable. For instance, two poems whose form and content would identify them as Eddaic – *Rígsþula* and *Grottasöngur* – are preserved in manuscripts of Snorri's *Prose Edda*, but for some reason were not included in the

Codex Regius. On the other hand, Snorri, who was writing perhaps half a century before the Codex Regius was compiled, bases his account of the Norse mythology of creation on the poem which opens the Codex Regius – *Völuspá* (*The Prophecy of the Sibyl*) – which strongly suggests the poem's pre-eminence. And the careful arrangement of the poems in the Codex Regius is a clear indication that the compiler knew the material well.

Snorri Sturluson quotes a substantial amount of Eddaic verse on mythological subjects in the first part of his treatise, *Gylfaginning* (the fooling of Gylfi: the name derives from the framing device Snorri gives this piece, in which a king called Gylfi is told stories by figures who claim to be gods). Eddaic verse on heroic subjects is copiously quoted in the late medieval prose saga *Völsunga saga*, which attempts to synthesize into one continuous narrative the complex history of the succession of legendary figures in Eddaic poems; and poems which are termed Eddaic on grounds of form and style are also quoted in some of the other *fornaldarsögur*. Thus, Eddaic verse is preserved both in an anthology and in narrative prose.

There is, by contrast, no medieval anthology of skaldic verse. As we have seen, the name by which this kind of poetry is usually now known reflects the fact that details about its authors – and as a consequence, its historical context – are often preserved along with the stanzas themselves, and sometimes too the names of longer poems from which individual stanzas are taken. In the second part of his treatise, *Skáldskaparmál* (the art of poetic diction), Snorri quotes great numbers of skaldic strophes by over seventy skalds in order to illustrate the various categories of kennings and poetic synonyms. His characteristic form of quotation is the half strophe, or *helmingr*, and he attributes his brief quotations to named poets and (more rarely) to named poems, so that modern editors have, with varying degrees of success, tried to reconstruct longer sequences of stanzas from quotations scattered around the work. The formal, long poem in skaldic metre is known as a *drápa*, but no full-length, complete *drápur* have survived; most skaldic verse is preserved in the form of individual stanzas quoted in prose narrative. Four longer sequences of strophes are preserved in narratives ascribed to Snorri, and are themselves ascribed to named poets. Since these sequences only occur in certain manuscripts, it is hard to be certain whether Snorri himself meant them to be included in this form, or whether they were added by a

scribe. Although the Eddaic verse quoted by Snorri in *Gylfaginning* and the skaldic stanzas in *Skáldskaparmál* both deal with mythological subject matter, the two are kept sharply distinct: only the opening verse in *Gylfaginning* is skaldic, while the great majority of quotations in *Skáldskaparmál* are skaldic. The exclusion of skaldic verse from *Gylfaginning* may well be the result of its apparent historicity: *Gylfaginning* is framed as a dialogue set in prehistoric Scandinavia, and it seems that in Snorri's time skaldic verses were still associated with specific authors and contexts, unlike Eddaic verse, which may have seemed ageless and authorless even to Snorri.

The primary concern of skaldic poetry was the praise of actual historical Scandinavian kings and earls. The nature of political panegyric meant that a poet could hardly falsify, beyond a certain polite exaggeration, the deeds for which he was praising his patron in person. In addition, the rigid metrical structure of the skaldic stanza recommended to Icelandic historians – and pre-eminently, Snorri Sturluson – the use of skaldic stanzas as source material for historical sagas. The practice of quoting the stanzas used in their historical prose means that our other great repository of skaldic verse – especially praise poetry by the court poets after whom the basic skaldic metre was named – is the body of historical writings in Old Norse. Such stanzas also contain mythological material, of course, both in the allusions implied by their kennings, and because a political eulogy might flatteringly suggest divine ancestry for the recipient.

The authenticity of skaldic stanzas in historical sagas has generally been taken for granted. But even the historical sagas do not always present the verses quoted in the text in a corroborative way, but may present them as the direct speech, or even impromptu utterances, of their author. Many of the family sagas also present their characters – in a native Icelandic, rather than courtly Norwegian, setting – as speaking skaldic verses. Such verses often take the form of the rhetorical core of an anecdote, or the emotionally charged words of a character at a climactic moment in the saga narrative. They are often termed *lausavísur* (literally, 'loose or unattached verses') or occasional verses. Their evidently literary, stylistic function made them a valuable tool in the hands of saga authors, and it may be that though some were authentic survivals, composed and recited in much the same circumstances as the saga author purports to record, many are rather part of the literary fiction of saga writing, reused in fresh

contexts to suit the new narrative, or even composed or commissioned to fit the context.

Mythological poems

The first half of the Codex Regius is given over to mythological poems, and the most important of these, *Völuspá*, comes first. In this allusive and sometimes mysterious poem, a sibyl looks far back in time to the creation of the world from the great abyss (the *ginnunga gap*, what James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* called the grinning gap), as first the frost giants, and then the gods, come on the scene. To begin with, the gods live in a creative, productive paradise, but in a series of darker episodes, some of which remain unexplained, the world of the gods is contaminated by conflict and rivalry, and hastens towards its end. The Christ-like figure of Óðinn's son Baldr is killed – perhaps as a sacrifice engineered by his father to avert the coming catastrophe – and the first signs of a Norse apocalypse – the terminal shuddering of the World Tree, Yggdrasill, and the howling of the dog Garmr – are described. *Völuspá* contains the seminal account of *Ragnarök* (the doom of the gods, a word which appears in later Old Norse sources as *ragnarökr*, and has thus been translated as the more familiar 'twilight of the gods', Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*), in which the gods (who cannot be simply identified with the forces of good, given the history of faithlessness and violence apparently alluded to earlier in the poem) and the giants (who are, in a Manichean sense, the equal opposites of the gods, and certainly not the lumbering halfwits of later fairy-tale tradition) clash to their mutual destruction, as all around them the created world erupts and implodes. But the poem ends not with chaos, but with resurrection: a new, cleansed world begins to manifest itself, in which fields grow unsown, and the symbol of the vanished earlier world – the chess pieces the gods once innocently played with – are rediscovered when a new earth begins to arise.

The second poem in the *Edda* is called *Hávamál* – the words of the High One. It seems to be a loosely arranged collection of different kinds of traditional wisdom (perhaps, indeed, a compilation of fragments of originally distinct poems). Much of the advice in *Hávamál* pertains to a real and recognizable human world. The poem presents a wary, even cynical, approach to keeping up appearances in a male-dominated social world: trust no one (and bear in mind that no

one ever refuses a gift); don't get drunk (it makes you look foolish); always keep your weapons within reach. Women, when they are mentioned in *Hávamál*, represent just one of the pitfalls in a largely hostile social environment: untrustworthy and unpredictable, young women should be praised only when they are married, and grown women only when they are cremated. But if the world is transient, one thing can be relied upon to last, for good or ill: the reputation one earns in life. As the poem tells us, 'Cattle die; kinsmen die / the self itself dies / but I know one thing which doesn't die: / the reputation of every dead man.'

Some of the advice is homely, and unexpectedly universal in its appeal. There's no point in lying awake worrying, because in the morning your troubles will still be there, but you'll be tired. Have something to eat before you go out visiting, because otherwise you'll be hungry on arrival, and seem greedy, or be too preoccupied with your food to make polite conversation. But as the poem progresses, we become aware of a distinctive voice, who sometimes relates the advice to his own experiences. These experiences identify the speaker as the god Óðinn, and he describes at increasing length his misadventures with drink and women, events which are in some cases alluded to in other Norse texts. The poem climaxes with Óðinn's dramatic account of how he acquired the magic knowledge of casting spells by means of runic inscription:

I know that I hung on a wind-swept tree
for nine full nights
wounded with a spear
and given to Óðinn
myself to myself . . .

I took up runes,
howling I took them;
I fell back from there.

The poem ends with a list of spells. In *Hávamál*, then, wisdom ranges from the minutiae of social etiquette (always provide visitors with water and a towel) to the arcane knowledge which Óðinn brought back from the world of the dead.

The echoes of Christ's crucifixion in Óðinn's account of his sacrifice are too striking to ignore, but they are hard to explain. In *Völuspá* too

there are shadowy but significant parallels with Christian doctrine: Baldr, the young and beautiful son of Óðinn, becomes a bloody sacrifice, killed, with mysterious improbability, by an arrow made of mistletoe, which the sybil sees stretching up tall and beautiful, an image of resurrection. And the climactic question, posed by Óðinn himself to the giant Vafþrúðnir in a deadly question-and-answer contest in the next mythological poem in the *Edda*, *Vafþrúðnismál* (the words of Vafþrúðnir), is ‘What did Óðinn whisper in his dead son’s ear?’ Is the answer, which lies at the heart of Norse mythology as we know it, that Óðinn offered a promise of resurrection?

Taken together, the mythological poems in the *Edda* do not present a fully coherent picture or a unified mythology. For example, though the giant Ymir is alluded to briefly at the beginning of *Völuspá*, it is only elsewhere in the *Edda* – in *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grimnismál* (the words of Grimnir, the masked one) – that the story of his dismemberment to form the topography of the earth is related, and nowhere can we learn of the (presumably hostile) events which led up to his killing. Some poems are catalogues of mythological ‘facts’ and names, given dramatic settings such as question-and-answer contests between Óðinn and a giant (*Vafþrúðnismál*), or violent, aggressive verbal exchanges known as flytings (*Lokasenna* – Loki’s insult contest – or *Hárbarðsljóð* – Hárbarðr’s song). It may be that such fact-packed pieces had an originally mnemonic purpose; whatever the case, the result is that information is presented in the form of snappy, allusive sound-bites, as barely elaborated answers to specific questions (‘Tell me this one thing . . . from where the earth came or the sky above’: ‘From Ymir’s flesh the sky was shaped’), or as obscure, but clearly damaging, insults (in *Lokasenna*, for example, Loki accuses each of the gods and goddesses in turn of some sexual transgression).

The remaining mythological poems in the *Edda* recount in more conventional narrative form episodes in which one or other of the gods has an encounter with a giant. In *Skírnismál*, Freyr falls in love with a giant’s daughter, and sends his emissary Skírnir (the shiner, perhaps sunbeam) to woo her with a mixture of promises and terrifying threats. In *Hymiskviða* (the poem about Hymir), the god Þórr becomes involved in an attempt to obtain a huge cauldron for brewing strong drink from the giant Hymir; even more plainly farcical is *Prymskviða* (the poem about Prymr), in which Þórr disguises himself as the goddess Freyja, who has been offered to the giant Prymr as part of a

plan to reclaim the symbol of Þórr's authority, his great magic hammer. Down in Giantland, Þórr plays the part of the blushing bride, but is unable to disguise his gargantuan appetite for food and drink at the wedding feast. The giant, gently lifting his bride's veil for a kiss, is taken aback by Þórr's fiercely glittering eyes, but Þórr's cunning companion Loki explains this as the result of 'Freyja's sleeplessness due to her excited anticipation of marital union with the giant. His suspicions swept away by the thrill of this possibility, Prymr produces Þórr's hammer to hallow their marriage, and at this very last moment Þórr seizes his chance to retrieve his reputation, his masculinity and his hammer.

The broad comedy and sexual innuendo of *Prymskviða* are clear. But what kind of a society might represent its gods in such transgressive and demeaning circumstances? Some scholars, perhaps conditioned by the respectful piety of Christianity or Islam, for instance, have wanted to date these poems relatively late – that is, from a time when faith had waned. Others, by contrast, have seen such licence precisely as evidence of a healthy, robust confidence in the Norse pantheon, or linked it to the Bakhtinian theory of how carnival – the world upside down, the lord of misrule and so on – can function as a containing, and thus profoundly sustaining, safety valve within a living religion.

The earliest skaldic mythological poem is probably *Ragnarsdrápa* (the formal long poem of, or for, Ragnarr), and a stanza apparently belonging to it is the first poetic quotation – and the only skaldic one – in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*. This strophe is attributed to the poet Bragi Boddason, who remains a shadowy figure, but probably lived in Norway in the first half of the ninth century. In *Skáldskaparmál*, two sequences, each of five strophes, are said to be from this poem, which is described in the prose as a *drápa* for Ragnarr Loðbrók (a legendary ninth-century hero), and modern scholars have put together all the other half strophes quoted by Snorri, and produced a (still incomplete) *drápa* which apparently describes four scenes on a painted shield – the shield is a gift for which the *drápa* is thanks.

The poem which Snorri calls *Haustlög* (literally, 'autumn-long', perhaps an allusion to the time it took the poet to compose it) is also preserved in *Skáldskaparmál*, both as a sequence of strophes and as separate *helmingar* quoted by Snorri to illustrate mythological kennings; reconstructed, the poem numbers twenty strophes. But we know

rather more about its author, a poet called Þjóðólfr from the district of Hvinir in southern Norway, who wrote his poetry at the very end of the ninth century and the beginning of the tenth. Þjóðólfr is recorded as one of the court poets of King Haraldr Finehair of Norway, and was the foster-father of one of Haraldr's many illegitimate sons. Þjóðólfr also features in the first of Snorri's sagas of the Norwegian kings, *Ynglingasaga* (the story of the Ynglings, the royal family of Norway, from whom Haraldr claimed descent), because he is credited with authorship of Snorri's quoted verse source for this saga, *Ynglingatal* (a tally of the Ynglings, a genealogical list of semi-mythical Yngling kings, and how they met their deaths). *Ynglingatal* is not in skaldic *dróttkvætt* metre, but in an Eddaic metre, although its phraseology is skaldic.

The skaldic poem *Húsdrápa* is provenanced in even more detail: its author Úlfr Uggason was an Icелander, and he is mentioned in several sagas, as well as in *Landnámabók*. As well as details about the poet's life and family, which may well be historically reliable, in *Laxdæla saga* we hear the story of how *Húsdrápa* was composed: the chieftain Óláfr pá (the peacock) commissioned it to celebrate the building of his magnificent hall, which had mythological scenes carved on its panels; Úlfr is said to have recited the poem, which praises these carvings – and, according to the saga, Óláfr himself – at Óláfr's daughter's wedding feast. As his nickname suggests, Óláfr was renowned for his flamboyant grandeur, and it may well be that in commissioning a formal skaldic poem like *Húsdrápa*, Óláfr felt himself to be carrying on the traditions of the Norwegian aristocracy.

Snorri names Eilífr Goðrúnarson as the author of *Pórsdrápa*; as with *Ragnarsdrápa* and *Haustlög*, a sequence of stanzas from the poem is quoted in *Skáldskaparmál*, as well as illustrative half strophes scattered more widely. Difficult even by skaldic standards, what we have of *Pórsdrápa* describes an encounter between Þórr and a giant called Geirrøðr. Some scholars have felt uneasy about the boisterous way in which Þórr is apparently presented in the poem, and suspect burlesque. But what we know of Eilífr does not help us to decide: he is recorded in *Skáldatal* (a list of skalds and their royal patrons which is found in one manuscript of Snorri's *Edda*) as one of the court poets of Hákon jarl, who ruled Norway in the second half of the tenth century and is known from historical writings as a fierce champion of paganism. A half strophe dedicated to Hákon jarl is quoted in *Skáldskaparmál* – but so too is a half strophe from a Christian poem, to

illustrate how Christ may be designated by the kenning ‘king of Rome’. Skalds of the very earliest period were certainly pagan, but contact with, influence from and conversion to Christianity all in turn coloured the ideological stance of skaldic as well as Eddaic poetry.

Because surviving *drápur* are reconstructions, we cannot be sure of their original lengths or structure. One feature which has just about survived is the *stef*, or refrain, which seems to have distinguished the *drápa* from a less prestigious kind of poem called a *flokkr* (there are stories in the sagas of poets who narrowly escape with their lives after insulting a ruler with a *flokkr* instead of a *drápa*). In the two sequences of stanzas from *Ragnarsdrápa*, the following pair of short lines recurs:

Ræs göfumk reiðar mána	Rær’s chariot’s moon was given to me
Ragnarr ok fjöld sagna	By Ragnarr, and a multitude of stories.

Rær is the name of a mythical sea-king, whose chariot, or more broadly, vehicle, is a ship. The moon of the ship is the shield, that is, a bright, circular object which would decorate the sides of a warship. We can see from this *stef* how skaldic poets insert themselves into the poetry, as well as self-reflexively emphasizing the occasion and context of the poem. In Úlfr Uggason’s *Húsdrápa* the obscure refrain ‘Hlaut innan svá minnum’ (perhaps, ‘In this way it [the hall?] was hallowed with memorials’, a reference to the carvings of ancient myths) has survived, another reminder of the poem’s genesis.

A *helmingr* attributed to Bragi, and assumed to be part of *Ragnarsdrápa*, seems, with its call for attention, to represent a formal opening:

Vilið Hrafnketill heyra,	Hrafnketill, will you hear
hvé hreingróit steini	how the bright-grown with colour
Prúðar skalk ok þengil	Prúðr’s thief’s sole-leaf
þjófs ilja blað leyfa	(and also the prince) shall I praise.

The poet, addressing a named listener (whom we cannot identify), announces his intention of praising the shield. The word order of the original is even more distorted than my translation (‘Will you, Hrafnketill, hear / how the bright-grown with colour / Prúðr’s shall I and prince / thief’s sole’s leaf praise’). The kenning for the shield itself relies on a series of mythological allusions: Prúðr is the daughter of

the god Þórr, and although we have no other source for the story, she must have been abducted by the giant Hrungrnir, because in *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri tells us the story of how Hrungrnir was led to believe – idiotically – that the god Þórr would come at him from below the ground, and so prepared for the encounter by standing on his shield instead of holding it up before him. Thus, by arranging the genitives in the correct order, the kenning for shield can be decoded as ‘the leaf of the sole (of the foot) of the thief of Þrúðr’, and in fact Snorri has guided us, since he quotes the half stanza in a list of kennings for shield.

Blað in Old Norse means ‘leaf’ (as in the English phrase ‘a blade of grass’) and we can recognize a visual analogy between a shield and a leaf, as well as the appropriateness of Hrungrnir standing on vegetation. There may be some additional paradoxical word play on the word *blað* as a sword, rather than a shield, though Old Norse-Icelandic poets usually use other words for the blade of a cutting tool. But there is clear metaphorical play on the theme of vegetation in the adjectival phrase qualifying the shield kenning: the brightly painted scene on the shield is said to be (over)grown with colour. Further, the word *steinn* (‘colour’, as in the cognate English word ‘stain’) is also the word for ‘stone’, and as we learn from Snorri, Hrungrnir’s shield (like his heart!) was made of stone. And finally, the verb *leyfa* (to praise) recalls the Old Norse (and indeed the cognate English) word for ‘leaf’, *lauf*.

The density of this word play is entirely typical of skaldic verse. The strings of nouns which make up its kennings mean that each stanza is light on adjectives, and even lighter on verbs, but rich in wide-ranging allusion. And as we have seen, three of our four skaldic mythological poems purport not to tell a story in the conventional way, narrating incidents, but to describe scenes – to transform examples of visual art into poetry, the practice of *ekphrasis* familiar from, for example, Greek shield poems. If we turn to one stanza from the oldest surviving Norse skaldic mythological poem, *Ragnarsdrápa*, we can see how Bragi’s kennings allow him (and us) to range well beyond the visual image he is ostensibly describing:

Ok ofþerris æða	And the complete drought of veins’
ósk-Rán at þat sínum	desire-Rán thereupon her father
til fárhuga föera	– with deliberate malice –

feðr veðr boga hugði	intended to bring the storm of bows
þá er hristi-Sif hringa	when brandishing-Sif of swords
háls en böls of fylða	– filled with malevolence –
bar til byrja drösla	carried to the steeds of the breeze
baug örlygis draugi.	the neck-ring for the log of war.

This stanza is one of three which describes a scene from the story of Hildr (whose name means ‘battle’), who was abducted from her father Högni by a king called Heðinn. But what does Hildr look like? How was she dressed? What colour were the sails of her father’s ships? There is none of this sort of visual detail in the verse: the poet is concerned with action, motive, past history – the causality of narrative, not the detail of visual art. In *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri explains that when Högni went after Heðinn to get back his daughter, she was sent to him by Heðinn with a neck-ring as a peace offering. But she somehow bungled the attempt at reconciliation – was the neck-ring perhaps an androgynous gift? – and battle ensued. Hildr thus found herself – like so many other Germanic heroines – caught between husband and father; in this no-win situation, she revived by magic those warriors who had been killed in each day’s fighting, so that the battle is never-ending – and will go on, says Snorri, until *Ragnarök*.

Only with the help of Snorri’s explanatory prose can we work out what this stanza is about. The kenning for Hildr is ‘desire-Rán of the complete drought of veins’. Rán is the name of the Norse goddess of the sea: she is figured as a malevolent deity, dangerous to seamen. The noun ‘desire’ which is prefixed to her name in part reflects her hunger for men’s deaths, but in part alludes to Hildr’s own desirability – she was after all carried off by Heðinn. We can see the same double meaning in a poetic term for valkyrie (which itself means ‘chooser of the slain’): *ósk-mey*. The *ósk-meyjar* are both maidens who choose (selecting the finest warriors to continue the fight in Vallhöll) and chosen ones, those specially favoured by the god of battle, Óðinn. In fact, Óski is listed as one of Óðinn’s many names; it is related to the modern English word ‘wish’. This too may have a bearing on the meaning of the stanza: the never-ending battle has come about because of Hildr’s exercise of will. Bragi goes further than Snorri in presenting Hildr as the cause of all the slaughter, for he twice emphasizes her willed culpability: according to his verse she deliberately, and malevolently, sabotaged the peace talks.

It is wonderfully paradoxical that a kenning which uses the name of a sea goddess as its base word should link it to the compound 'excessive drought' (*ofperrir*). But the excessive drought of veins also has a sinister double meaning which reflects Hildr's extraordinary actions on the battlefield: she both causes veins to run dry because men are fatally wounded, and, impossibly, stanches the flow of blood from those same veins by restoring the dead to life each night. The other kenning for Hildr, 'brandishing-Sif of swords', uses a goddess's name – Sif – as its base word. In Norse tradition, Sif was the wife of Þórr; she was never, so far as we know, abducted (though her daughter Þrúðr was, as in the kenning for the giant Hrungnir which opens *Ragnarsdrápa*), although her hair was maliciously cut off by Loki, and replaced by hair of real gold which grew from her head by magic. It would seem, then, that the name Sif is used as part of the kenning without any particular aptness. But the name Sif is related to the English word 'sibling', and used as a plural common noun in Old Norse it means relationship by marriage. Could this allude to Hildr's situation as the woman related to both male protagonists – not only daughter but also wife? That the kenning has her brandishing rings – usually taken to refer to the ringed hilt of a war sword – stresses her femininity by ironic contrast: she played the woman's part by proffering a precious ring to her father, but purposefully transformed the gesture into an act of war. And the fate of her father – anchored, as Snorri tells us, off the Old Man of Hoy, the location elegantly and lightly evoked by Bragi's kenning 'steeds of the breeze' for his ships riding the choppy sea there – is foreshadowed in the kenning for him: the log of war. In skaldic poetry, warriors are commonly designated by kennings which use a tree name as a base word; sometimes they may withstand the storm of Óðinn (battle), but, like Högni, they may also be brutally felled in the fight.

The distinction between mythological and heroic subject material is not straightforward. The poet of *Ragnarsdrápa* would have been a pagan, and naturally turned to the names and activities of the gods in his skaldic stanzas. But Heðinn, Hildr and Högni are not divine figures, but human ones – or at least, in Hildr's case, a supernatural figure midway between woman and valkyrie. Bragi's description of the god Þórr's encounter with the World Serpent – widely celebrated over a long period in early Scandinavia, on the evidence of surviving picture stones – and the single surviving stanza alluding to how the goddess

Gefjon dragged the island of Zealand away from the Danish mainland with the aid of four monstrous oxen, steaming with the sweat of their Herculean task, are clearly mythological in the narrowest sense. However, the scene which has been preserved in most detail in *Ragnarsdrápa* is an heroic one: the grotesque death of the Gothic king Jörmunrekkr at the hands of the Burgundian brothers Hamðir and Sörli – an episode which is even more fully treated in the *Edda*, amongst its selection of heroic poems.

Heroic poems

Heroic poetry may be the product of a supposedly heroic society; or may depict (from an historically distant perspective) the legendary heroes of such a society; or show characters and situations in an heroic light: noble figures facing violence and death with courage and high-mindedness. The heroic poems of the *Edda* are hard to date; we cannot know much about the context of either their origins or reception before they were collected together in the Codex Regius. But their subject matter is the half-historical, half-legendary Germanic heroic age, when Germanic tribes such as the Goths and the Burgundians clashed – in history, with the Roman Empire, but in Eddaic verse, with each other, and with the incoming Huns. These great tribal struggles in continental Europe in the fourth and fifth centuries AD are figured in the *Edda* as dramas of pre-eminent individuals: aristocratic men and women fired by superhuman (and often, to modern minds, repellent) ideals of bravery, loyalty and vengeance.

The compiler of the Codex Regius has carefully ordered the poems so as to form a cycle following the extraordinary history of two legendary families, the Volsungs and the Giukungs. According to *Völsunga saga* (the saga of the Volsungs), a thirteenth-century Icelandic prose saga largely based on the poems in the *Edda*, the Volsungs traced their ancestry back to the god Óðinn, and the name Völsungr itself may derive from a shadowy Old Norse fertility god, Völsi, whose cult, involving the worship of a horse phallus, may lie behind a surprisingly graphic medieval Icelandic short story in which such pagan practices are held up to ridicule (but described with some relish). King Völsungr himself does not figure in the poems of the *Edda*. The first three poems concern two heroes, each called Helgi (the hallowed

one); Helgi Hundingsbani (Helgi the killer of Hunding) is said to be the grandson of Völsungr, and like his namesake Helgi Hjörvarðsson, he is victorious in grand, stylized battles and is loved by a valkyrie – perhaps explaining the name Helgi, the hero whose life is magically guarded by one of Óðinn’s battle-maidens, just as Hildr continually raised dead warriors to life in Bragi’s poem *Ragnarsdrápa*.

Much more celebrated in both Scandinavian and English traditions is another of Völsungr’s grandsons, the hero Sigurðr the dragon-slayer (in the Old English poem *Beowulf* it is his father Sigmundr, the son of Völsungr, who is credited with this epic deed). There is no poem about Sigmundr (though a prose link in the Codex Regius tells the story of how Sigmundr was immune to poison – thus explaining the skaldic kenning ‘drink of the Volsungs’, used of the deadly venom of the World Serpent in mythological poems). But Sigurðr is the first great hero of the Volsung cycle of legends, and his future is foretold in the poem *Grípisspá* (the prophecy of Grípir). Sigurðr’s foster-father is a malevolent, dwarfish smith called Reginn; from the prose links in the Codex Regius and Snorri’s retelling of the story in *Skáldskaparmál*, we can piece together the story of Reginn and his brothers Óttarr and Fáfnir: the god Loki killed an otter – Reginn’s brother Óttarr, shape-shifted – and the family demanded a huge ransom from the gods, the great but cursed treasure known in Scandinavian tradition as Fáfnir’s gold, or the hoard of the Nibelungs, and eventually, in Wagner, as *das Rheingold*. Reginn and his brother Fáfnir killed their father to get their hands on the gold; Fáfnir wrested it from Reginn and turned himself into the celebrated dragon in order that he might sit forever on the hoard. But Sigurðr killed the dragon, and so the gold passed into human keeping, in spite of attempted treachery by Reginn.

In the next phase of the cycle, Sigurðr becomes involved with the Giukungs. There is a gap in the *Edda*; a poem about Sigurðr and a valkyrie breaks off halfway through, and in the next poem Sigurðr is murdered. But both *Völsunga saga* and Snorri’s *Skáldskaparmál* supply the missing events, though not entirely consistently. Sigurðr meets the mysterious Brynhildr (identified as a valkyrie in *Völsunga saga*), and is betrothed to her, but ends up marrying Guðrún, the daughter of King Giúki. Brynhildr in turn marries Guðrún’s brother Gunnarr, but only after Sigurðr has taken Gunnarr’s place because Gunnarr and his horse fail to penetrate the wall of flame behind which Brynhildr

is incarcerated. Sigurðr is thus twice betrothed to Brynhildr, but she never marries him. The results of this tragedy of errors form the basis of a series of startlingly emotional poems in the *Edda*: Brynhildr, apparently unable to bear Guðrún's marriage to Sigurðr, eggs on her husband Gunnarr to kill his brother-in-law, and is consumed with both triumph and grief at her success. Guðrún is at first unable to give vent to her grief for the loss of her husband Sigurðr, but in some of the most expressive poetry in the *Edda*, she finally laments her sorrow, which is of course intensified by her brothers' guilt. Brynhildr castigates Gunnarr for the murder, and mocks him for having been led to believe (by Brynhildr herself) that Sigurðr slept with her before Gunnarr did. Brynhildr kills herself, but Guðrún lives on in her dreamlike grief, and becomes the central figure in the final group of poems. *Atlakviða* (the poem about Atli), in which Guðrún marries Attila the Hun, and murders him to avenge the death of her brothers, and *Hamðismál* (the lay of Hamðir) may be amongst the oldest in the *Edda*.

The figures in heroic poetry have a terrifying moral grandeur, but the heroic morality they uphold is far from attractive to modern readers, and may have struck even an early Icelandic audience more with awe than with admiration. The destructive nature of the heroic ideal is evident in *Atlakviða*, in which Guðrún also sacrifices her two young sons in order to be avenged on their father, her husband, Atli, who has killed her brothers Gunnarr and Högni. It is yet more evident in the poem *Hamðismál*. Here, Guðrún (as a rather unconvincing prose link in the manuscript explains) has tried unsuccessfully to drown herself after murdering Atli, and has ended up married to an otherwise unknown figure called King Jónakr. They have two sons, Hamðir and Sörli, and *Hamðismál* opens as Guðrún incites these two to avenge the death of their half-sister Svanhildr, who has been killed by the Gothic king Jörmunrekkr; in a narrative pattern familiar in medieval literature, perhaps most famously with a slight variation in the story of Tristan and Isolde, Jörmunrekkr had married a much younger bride, who was then charged with sleeping with his son. As the sons point out, Guðrún is inciting vengeance at the price of losing her last remaining blood relatives, but they are helpless to refuse her whetting. Vengeance is both imperative and impossible, and the poem's opening stanza delicately but pressingly conveys the tragedy of the situation:

Sprutto á tái	Sprouted on the threshold
tregnar íðir,	sorrowful tasks,
groeti álfa	the weeping of elves
in glýstömo.	stemmed of joy.
Ár um morgin	Early in the morning,
manna bölvva	of the troubles of men
sútir hverjar	all griefs
sorg um kveykva.	kindle sorrow.

Appropriate to both the opening of a poem and the beginning of a tragic history, the setting is anticipatory in time and space: a threshold, at dawn, and the events yet to unfold figured as new shoots of organic growth. Beyond the world of men, supernatural presences – here, the elves – foresee what is to come, and grieve for it. Their tears flow unstemmed; paradoxically, it is their joy which is dammed up, and the warmth in their hearts is not pleasure but misery.

Guðrún incites her sons' revenge by recalling the terrible manner of Svanhildr's death: Jörmunrekkr has had her trampled by horses – not, crucially, wild horses, but slow, ceremonial, gait-trained war-steeds, elegantly patterned black and white. The untamed brutality of this execution is in shocking contrast with the control which has been imposed on the horses; in the same way, when Hamðir recalls to Guðrún how her first husband Sigurðr was murdered beside her in bed, the intricate black-and-white pattern of the bedspread – the finest product of skilled craftsmen – is said to be soaked in blood. Men, these images seem to say, are capable of equally high orders of savagery and skill.

Hamðir and Sörli are unable to refuse Guðrún's incitement, though they know that their task is hopeless, and that Guðrún is sending them to certain death. Hamðir helplessly argues with her, pointing out what is obvious – that satisfying her need for vengeance will destroy the remaining strands of her family line. But they are not simply innocent victims. On their way to the court of King Jörmunrekkr, their half-brother Erpr offers to go along with them, but they contemptuously disdain his help, and kill him when he insults them as cowards. Erpr has offered to help them 'as one foot helps another', but they fail to understand his intuitive image of the family as an organic whole, a body whose parts only operate fully in unison, and mock him. Surprisingly enough, the two brothers, against

all the odds, manage to attack and fatally wound Jörmunrekkr – there is a suggestion that they are magically protected, like the Helgi warriors early in the *Edda*. But though horribly maimed, Jörmunrekkr in his dying breath gives the order for the brothers to be stoned, ‘since weapons will not pierce them’, and at once they realize the implications of refusing Erpr’s help: ‘The head would now be cut off / if Erpr were still alive.’ Suppressing the urge to recrimination, they die bravely, resigned to their fate.

The figures in the heroic poetry of the *Edda* operate on the very furthest edges of what we as readers recognize as human behaviour. The poems’ locations are distant too – the outer reaches of continental Europe, far across rain-drenched mountains and through untracked forests. Materially, their world has a perfunctory magnificence which reflects no specific historical setting: glittering armour, untold wealth and endlessly stretching mead-benches. And their poets make no attempt to place the events of their poems in any historical time-frame; quite the contrary, as the poet of *Hamðismál* puts it: ‘What happened was not today / or yesterday; / a long time has / passed since then; / there are few things older / that this was not twice as old again.’ But these heroic events are not merely wild fantasies: they have a basis in history, although confusingly, what can be pieced together from the accounts of Latin historians about the struggles of the so-called barbarian tribes on the continent suggests that the earliest events in the *Edda* cycle were the most recent in historical terms. The sixth-century historian Jordanes, in his *History of the Goths*, recounts the death of Attila the Hun (who, incidentally, is figured here and in other medieval sources, such as the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*, as a noble and impressive figure) in a form which nevertheless clearly relates to the matter of *Atlakviða*. The emperor has a new bride – a Germanic woman by the sound of her name, Hildico – and on their wedding night, he chokes in his sleep during a nosebleed. But accounts soon sprang up suggesting that his foreign wife had murdered him. Jordanes also writes about the death of Jörmunrekkr in a form which closely resembles *Hamðismál*: in the *History of the Goths*, Sunilda is torn apart by wild horses, and her death is avenged by her brothers Ammius and Sarus (they fail, however, to kill Jörmunrekkr; invading Huns finish him off). But while in the *Edda*, Guðrún is first married to Attila, then murders him, and then sends her sons from a subsequent marriage to kill Jörmunrekkr, in history, the death of Jörmunrekkr

(and the Hunnish invasions) took place in the fourth century AD, and the suspicious death of Attila almost a century later. The Old Norse cycle inverts the historical sequence here, and characters such as Sigurðr and Brynhildr, from early in the Eddaic cycle, may derive from historical figures from the sixth and even seventh centuries.

Archaeology may substantiate some aspects of Eddaic heroic poetry. The discovery of an apparently ritual deposition of a woman's body in a Danish peatbog, for instance, chillingly confirms both the testimony of the first-century Roman historian Tacitus, in his *Germania*, an account of the Germanic tribes on the continent, and the reference in the Eddaic poem known as the third lay of Guðrún, in which one of Atli's mistresses accuses Guðrún of adultery. Her guilt, and Guðrún's innocence, are established in a trial by ordeal (surely an anachronistically late procedure) but her punishment – to be thrown into a bog – recalls a much more ancient practice. And even more evocative is archaeological evidence of intermarriage: of Burgundian skeletons whose skulls have been distorted to form the conical shape apparently favoured by the Huns. Relations between Huns and Burgundians are violent and catastrophic in both historical and poetic texts, but everyday life (and death) is not the concern of heroic poetry.

Mythological themes are always related to the concerns of the societies which either produced or transmitted them. Some, such as creation, apocalypse and resurrection, may reflect universal human anxieties about life; others may be particular to one or other culture or society. That so many mythological allusions in Old Norse-Icelandic texts allude to feuding, oath-breaking and dynastic succession reflects the specific concerns of early Scandinavian or even specifically Icelandic society. Similarly, heroic poems may derive – however distantly – from historical events which captured the imaginations of poets who viewed them as the past of their own ancestors. But in all these cases, the resulting poetic texts transcend their recoverable relation to reality, a relation which becomes little more than a curiosity, an incidental interest. The worlds of the Norse gods and heroes, in both space and time, are constructs of the imagination, self-contained and self-validating. This is especially true of one of the strangest poems in the *Edda*, *Völundarkviða* (the poem about Völundr), in which the heroic and the mythological are impressionistically woven together.

The poem begins with a paradox: *meyjar flugo* (maidens flew). These creatures, we can surmise, are swan-maidens. Strangely poised between

two worlds, they are impelled by mysterious forces – like migrating birds – and settle by a lake shore, yet they behave like aristocratic princesses, spinning linen and choosing husbands for themselves. But after seven years, they disappear as ineluctably as they arrived, to the anguish of their chosen mates. One of the men, Völundr, waits in his wintry home in Úlfdalir (‘Wolfdales’), obsessively forging symbols of his loss – gold rings. One night, soldiers sent by King Niðuðr steal one ring, and Völundr irrationally supposes that his bride has returned. Dropping his guard, he falls asleep, and awakes to find himself captured by the king, who imprisons him, and gives the missing ring to his own daughter, Böðvildr. Völundr, even caged, is a terrifying, hardly human figure. The king’s wife sees the danger:

Tenn hánom teygiaz er hánom er tét sverð ok hann Böðvildar baug um þekkir; Ámon eru augo ormi þeim enom frána.	He bares his teeth when a sword is shown him and he Böðvildr’s ring recognizes; his eyes remind me of the glittering snake.
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She advises that he should be crippled so that he cannot escape. But her small sons come to stare at this dangerous captive, and in a scene of great and sinister power, he asks them to return in secret, because he has something to show them. He kills them, turning their body parts into improbable but spine-chilling jewellery. And his next visitor is Böðvildr herself, who has broken the ring, and has come to wheedle the goldsmith into repairing it for her. He seduces her, in a vile parody of his union with the swan-maiden, and then, having taunted Niðuðr’s wife with a triumphant account of all his deeds of vengeance, he magically rises into the air, his strange disappearance echoing the supernatural departure of his swan-maiden at the beginning of the poem. The poem ends on a poignant note of human weakness, as Böðvildr describes how powerless she was to resist Völundr.

The world of *Völundarkviða* is both vividly physical – especially in the descriptions of the snowy landscape inhabited by Völundr and his brothers, or the sudden flash of moonlight on the shields of Niðuðr’s soldiers – and at the same time improbably metaphorical, as when Völundr rises on invisible wings, his shape shifting from human to

avian, just as his bride metamorphosed from swan to maiden. The status of Völundr himself is equally liminal: at the outset apparently human, he is described later in the poem as 'lord of the elves' – perhaps an allusion to his identity as one of the dwarfish smiths of Old Norse tradition. In literary terms, his fate at the court of Niðuðr is clearly in the classical tradition of the crippled smith, like Vulcan or Hephaestus. The danger he presents, even when imprisoned, is surprisingly reminiscent of the picture of the incarcerated, bestial Hannibal Lecter in Thomas Harris's *Silence of the Lambs*; the violent man who cannot be disempowered is plainly an archetypally frightening figure. And is Völundr the hero or the villain of *Völundarkviða* – or just a horrifying example of humanity pushed to the verge of existence? Even more strongly than the other poems of the *Edda*, *Völundarkviða* creates its own world, its own morality (or amorality), and then focuses with drama and intensity on its individuals and their conflicts.

Praise poems

The court poet in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition eulogized – in verse – his royal patron, who paid him for this service. Skalds were professional poets producing *ad hominem* public poetry designed for oral delivery at the courts of tenth- and eleventh-century Norwegian rulers. The praise – usually centred on success in battle – was contained not only in the substance of the verse (battles won, territories conquered, enemies felled, and the favour of the god of battle, Óðinn, who was also, of course, the god of poetry, thus closely connecting the two activities) but also in the complexity and formality of the poem, or *drápa*, itself. For all these reasons, skaldic praise poetry is nowadays perhaps the least appreciated branch of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, believed to be bombastic, militaristic, impersonal and esoteric. But skalds were highly skilled verbal craftsmen who could yet sustain vivid metaphors and insinuate veiled allusions; skaldic poetry is a remarkable blend of loudly proclaimed technical virtuosity and unexpected literary subtlety.

Although the first skalds – such as Bragi Boddason or Þjóðólfr – were Norwegians, most skalds whose praise poetry has come down to us were Icelanders. One of the most celebrated was Einarr Helgason, nicknamed *skálaglamm* (the tinkle of scales), which is explained

in saga prose as commemorating a gift of weighing scales from his patron Hákon jarl, who ruled Norway in the late tenth century. It is more likely that the name refers to the payment Einarr customarily expected for his work, as may be the case too with the title of his most celebrated *drápa*, as reconstructed by modern editors: *Vellekla* ('shortage of gold'). What is probably the opening stanza of *Vellekla* very aptly demonstrates in its intricate imagery the symbiotic quality of battle and poetry:

Hugstóran biðk heyra	I bid the high-minded one to hear
– heyr, jarl, Kvasir dreyra –	– hear, O earl, the blood of Kvasir –
foldar vörð á fyrða	(the guardian of the land) the company
fjarðleggjar brim dreggjar.	of the fjord-leg's surf of yeast.

Typically, the poet foregrounds himself as poet while praising his subject (high-minded earl, guardian of the land). The kennings for poetry depend on detailed knowledge of the various mythological stories about its origins. According to Snorri, the gods made a supremely wise man out of their blended spit, and called him Kvasir (his name is suggestively cognate with Indo-European words for strong drink), but the dwarfs killed him and turned his blood into a mead which would inspire poetic composition; poetry becomes synonymous with the blood of Kvasir. In the same way, poetry can be called the surf of the yeast of the company of the fjord's leg: the leg of the fjord is a rock, dwarfs are the company associated with rocky places, and their yeast-surf is the liquid defined by yeast – that is, brewed drink or mead, so that the whole kenning denotes poetry, the mead the dwarfs made. The recitation of poetry is implicitly associated with blood-letting – poet and patron are linked by this bizarre, synaesthetic word play – and the intellectual activity of composing verse is by the same token linked with Hákon jarl's most spectacular achievements: bloody successes in battle. The defining words for the mead of poetry – fjord, sea-surf – also recall the sea-battles which were amongst Hákon's most celebrated victories. The thirty-seven strophes now believed to constitute *Vellekla* celebrate Hákon's career in complex metaphorical variations on blood, battle, sea and poetry, flatteringly implying not only divine ancestry, but also divine favour, for the earl: since he took power, Einarr tells us, 'nú groer jörð sem áðan' ('now the earth becomes green, as it used to be').

Quite different in tone and style is Eyvindr Finnsson's memorial eulogy for another Hákon – Hákon gøði ('the Good'), who had been fostered by the Anglo-Saxon king Athelstan, a Christian. Hákon had failed in his attempt to convert Norway, and Eyvindr's *Hákonarmál* expresses the poet's unease about the king's liminal status. He envisages Óðinn's valkyries determining the outcome of Hákon's final battle, and although the action is described in typically flamboyant terms ('wound-flames [swords] burned in bloody injuries'; 'wound-sea [blood] surged around the sword's headland [the shield]') the valkyries are unexpectedly dignified and sympathetic as they explain why victory was not granted, and invite Hákon to join Óðinn in Valhalla. The poem ends with a moving tribute to Hákon; Eyvindr imagines that not before *Ragnarök* will Norway have a ruler as good, and echoes the famous lines from *Hávamál* about the transience of all created things – another apocalyptic vision which Hákon's death may seem to herald – set against the permanence of a good reputation. *Hákonarmál* is written in Eddaic measures, and the poet does not call attention to himself and his craft. It has been suggested that his nickname, *skáldaspillir* ('spoiler of poets'), charges him with plagiarism, but perhaps it refers simply to his reputation: his understated excellence eclipses others.

Snorri, at the end of his historical saga about Hákon the Good, quotes all the surviving verses of *Hákonarmál* in sequence, as a concluding epitaph. More typically in the sagas that make up *Heimskringla*, however, Snorri quotes individual strophes by court poets, ostensibly to corroborate the facts of the prose narrative. Often, a strophe is presented as if the poet composed, or at least recited, it on the spot, and while sometimes this may represent some historical actuality, in other cases the verse may have been excerpted from a formal *drápa* and quoted individually in this lively way. Þormóðr Kolbrúnaskáld (the poet of a woman with coal-black eyebrows) was a court poet to King Óláfr the saint, and many of his stanzas are quoted in Snorri's saga about the king. After Óláfr's death at the battle of Stiklastaðir in 1030, Þormóðr, himself fatally wounded, is shown discussing who fought most bravely. Some praised Óláfr; others cited other men; Þormóðr spoke this verse:

Ört vas Áleifs hjarta.	Óláfr's heart was valiant.
Óð framm konungr blóði,	The king waded forward in blood;

rekin bitu stál, á Stiklar	inlaid blades bit at Stiklar-
stöðum, kvaddi lið böðvar.	staðir; he called troops to battle.
Élþolla sák alla	Fir trees of the storm – I saw them all –
Jalfaðs nema gram sjalfan,	of Óðinn (except the prince himself)
reyndr vas flestr, í fastri	(most were tested) were, in the fierce
fleindrífu sér hlífa.	arrow-blizzard, protecting themselves.

Óláfr was a Christian king pitted against the allied forces of conservative paganism in Norway. And yet Þormóðr celebrates his bravery, and laments his fall, in the old pre-Christian poetic form of skaldic verse – and perfect *dróttkvætt* – even including the name of Óðinn in a kenning for warriors: fir trees of the storm of Óðinn. This kenning is part of the sustained metaphor in the stanza: warriors are like storm-swept trees, and arrows hail down on them; by implication, some may be felled. But the king himself dominates the stanza, from the authoritatively end-stopped first line, which places the king in the front line of battle, to the contrast between his valour and the understandable defensiveness of his troops. Þormóðr refers to himself in the stanza, but in what seems to be a claim for authenticity, for the authority of the eye-witness.

Hákon jarl was the last pagan ruler of Norway, and Icelandic skalds continued to praise and commemorate his Christian successors in skaldic verse. Like Þormóðr, they cut down on mythological references, and coined new kennings – ruler of the hall of the wind (the heavens, and thus, Christ) or, more conventionally, lord of angels – to designate the new divinities. But kings were still praised for their success in battle, and poets still rejoiced in the felling of enemy troops and the downfall of the king's opponents.

Occasional poetry

As we have seen, stanzas from praise poems might be presented as occasional verses, or *lausavísur*, stand-alone stanzas (or those which had been excerpted from *drápur*) presented as if recited impromptu by the poet in response to a narrative event. Court poets were celebrities, and historical writings are full of lively vignettes with a verse at their heart, humorously illustrating the close but sometimes spiky relationship between court poet and patron. In Snorri's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (the saga about Óláfr Tryggvason, who was the first

Christian king of Norway), the poet Hallfreðr hopes to be taken on by the king, but his reputation has preceded him, and the king nicknames him *vandræðaskáld* (troublesome poet). Hallfreðr at once claims a christening gift, and the king gives him a sword, demanding in his turn a skaldic stanza – but the catch is that the stanza must include the word ‘sword’ in every line. At once, as the prose presents it, Hallfreðr responds:

Eitt es sverð, þat's sverða,	A single sword of swords it is,
sverðauðgan mik gerði.	which made me sword-rich.
Fyr svip-Njörðum sverða	Before sweeping Njörðs of swords
sverðótt mun nú verða.	it will be thick with swords.
Muna vansverðat verð	There won't be a lack of swords;
verðr emk þriggja sverða,	I am worth three swords
jarðar leggs ef yrði	if there might be a painted
umbgerð at því sverði.	scabbard for this sword.

In some versions of the story, Óláfr immediately points out that one line doesn't contain the word ‘sword’; Hallfreðr's riposte is that ‘sword’ occurs twice in another line. In this anecdote, the point is not the quality of the stanza, but the witty exchange between poet and patron. After Óláfr's death, Hallfreðr composed for him the first Christian memorial eulogy in skaldic verse.

Many family sagas also contain skaldic stanzas which are presented as the impromptu responses of saga characters. The protagonists of one particular subset of family sagas are presented in the narrative as poets: not the court poets of historical writings, but Icelanders at home, amongst their friends, enemies and neighbours (in fact, some poets – Hallfreðr the troublesome poet among them – had careers as court poets as well as living in Iceland, but family sagas never include details of their professional poetry in the narrative). These poetic heroes were also celebrated (if somewhat unprincipled and unreliable) lovers. The author of *Kormaks saga* (the saga of Kormakr) quotes skaldic stanzas which are both attributed to Kormakr and spoken by him in the narrative, as dialogue. It is possible that some of them originally belonged to longer sequences – formal love poems of the kind apparently deplored by the church authorities – and equally possible that some were late compositions not by Kormakr at all. At the beginning of the saga, Kormakr falls in love with Steingerðr, and describes the experience in verse:

Brunnu beggja kinna	They blazed, both cheeks' bright lights
björt ljós á mik drósar	of the woman, on me
oss hloegir þat eigi –	– we don't find that funny –
eldhúss of við felldan;	over the kitchen door;
enn til ökkla svanna	further, at the ankles of the woman,
ítrvaxins gat ek líta	beautifully formed, I managed to gaze
þrá muna oss um ævi	– the anguish will not as long as I live
eldask – hjá þreskeldi.	grow old – by the threshold.

According to the prose, Kormakr and a friend are in the main room of a farmhouse at which they've been working, and the girl Steingerðr is spying on the newcomers, hiding behind a door which reveals only her eyes and ankles. It's an appealing, flirtatious scene, and the poet livens it up further with clever word play which is emphasized by the internal rhymes: Steingerðr's bright eyes almost burn him with their intensity, and the word for kitchen, *eldhús* – literally, 'fire-house' – is echoed by the verb 'to grow old' – *eldask* – and the word for 'threshold', *þreskeldr*, which in itself figures the beginning of a relationship, in this case one which will continue until the end of the saga, and Kormakr's dying breath. The romance of Kormakr's falling deeply – and painfully – in love at first sight is very striking, and even reminiscent of continental medieval courtly love texts.

But whilst Icelandic poets extol their lovers, they also excoriate their rivals. Kormakr is challenged to a duel by Steingerðr's husband's brother; when the brother fails to turn up, Kormakr mocks him for his cowardice, and manages a swipe at Steingerðr's husband at the same time:

hringsnyrtir þarf hjarta	the sword-polisher needs a heart
háðœrr í sik fœra,	– driven mad by mockery –
	put into himself
þó's men-Gunnar manni	(and yet the necklace-goddess's man
meira vant, ór leiri.	is more lacking) made out of clay.

There is an elegant allusion to the name Steingerðr (literally, 'girdle of gemstones') in Kormakr's kenning for her, goddess of the necklace. But presumably 'sword-polisher', as a kenning for Steingerðr's brother-in-law Þorvarðr, is insulting: brave warriors went out and stained swords with blood, rather than staying at home and keeping them shiny. However, the chief insult is the comparison between Þorvarðr and a giant, cowardly figure which, according to Snorri, the gods had

made out of clay. Even this pathetic creature's heart, Kormakr implies, would be braver than Þorvarðr's; and Steingerðr's husband is even less impressive. Accusations of cowardice were particularly offensive, because cowardice was held to indicate – or at least, to attract accusations of – effeminacy; such sexual insult, or *níð*, invited violent vengeance. There is in the Icelandic sagas of poets a strong link between lover poets and grossly insulting verse, but it's not clear whether this is because poets were primarily satirists (as in early Irish tradition, for example) or because lovers inevitably made enemies of husbands.

Given the pattern of feuding which lies at the heart of so many family saga narratives, it is not surprising that many *lausavísur* are quoted as characters' responses to a conflict which is to come – and thus express defiance and determination – or to celebrate a fight well fought, a simple boast by the poet of his own success. And outside the poets' sagas, the fact that a character speaks in verse merely foregrounds, stylistically, what is being said; it is an extra-diegetical narrative device, not an indication that the character is recognized as a poet in the world of the saga narrative. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, a man called Þórarinn becomes involved, most unwillingly, in a violent conflict, and describes what happened in skaldic verse. But, in a striking reversal of the link between killing and composing evident in the praise of the court poets, Þórarinn paradoxically uses skaldic strophes to undermine the heroic ethic, expressing in them instead his disgust and despair:

Knátti hjörr und hetti,	My poet's blade, under the helmet,
hræflóð, bragar Móða,	found a spot (corpse-torrent
rauk of sóknar sæki	flowed over the warrior);
slíðrbeittr staðar leita;	it was razor sharp;
blóð fell, en vas váði	blood fell over ears and yet
vígtjalds náar skáldi,	the danger of the battle tent [sword]
	was near the poet;
þá vas döemisalr dóma	then the judgement hall of decisions
dreyrafullr, of eyru.	was filled with gore.

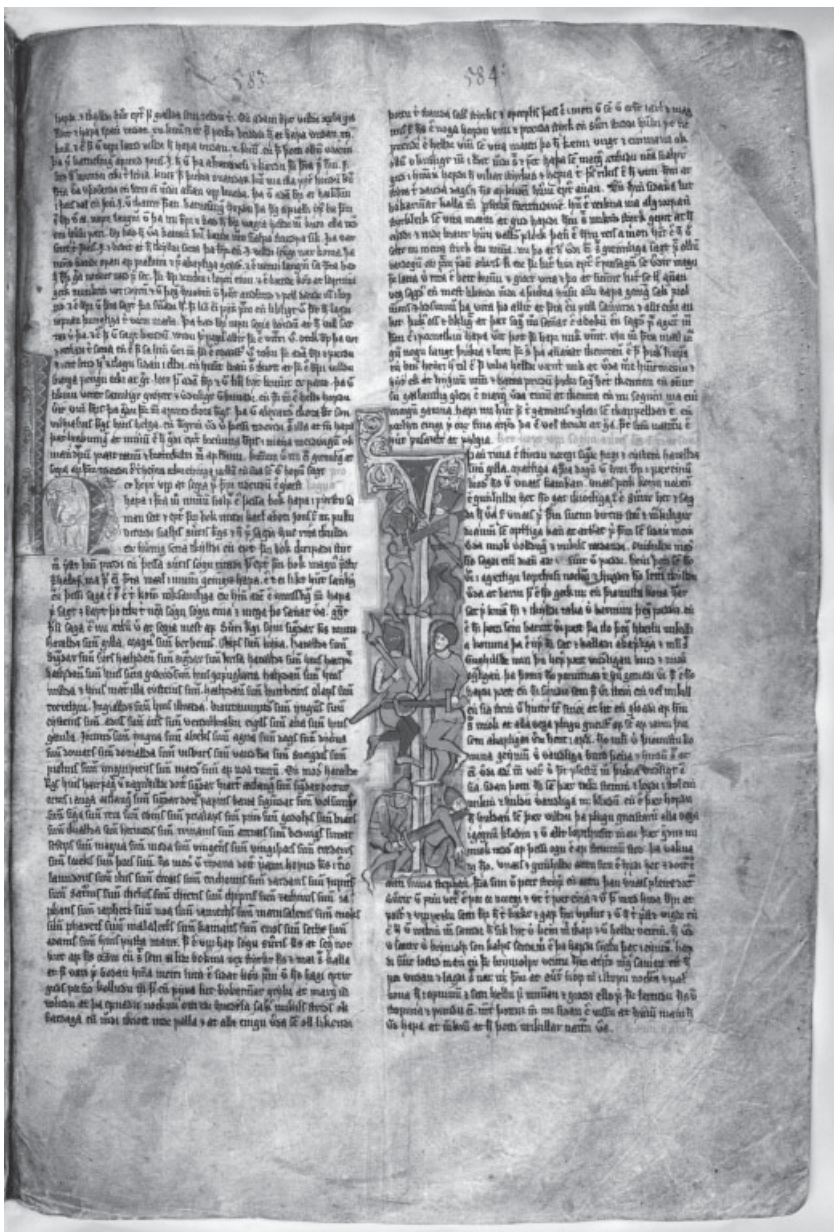
In this stanza, Þórarinn makes clear his revulsion at the violence. He minimizes his own part in the action – the sword seems to strike of its own volition – and contrasts the rational, creative part of himself with the almost grotesque bloodshed. He has killed his opponent, having split open his skull, but he does not boast about this, instead,

wonderingly, juxtaposing the civilized potential of the human brain – the judgement hall of decisions – with the crude physical damage done to it.

In the saga prose, Þórarinn is presented as a peaceable, taciturn man, and what he expresses in these verses could have no place in the down-to-earth practicality of that prose, which implies rather than expresses emotional responses. Þórarinn does not recite his verses as a sequence; his friends and family prise them out of him, one by one, as they question him insistently about the fighting. In this way, the stanzas are expressive not only in themselves, but also in the way the author of the saga narrative uses them. In some family sagas, especially *Grettis saga*, for example, skaldic stanzas are purposefully put to use by the saga author to provide the characters with expressive, metaphorical or cryptic dialogue, to convey information which an externally focused narrative cannot – for instance, to carry soliloquy. The particular quality of the verse – though many stanzas in saga narrative are highly crafted and sophisticated in themselves – is less at issue than what the speaking of the verse conveys. At the end of *Grettis saga*, Grettir's brother Þorsteinn recites a skaldic verse to commemorate his brother's death. Grettir is praised in conventional skaldic terms as a remarkable hero – but the context is at odds with this traditional eulogy, because the verse is recited in Byzantium, and Þorsteinn is not a skald, but belongs to a new era, and a new literary tradition: the world of troubadours, of fine ladies and courtly romance. Grettir himself is shown throughout his saga as a figure from the old heroic past, already anachronistic in his saga's society, and the speaking of skaldic verse identifies him as such. Þorsteinn's tribute underlines this, for at the court of the emperor of Byzantium, few people could understand this strange kind of poetry. The author of *Grettis saga* is using the traditions of skaldic praise poetry to comment, self-reflexively, on Old Norse-Icelandic tradition itself.

Historical Writings

Although the earliest surviving historical text in Old Norse – Ari's *Íslendingabók* – takes Iceland itself as its subject, it anchors the date of the settlement of Iceland not only to Norwegian history (it was during the reign of King Haraldr Finehair, the son of Hálfðan the Black)



Detail of manuscript taken from *Flateyjarbók*, a fourteenth-century Icelandic manuscript book containing a large and varied collection of Old Norse-Icelandic historical works, and beautifully illustrated. Arna Magnússon Institute

but also to English history (the year that the viking Ívarr the boneless martyred King Edmund of East Anglia) and to the history of Christianity itself: 870 years after the birth of Christ. *Íslendingabók* is introduced as having been shortened by the omission of information about genealogy and *konunga ævi* (the lives, or perhaps regnal dates, of kings), so it is clear that from the outset, Icelandic historians saw the history of their own nation as rooted in the history of kings. As time went on, Icelanders produced more and more royal histories, not only of Norwegian kings, but also of the kings of Denmark and the rulers of the Orkneys. Throughout the early Middle Ages, the history of most of Scandinavia was produced in Iceland, in Old Norse.

The backbone of the earliest histories must have been lists: the genealogies and regnal dates Ari refers to; the careful chronology of law-speakers in Iceland, as set out in *Íslendingabók*; tallies of bishops; and perhaps brief annals (though it is suggested that surviving Icelandic annals are themselves derived from historical sagas, rather than the other way round). One can easily imagine how productive the union of this kind of factual scholarship with oral storytelling skills would have been, and oral traditions must have contributed a considerable part to the finished histories. In Norway, in the twelfth century, clerics were beginning to write history in the continental style: Latin chronicles such as the *Historia Norwegiæ* (history of Norway) or the *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* (history of the ancient kings of Norway) whose authors took a high moral tone, and paraded their learning in the narrative in the form of edifying quotations from classical authors. But there is also a history written in Old Norse: the *Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sögum* (summary of sagas of the kings of Norway, so-called in the mistaken belief that it was a précis of a longer work; the text now survives in an Icelandic copy). In the *Ágrip*, skaldic verses are quoted in the text, implying that they have been used as source material. This, then, is one of the foundations for the great Icelandic histories.

The other catalyst for the creation of historical sagas was the long-established clerical tradition of producing hagiography – the lives of saints. In medieval Europe, kings were prime subjects for canonization – mostly for political reasons – and in the biographies of royal saints, hagiography and history came together. The two most celebrated Scandinavian royal saints were Óláfr Tryggvason (d. 1000) and Óláfr Haraldsson – Óláfr inn helgi (St Óláfr)(d. 1030). Lives of

both kings were produced early on, and ranged from the most pious Latin hagiography – Óláfr Tryggvason was especially venerated in Iceland because he sent the missionaries and played an important role in the Conversion – to much more secular, political histories. Óláfr inn helgi was a difficult subject for hagiographers, both because of his early career as a ruthless viking, raiding all around the North Sea coasts, and because of his equally ruthless (though finally failed) attempts to subjugate Norwegian earls to his Christian hegemony. One of the most extraordinary royal subjects was King Sverrir of Norway; he was brought up in the Orkneys, and became a priest, but believing himself (or, perhaps, pretending) to be a rightful heir to the Norwegian throne, he seized power there and commissioned an Icelandic cleric, Abbot Karl Jónsson, to write his biography.

King Sverrir came to the throne in 1177, and when Icelandic and Norwegian historians began producing not individual lives, but collections of royal biographies offering a greater sweep of Norwegian history, this was the year at which they finished. The histories known since the seventeenth century as *Fagrskinna* and *Morkinskinna* (both named, contrastingly, after the physical qualities of their manuscripts: ‘Fine vellum’ and ‘Rotten vellum’) were compiled from largely unknown sources by Icelanders in the thirteenth century; *Fagrskinna* goes right back to Hálfðan the Black in the ninth century, but *Morkinskinna* seems only to fill in the gap between the end of the Óláfr sagas and the story of Sverrir. Both are highly readable narratives, full of dramatic detail and lively exchanges. *Fagrskinna* is particularly accomplished in purely literary terms, while *Morkinskinna* is more rambling, though it does contain a number of beautifully related individual short stories, or *þættir* (*þáttr*, the singular, means a single strand of yarn or rope), such as the simple but elegant tale of an Icelander called Auðun, who buys a white bear in Greenland, and plans to offer it as a gift to King Sveinn of Denmark. On the way, the Norwegian King Haraldr harðráði (Harold the Hard-Ruler, who was killed at Stamford Bridge) asks Auðun to give him the bear instead; Auðun refuses to be swayed from his original plan, and in his innocent integrity ends up playing the two kings off against one another, and being loaded with gifts by both. Both *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna* are full of skaldic stanzas, which has always been held to guarantee their fundamental reliability as history in spite of the evident fictionality of their narrative style.

Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* is without doubt the finest of the great Norse historical compendia. Snorri probably began with a single biography: the life story of King Óláfr the saint – Óláfr inn helgi. A separate version of this saga has survived, but the biography of Óláfr also forms the centrepiece of Snorri's complete history *Heimskringla* ('World's Orb' – the opening words of the text, with which Snorri majestically locates Scandinavia, and the homeland of the dynasty which is to be the subject of his great work). Óláfr's childhood and early career as a viking are not at all saintly in Snorri's account, and sections of the narrative based on the poet Sigvatr's sequence *Víkingarvísur* (Viking verses) celebrate Óláfr's victories in battle in traditional style. But when Óláfr lays claim to the Norwegian throne, and finds himself struggling not only to maintain the integrity of his boundaries against neighbouring Sweden and Denmark, but also to secure the loyalty of powerful factions within his realm, Snorri's skills as a sophisticated political analyst become evident; the saga narrative is a detailed and compelling secular history of diplomacy and military campaigns, intrigue and betrayal.

Óláfr's enforcement of Christianity, and his punishments for insurrection, are often brutal and merciless. Individual incidents are depicted in vivid terms. One of Óláfr's enemies, a king called Hróerekr, was also his kinsman; feeling it shameful to kill him, Óláfr instead puts out his eyes. But this only intensifies Hróerekr's desire for vengeance, and though minded at all times by two guards, he still contrives a violent plot to escape Óláfr's custody: one night, after a heavy drinking session, he asks to be taken to the outside privy, and then shakes off his minders, who are swiftly murdered. The poet Sigvatr, next to visit the privy, slips on its steps; putting out a hand to save himself he feels wetness, and makes a cheerfully coarse remark about the after-effects of drinking. Once inside the lighted hall, it looks as if Sigvatr has hurt himself in the fall more badly than he thought, for he is covered in blood. But the blood is not his, and thus the murder of the king's retainers is discovered.

Hróerekr's eventual fate is, by contrast, introduced with a comic anecdote. King Óláfr has staying with him an Iclander, Þórarinn:

One morning the king woke up; other men were still asleep. The sun had just risen, and the room was in broad daylight. The king saw that Þórarinn had stuck one of his feet out of the bedclothes. He looked at

the foot for a while. Then other men in the lodging awoke. The king said to Þórarinn, 'I've been awake for a while, and I've seen a sight which seems to me worth seeing, and that is a man's foot than which, in my view, there will be none uglier in the whole town.' . . . Þórarinn said, 'I'm ready to bet that I can find an uglier foot in the town.' . . . He stretched his other foot out from the bedclothes, and it was not at all lovelier; the big toe was missing. Then Þórarinn said, 'Look at this foot, Sire, which is uglier because it lacks a toe; and I've won the bet.' The king replied, 'The other foot is uglier, because it has five horrible toes on it, while this only has four.'

Þórarinn's penalty is to take Hróerekr away to Greenland.

King Óláfr eventually loses his battle against the Norwegian opposition, and is himself exiled, in Russia. But this marks a turning point in Snorri's narrative. Óláfr has a dream in which King Óláfr Tryggvason urges him to return to Norway, and the attempt to reclaim the throne is presented as a Christian campaign, although there is to be none of the savage burning and depredation which was, ironically, the fate of those Norwegians who previously resisted King Óláfr's attempts to Christianize. Óláfr is credited with healing miracles. He leads his army into the great battle of Stiklarstaðir with the rallying cry 'Fram, fram, Kristsmenn, krossmenn, konungsmenn!' ('Onward, onward, men of Christ, men of the Cross, men of the King!') But he is killed in battle, and his troops defeated. After his death, miracles are associated with his body, including its incorruption after being buried for a year.

Snorri, unnervingly, gives clear expression in his narrative to contrary voices. Álfífa, the mother of the new king Sveinn, tartly remarks that any corpse buried in sandy soil, like Óláfr's, will decay more slowly than a body in clay. And the pre-battle speech by Óláfr's opponent, Bishop Sigurðr, sums up very forcibly the reasons why Óláfr met with such determined opposition both before and after his exile: his bloody early career, his ruthless suppression of his enemies, his horrible mutilations of those who resisted conversion, and his unjust treatment of the Norwegian aristocracy. But after his death, the cult of St Óláfr continued to grow, not least because of the unpopularity of Sveinn and his sceptical mother. *Óláfs saga helga* ends with the return of Óláfr's son Magnús (named after Carolus Magnus – the Frankish emperor Charlemagne) to the throne of Norway, Snorri's political understanding dominating the saga, as it does the whole of *Heimskringla*.

Fornaldarsögur

The obvious starting point for any speculation about how family sagas first came into being is the assumption that such a sophisticated and highly polished literary form must have had some predecessors. But there are no texts surviving which look like trial runs at saga writing. Perhaps what preceded family sagas was an oral tradition of storytelling, and it would be surprising if a society such as the one which developed in Iceland did not have a strong oral tradition. And there are some references in Icelandic literature to storytelling as a form of learned entertainment before the centuries in which the family sagas are generally held to have been written down. The most celebrated of these is an account of a wedding feast at which sagas were orally related.

Porgils saga ok Haflíða (the saga about Þorgils and Haflíði) is part of a large compilation of sagas – *Sturlunga saga* – which, like the family sagas, was probably written around the year AD 1300, but which related events from a more recent period in Icelandic history, that is, what happened in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary sagas) thus concern the lives of those Icelanders who might themselves have been the authors of family sagas, and certainly reflect the values and cultural contexts of those who wrote about the earlier period. In *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða*, we are told that at a wedding feast at Reykjahólar, in western Iceland, in the year 1119, there were various entertainments on offer such as dancing, wrestling – and *sagnaskemtan*: storytelling. These stories were plainly fictional:

Hrólfr of Skálarnes recited a saga about Hröngviðr the Viking and about Óláfr liðmannakonungr, and the gravemound-breaking of Práinn the berserkr and Hrómundr Gripsson, and many verses with it. King Sverrir was entertained by this story, and he called such ‘lying sagas’ the most entertaining. On the other hand, people can trace their ancestry back to Hrómundr Gripsson. Hrólfr himself had composed this saga. Ingimundr the priest recited a saga about Ormr Barreyjarskáld, with many verses and a fine sequence of verses at the end of the saga, which Ingimundr had composed; and nevertheless, many wise men take this saga to be true.

Neither of these two sagas has survived (although the story of Hrómundr Gripsson is represented in a much later rhymed version,

from which an even later saga is derived). But it is clear from what is said about their form (prose narrative with verses), their content (vikings, berserks and gravemound treasure), and their function (diversion) that such storytelling corresponded quite closely to the genre of Icelandic saga which is now known as the *fornaldarsaga*, the saga about olden times.

There are about thirty surviving *fornaldarsögur*. They are markedly different from the family sagas, and critical opinion has not valued them as it has the latter. There is no doubt that the *fornaldarsögur* have suffered from the inevitable comparisons, and yet it is hard to describe them without making explicit reference to family sagas. For instance, the most characteristic features of family sagas – the setting in Iceland, during the settlement period and the succeeding century – constitutes the most striking difference between them and the *fornaldarsögur*, which take place at an unspecified, but plainly early, period in Scandinavian history, with locations not only all over Scandinavia, but also throughout a legendary Europe: Greece, Novgorod, Russia, Antioch. Typically, the hero – often, a king's son – undertakes a series of exciting but improbable adventures which involve raiding, killing and conquering. The supernatural plays an important part in these stories, and is frequently recognizable as the familiar magic of the folktale – arrows which return to their shooter, inviolable armour, giants and monsters.

Örvar-Odds saga (the story of Arrow-Oddr), for instance, contains all the elements noted above; the hero Oddr is in fact nicknamed for his magic arrows. The carefree fictionality of the saga – Oddr is destined to live for three hundred years, so his encounters with hostile foes are naturally foregone conclusions – is also in keeping with the 'lying sagas' which entertained the wedding guests, and even King Sverrir himself. There are also verses interspersed in the prose narrative, and at the very end of the saga, Oddr is said to compose a long poem about his life and times, which he recites for others to memorize, before climbing into his long-awaited stone coffin. But it would be wrong to see *Örvar-Odds saga* as nothing more than light diversion. A darker side to the narrative gradually emerges as the near-tragic entailment of Oddr's preternaturally extended lifespan become clear: he must stand by as his closest companions die before him.

The authors of the *fornaldarsögur* could allow their imagination unexpectedly free rein. *Egils saga ok Ásmundar* (the story of Egill and

Ásmundr) illustrates how the conventional may suddenly give way to the very strange indeed. As the account of the Reykjahólar wedding feast would lead us to expect, one of its heroes, Ásmundr, has a terrifying encounter with a corpse in a gravemound, but overcomes his foe and escapes with the funerary treasure. And later in the saga, a giantess must travel to the Underworld to secure three magic treasures, a cloak which can't be burnt, a drinking horn which never needs refilling, and a chess set which will play by itself with any opponent. But the imaginative element reaches disturbingly grotesque proportions. The giantess is sent to find such fairytale items as a punishment for her hostility to the bride of a prince she is determined to seduce: she turns herself into a fly in order to mutilate the bride and sabotage their wedding night. Her man-hunger seems to be an obscure hangover from a bizarre episode in which the god Þórr slept in turn with each of her older sisters; each slept-with sister cursed the potential offspring of the one younger than herself before being killed by those remaining, out of jealousy. The curse, which finally comes to rest on the youngest giantess, the storyteller herself, is that the child shall not thrive, and as she points out, her daughter is now shorter than when she was born.

Such runaway invention is at best diverting and unpredictable, and there may be a degree of grim humour, but as with the extended and graphic accounts of heroes fighting both men and monsters, there is a dark savagery which can make for uncomfortable reading. The combination of magical elements, aristocratic heroes and exotic locations initially recalls other varieties of European medieval romance literature, but the *fornaldarsögur* depict neither a courtly nor a Christian milieu; there is barely any trace of a moral framework behind the narratives. Structurally, they are episodic and even rambling, but the very capaciousness of their plots allows for an almost kaleidoscopic quality. In terms of genre, the *fornaldarsaga* moves between courtly romance, fairytale, folktale and heroic legend. Individual episodes may recall scenes from Norse mythology or history, and amidst the innumerable allusions to medieval classical and Christian learning, there are occasional startling reworkings of familiar episodes from Greek mythology, such as the account of how Egill One-Hand escapes from the cave of a blinded giant by sewing himself into the skin of one of the giant's flock.

The wide-ranging eclecticism of the *fornaldarsögur* marks them out in their extant forms as late medieval compositions, and many are

only found in late, sometimes even post-medieval manuscripts. On the other hand, some, such as *Örvar-Odds saga*, are found in substantially different versions, and the extreme looseness of their narrative structure could easily accommodate the free play of episodes and characters in and out of the basic frame. If the testimony of *Porgils saga ok Haflíða* is to be relied on, it would seem likely that the surviving *fornaldarsögur* are versions of stories which were orally told in Iceland for entertainment in the time preceding the composition of the family sagas. If this is so, such stories give no indication of the distinctive literary strengths of the coming family sagas. In fact, *fornaldarsögur* have more often been regarded as texts which post-date family sagas, and as such, they have been deplored as an inexplicable falling off of literary taste and skill.

Riddarasögur and Rímur

The distinction between the *fornaldarsögur* and the *riddarasögur* (sagas of knights) is a very difficult one to draw. Both genres are characterized by fictionality, adventure, exotic settings and supernatural incident. The term *riddarasaga* is generally applied to two kinds of Icelandic romances: those translated or closely derived from continental originals (translated *riddarasögur*) and those composed later in imitation of – or response to – such works (indigenous or original *riddarasögur*). On the face of it, then, the distinction ought to be a clear one: *riddarasögur* as the equivalent of courtly or chivalric romance. But these Norwegian and Icelandic texts – both translated and original – do not preserve the courtly ethos of their models: no idealistic code of refined behaviour governs either their fighting or their love-making.

A seventeenth-century prologue to the Norse translation of an Anglo-Norman *Tristan* (*Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*), translated by one brother Thomas, explains that the Norwegian king Hákon the Old, who ruled from 1217 to 1263, commissioned the work in 1226, and there followed Old Norse translations of many of the most famous French romances of the time, such as the *lais* of Marie de France, three of Chrétien de Troyes' Arthurian romances, and a compilation of *chansons de geste* (*Karlamagnús saga* – the saga of Charlemagne). Most of this material is now found in Icelandic manuscripts, and to judge by the number of extant manuscripts, it was extremely popular. But more is

lost in translation than is gained: the playful elegance of French verse is lost in Icelandic prose, and the self-conscious author such as Chrétien, subtly commenting on and sometimes undermining his own narrative, is a figure quite foreign to Old Norse-Icelandic tradition. Perhaps most significant is the reduction of the courtly idealism, to such an extent that some original *riddarasögur* are suspected of being deliberate challenges to the rarefied ideology of continental romance.

Sigurðar saga þögla (the story of Sigurðr the Silent), an 'original' *riddarasaga*, illustrates both the virtues and the shortcomings of Old Norse-Icelandic *riddarasögur*. Sigurðr's name recalls the most famous hero in native Scandinavian traditions – Sigurðr the dragon-slayer, the tragic hero of *Völsunga saga* and the heroic poems of the *Edda*. And the hero of *Sigurðar saga þögla* also kills a dragon – but in order to save a lion from its clutches; the lion's gratitude owes more to chivalric and indeed classical romance than to native tradition. Sigurðr is the son of Lodivikus and Eufemia, king and queen of Saxland; his brothers are Hálfðan and Vilhjálmr, his sister, Florencia. Sigurðr is the unpromising youth of widespread European tradition, a type known in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition as the *kolbíttr* (literally, 'coal-biter', one who sits by the fire while others make their way in the world). All three brothers have a series of extraordinary adventures involving both human and supernatural foes – misshapen trolls, a cyclops, the aforementioned dragon, 'people from the land of India who were called Coenofali, who barked like dogs and had dogs' heads' and so on – but their exploits are dominated by their encounters with the beautiful Seditiana, who, in a flash of medieval intertextuality, is identified as the daughter of Floris and Blanchefleur, the lovers of a celebrated twelfth-century French romance which was translated all over Europe in the Middle Ages.

Most of the original *riddarasögur* are centred on the hero's quest for a suitable bride; Seditiana is one of a number of female figures in these romances who are known as 'maiden-kings' – autocratic and ruthless, they rule whole kingdoms single-handed, and fiercely resist any suitor. Sigurðr's brothers prove themselves more than a match for any number of outlandish opponents, but Seditiana cruelly humiliates them: she shaves off their hair, smears them with tar, has them flogged with whips and swords, burned, scarred and mutilated. In folktale style, it is the third brother who proves most successful, but Sigurðr's success involves disguising himself, with the help of a

series of magic objects, as first a swineherd, then a tiny, fat, ugly dwarf, and finally a huge and hideous giant, and forcing her to sleep with each one in turn. Her savage humiliation is not complete, however; Sigurðr has more adventures to come before he and his brothers revisit Seditiana's palace. She treats them civilly (to her court's immense surprise) but puts on as entertainment one night a staged rerun of the brothers' horrible treatment at her hands. Sigurðr retaliates by conjuring up the swineherd, the dwarf and the giant in turn, replaying her original humiliation. The shrew is finally tamed: she has given birth to Sigurðr's son, to whom she gives up the kingdom, and finally, when Sigurðr's brothers and all his associates have found their own suitable brides, he and Seditiana are married in splendour. Genealogical order is restored. This story is neither chivalric, nor courtly, nor in any way edifying. But it displays considerable learning: there are references to Ovid, for example, and Lucretius, as well as a kaleidoscopic host of borrowed motifs and story elements. *Sigurðar saga þögla*, as preposterous and disturbing as it is, is surely as powerful and remarkable a response to continental literary tradition as the family sagas were to the unique circumstances of Iceland's settlement and early history.

Riddarasögur continued to be both copied and composed in Iceland well beyond the Middle Ages, and in great numbers. There are eighteenth-century romances just like *Sigurðar saga Þögla* in form, style and content, but incorporating motifs and storylines from current continental literature. Similarly, the *rímur* (rhymes: the term *rímur* is derived from the French word 'rime'), which began to be popular in the fourteenth century, developed into the single most popular literary genre in post-reformation Iceland. The *rímur* are long narrative poems, with enormous numbers of different rhyme schemes. Both the diction and the metres of the *rímur* were influenced by Eddaic and skaldic verse, but the subject matter is very largely taken from the storylines of the *riddarasögur*, though there are some retellings of family saga narratives.

Like the *fornaldarsögur*, the *riddarasögur* and *rímur* have not been valued as highly as the family sagas by modern readers and critics. It may also be the case that *riddarasaga* authors felt the need to justify their free fictionality, to judge from the prologue to *Sigurðar saga þögla*, its sentiments echoed in the prologues to other such works:

Previously, many people have put together stories for entertainment, some derived from old poems, or learned men, and some from old books. These were first composed in brief style, but then filled out with skilful words and made longer . . . One person has often seen or heard something which another has not, and it is in the nature of many foolish people that they do not believe anything they have not seen or heard for themselves . . . It is impossible to please everyone, and no one is forced to believe such things [supernatural occurrences or magic] if they don't want to. It is best and wisest to listen while a story is told, and to find pleasure in it, rather than misery, because people don't brood on sinful things while they are enjoying entertainment. And people shouldn't pick fault with a story, even if it isn't expertly told or with poor choice of words.

Even measured, implicitly, against the learned naturalism of the family saga, there was still plenty to be said in favour of romance.

The Politics of Old Norse-Icelandic Literature

The reception of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, both inside and outside Iceland and Scandinavia, has always been bound up with nationalist politics, especially with national – and often racial – myths of origin. The literature of medieval Iceland was rediscovered by seventeenth-century Scandinavian scholars researching the origins of their own nations. Outside Scandinavia, the literature answered a growing fashion for ancient poetry, which was believed to open a window on the lives and sensibilities of long-lost ancestors. In nineteenth-century Britain, a spirit of industry and empire seemed to see its own reflection in viking ideals. But claims of viking ancestry were often linked to a desire for racial purity and belief in racial superiority.

In an academic context, responses to Old Norse-Icelandic literature have continued to reflect these political issues. Debate about the origins of Icelandic sagas was strongly influenced by an Icelandic nationalist agenda, and the place of Old Norse-Icelandic literature in departments of English literature matched twentieth-century views of the close political relationship – both historical and contemporary – between Iceland and Britain. The view of the vikings as alien – and transient – invaders of the British Isles has given way to further investigation of the Scandinavian contribution to English medieval literature (as well as language, society and commerce), and this chapter ends with a brief look at some of the connections which have been proposed between the two.

Iceland and Scandinavian Nationalism

Medieval Iceland was, like the rest of Europe, a Christian country. But its geographical isolation meant that it remained more independent of church control than many continental countries. No doubt this aided the production of secular literary texts – the sagas, skaldic and Eddaic verse, and the histories – which transmitted pre-Christian material, ideas or traditions. None the less, in tune with the rest of northern Catholic Europe, Iceland had its Reformation – its second great change of faith.

In the thirteenth century Iceland ceded its independence to the Norwegian king Hákon Hákonarson, who had commissioned the first translations of continental romance into Norse. By the sixteenth century, a Danish king ruled Norway, and Iceland had become part of a Danish empire. In 1527 the Danish king Christian III tried to institute a Lutheran church in Iceland, but clerics in Iceland seem to have more or less ignored his ordinances. During the next thirteen years, reformation in Iceland was more a matter of Icelandic independence from foreign authority than a primarily theological issue. Royal Danish authority was restored by 1541, but Icelandic rebellion was decisively dealt with only in 1550, when Jón Arason, the last Catholic bishop in Scandinavia, was executed.

The Reformation has been held to mark the end of the medieval world in western Europe. But in Iceland, the Reformation fails to make this break. The composition of family sagas and skaldic poetry had already petered out by the fifteenth century. But romances and *rímur*, which had become so popular a century or so before the Reformation, continued to be produced in great numbers. Sagas continued to be told and retold all over Iceland, providing the favourite kind of entertainment for passing the long hours of winter darkness, and manuscripts continued being copied and recopied. The first book to be printed in Iceland – in 1540 – was a translation of the New Testament into Icelandic, and thereafter the church monopolized the presses, producing religious texts. But neither the advent of printing, nor puritan opposition to secular and sometimes heathen material, had any significant impact on traditional literary activities. The language of the Lutheran church in Iceland, however, was Icelandic, not Danish, and unlike Danish, it was changing very little from its medieval

form. Continuity of literary tradition and language meant that when the other Scandinavian countries looked to the literature of their past, it had survived, in Iceland, and Icelanders could read it.

In Scandinavia, in the seventeenth century, scholarly interest in the origins and ancient history of the Scandinavian nations was fuelled by nationalist rivalry. The result was a series of Latin editions of Old Norse-Icelandic texts, and learned Latin treatises on Scandinavian origins. Both kinds of text depended on Icelandic scholarship, and made available to the rest of the world their first taste of Icelandic literature. In the previous century, when (often sensational) travel literature was popular all over Europe, Iceland was far from celebrated as a place of culture and scholarship; on the contrary, it was notorious for the barbarous and savage nature of its landscape and inhabitants. Icelanders were reputed to eat candle wax and wash in urine; they were dismissed by one English travel writer simply as



Bishop Guðbrandur Þórlaksson's map of Iceland. First published in 1590, it was engraved in 1585, and attributed to the bishop of Hólar, in Iceland, Guðbrandur Þórlaksson. Note the hellish mouth of Mt Hekla, and the many monsters in the seas surrounding Iceland.
National and University Library of Iceland

‘beastly creatures’. Sixteenth-century maps showed the sea around Iceland infested with hideous monsters, and Mount Hekla was widely identified as the mouth of Hell itself. An Icelandic scholar, Arngrímur Jónsson, published his *Brevis Commentarius de Islandia* (‘Brief Commentary on Iceland’) in 1593, in Copenhagen; it was an aggrieved riposte to the many historical inaccuracies, misconceptions and unflattering myths which were circulating about Iceland and the Icelanders. The full Latin text, together with a translation, was included in the second edition of Richard Hakluyt’s *Voyages (The Principall Navigations, Voiages, and Discoveries of the English Nation)* (1598–1600), and when, in 1609, Arngrímur completed a history of Iceland, the *Crymogæa* (from the Greek ‘ice-land’) parts of it (and, indeed, some of the texts which Arngrímur had railed against in his brief commentary) were included in Samuel Purchas’s *Hakluytus Posthumus* in 1625. Clearly, Iceland – in myth or in relative reality – was in demand.

Scandinavian antiquarians were busily seeking out the roots of Scandinavian history and culture. The three most celebrated were the Danes Ole Worm and Thomas Bartholin the Younger, and the Icelander Þormóður Torfason (often known by the Latin form of his name, Torfaeus). Worm published his *Runer seu Danica literatura antiquissima* (‘Runes or Most Ancient Danish Literature’) in 1636. The basis of his treatise was that all ancient northern poetry – including Icelandic – had originally been written in runes, and that runes were derived from Hebrew, then believed to be the most ancient script. His work was most influential on account of its substantial appendix, in which he gave examples of Icelandic poetry (transliterated into its ‘original’ runic script) and analysed its metre and diction.

Thomas Bartholin’s *Antiquitatum Danicarum de Causis Contemptae a Danis adhuc Gentilibus Mortis* (‘Danish Antiquities on the Pagan Danes’ Disdain of Death’), published in 1689, illustrated, as its extraordinary title suggests, the old heroic virtue of facing death bravely, even welcoming it, in battle, and its text included a large number of quotations from Old Norse-Icelandic poetry and prose; the Icelander Arni Magnússon collaborated with Bartholin in this. Torfaeus’s *Orcaedes* (1697) was a collection of texts relating to the Orkney Islands. Its overtly political agenda was to back up Danish claims to the islands, and both Worm and Bartholin were also making claims for the cultural and literary antiquity and nobility of Scandinavia (though they did not go as far as Olaus Rudbeck, a Swedish historian, who

claimed in his *Atlantica* that ancient Sweden was Plato's lost Atlantis – the cradle of the whole world's civilization).

At the same time as these Latin treatises were being written, Scandinavian scholars were also producing editions of Old Norse-Icelandic texts, and crucially, with Latin translations. Peder Resen, who was Danish, edited Snorri's *Edda*, and the two Eddaic poems *Völuspá* and *Hávamál*, in 1665; two Swedes, Olaus Verelius and Johan Peringskjöld, produced editions of two *fornaldarsögur* (*Hervarar saga* and *Herrauðs saga ok Bøsa*), and of Snorri's *Heimskringla*, in 1666, 1672 and 1697 respectively. Together with the verse quotations (and appendices) in the Latin treatises, all these works made available, in Latin translation, a considerable amount of Old Norse-Icelandic poetry, given the number of verses included in the prose texts. *Hervarar saga*, for instance, edited by Olaus Verelius, contains a sequence of verses which constitute the first piece of Old Norse-Icelandic literature to be translated into a European modern language: as *The Waking of Angantýr* it was included by George Hickes in his *Thesaurus Linguarum Septentrionalium* ('Treasury of the Northern Languages') (1703–5), along with an Old Norse grammar and a list of books and manuscripts of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, and it was reprinted a few years later in the final volume of a (posthumous) edition of Dryden's *Miscellany*, alongside translations from classical texts.

Old Norse-Icelandic as 'Ancient Poetry'

The learned antiquarianism and nationalist agenda of seventeenth-century Scandinavian scholars made available just what was wanted in eighteenth-century Europe. Ancient poetry of all kinds had come to be very much in vogue. Early literature – and above all, poetry – was valued as a window on the roots and origins of European culture. Old Norse texts were presented as a significant and valuable alternative to the body of Greek and Roman literature, a status backed up by ideas which were beginning to circulate about the early Germanic languages being on a par with Latin and Greek as equal Indo-European descendants from Sanskrit. In Britain, Old Norse-Icelandic texts could provide information about the early history of England and Scotland, and insights into the culture and *mentalité* of ancestral nations.

Scholarly research – linguistic and historical – was, as always, closely linked to political concerns, most obviously nationalism. One of the most influential writers was Paul-Henri Mallet, whose *Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc* (1755) was followed up by the misleadingly titled *Monumens de la mythologie et de la poésie des Celtes* (1756), which called the early Scandinavians Celts; both volumes, in revised form, were published together in 1763 and translated into English in 1770. Mallet, who was Swiss, had been commissioned by the king of Denmark to write a scholarly work specifically designed to counter existing views of Scandinavia as a backward country, just as Arngrímur Jónsson had before him. And like the early Swedish historians, Mallet stresses the role of Scandinavia in the origin of European civilization and culture – especially in terms of human rights and legal freedoms (the bracingly cold climate of the northern nations was believed to have been particularly instrumental in this). Mallet reworked to great effect Snorri Sturluson's extraordinary thirteenth-century hypothesis, set out in the Prologue to his *Edda*, that the Norse gods – the *Æsir* – were originally a tribe of human people from Asia (as their name would suggest – but only to a medieval etymologist) who had left Troy to establish themselves in Scandinavia. This ostensibly preposterous idea had the great virtue of locating Norse literature alongside Greek and Latin literature and learning, and it was welcomed and took root.

Literary fashion also had its part to play. When translated into English, the texts which had been disseminated via Latin both fitted and formed the literary taste which came to dominate the later part of the century: the Romantic sublime, with its yearning for awe-inspiring passions and visionary grandeur, imaginative intensity and exotic settings and incidents. Old Norse-Icelandic poetry, with its valkyries, gods and heroes, and its battles, brave deaths and fierce loves, could provide much more than venerable antiquity and historical interest. Thomas Percy, bishop of Dromore, published in 1763 his *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry*, and ushered in a great wave of translations, versions and imitations of ancient northern verse.

Bishop Percy's Translations

Percy's preface to *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* begins by describing current images of early Scandinavians – 'a hardy and unpolished race' –

but we can see the influence of Bartholin's ideas in his description of '[t]heir valour, their ferocity, their contempt of death', and the reflection of more topical concerns in their 'passion for liberty' and 'that generous plan of government which they everywhere established'. Percy explains that these 'ancient Danes' were also great connoisseurs of poetry, and that because of relatively late Christianization and 'the remoteness of their situation', this poetry preserved ideas and ideals lost elsewhere in Europe. Percy was following Ole Worm in his claim that all these texts were originally recorded in runes – hence his title. But apart from this misconception, Percy's account of the transmission of Old Norse-Icelandic poetry up to his time is reliable and scholarly – and he cannot resist contrasting the facts of Old Norse literary history with the situation of the other kind of ancient poetry currently in fashion: James Macpherson's Ossianic verses, which had been published in 1760 as *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland and Translated from the Galic or Erse Language*. The authenticity of Macpherson's *Fragments* was in doubt from the beginning. As Percy acidly points out, 'And yet till the Translator of those poems thinks proper to produce his originals, it is impossible to say whether they do not owe their superiority, if not their whole existence entirely to himself.' Percy notes proudly that each of his five pieces has already been published, accompanied by Swedish and/or Latin translations, 'by which every deviation would at once be detected'. As Percy acknowledges, this legacy was not without its failings: 'The misfortune has been, that [Icelandic] compositions have fallen into the hands of none but professed antiquarians: and these have only selected such poems as confirmed some fact in history, or served to throw light on the antiquities of their country.' This was indeed precisely the case. But the poems which came through were also those in which the characteristic features of the sublime were evident – Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) lays particular emphasis on 'whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, danger . . . or is conversant about terrible objects'. Old Norse praise poetry was certainly so fitted.

Percy's five poems are translated into literal English prose – in fact, contemporary reviewers, who gave his work a mixed reception, felt that he might have served his ancient poetry better had he tried to capture some of its poetic spirit. Percy based his translations on the

Latin of his predecessors in Scandinavia, but compared them closely with the Icelandic originals, which are printed in full at the end of *Five Pieces*. There is very little sense of the metrical or lexical intricacy of the Icelandic, and this is especially tantalizing since the collection in the original illustrates a wide variety of Eddaic and skaldic metres. But Percy analyses rather well how the kenning operates and he also includes explanatory notes taken from Bartholin, Worm and Mallet. *Five Pieces* is the work of a considerable scholar, and Percy's choice of texts constitutes a fine anthology, an excellent introduction to the variety of Old Norse-Icelandic poetry outside the *Poetic Edda*. An updated edition of Percy's selection would have made a perfect anthology of Old Norse poetry for modern students – an anthology never since provided.

The volume opens with a poem Percy calls *The Incantation of Hervor* – an alternative name for Hickes's *The Waking of Angantýr*. The poem is quoted in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (the saga of Hervör and Heiðrekr) which Percy describes as 'an old Islandic history . . . of very great antiquity', although modern scholars categorize it as a *fornaldarsaga* (legendary saga) and date it to the middle of the thirteenth century. The central thread of a complex series of incidents is a sword called Tyrfingr, which is owned by the hero Angantýr. He and his eleven brothers are killed at the battle of Samsey in Sweden, and when his daughter Hervör discovers the identity and fate of her father (having been brought up by grandfather in Russia), she turns herself into a viking warrior and travels to her father and uncles' gravemound on Samsey in an attempt to reclaim the sword Tyrfingr by waking the dead. The poem is her call to Angantýr to rise from his grave, and his desperate attempts to dissuade her from taking the sword, since he has foreknowledge that it is a cursed weapon, and will bring about the death of their descendants if she passes it on to her son, Angantýr's grandson (the later parts of the saga reveal this to be indeed the case).

Hervör's transformation into a female warrior, and the setting of the poem at a gravemound, certainly answer the contemporary taste for wild and romantic incident. But we may also recognize in the poem the situation of the woman for whom vengeance becomes an heroic imperative even though it will mean destruction and sorrow; like Guðrún in the *Poetic Edda*, who sends one pair of sons to certain death at the court of King Jörmunrekkr in order to have revenge for

the death of their half-sister Svanhildr, and kills another pair herself to be revenged on her husband Atli, Hervör is driven to transcend her natural human impulses to safeguard her children by the overriding desire for vengeance. There may also be an echo of the story of Hildir as alluded to by Bragi Boddason in his skaldic poem *Ragnarsdrápa*; both she and Hervör are unable to let dead kinsmen lie, and mysteriously call them up from the dead.

Percy called his second poem *The Dying Ode of Regner Lodbrog*. Again, the saga from which the poem is taken – *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* (the saga of Ragnarr Hairy-Breeches) – is now regarded as a *fornaldarsaga* based as much on folktale and legend as on dimly remembered historical fact. Percy writes as if Ragnarr were an historical personage – ‘King Ragnarr Lodbrog was a celebrated Poet, Warrior, and (what was the same thing in those days) Pirate, who reigned in Denmark, about the beginning of the ninth century.’ But the saga prose has Ragnarr composing his poem in a snake pit prepared for him as a place of execution by King Ella of Northumbria, and Percy adds a cautious note taken from Mallet: ‘It is, after all, conjectured that Regner himself only composed a few stanzas of this poem, and that the rest were added by his *Scald* or poet-laureat, whose business it was to add to the solemnities of his funeral by singing some poem in his praise.’

This poem was translated into several European languages – perhaps not surprisingly, since Ragnarr’s career as described in the poem included battles all over Europe – and it became very popular in Britain. Known to modern scholars as *Krákumál* (the lay of Kráka, or Crow: the nickname of Ragnarr’s second wife), it is not now much praised, perhaps because of its uncomplicated military triumphalism (every stanza begins with the boast ‘We struck with a sword’) and perhaps because of its crude linking of sexual and martial prowess. Ragnarr proudly boasts that gaining victory in a sea-battle was a very different matter from another sort of (easier) conquest – not ‘like having a fair virgin placed beside one in bed’, as Percy’s Regner puts it, nor, of a victory in Northumberland, ‘like kissing a young widow at the highest seat of the table’. But what modern readers might dismiss as ingrained chauvinism on the hero’s part is given a dramatically different spin in Percy’s translation. Percy based his version on Ole Worm’s Latin, and Worm consistently translates the Norse ‘*varat*’ (was not) with the confusingly similar Latin word ‘*erat*’ (was). So Percy misses the negative in each case, and his Regner seems to make

a direct comparison between sex and violence, equating the two; the pleasure of victory is just like making love.

What must have appealed most forcibly to eighteenth-century tastes was Regner's unequivocal Danish contempt for death; Percy's version of the final stanza reads: 'Tis with joy I cease. The goddesses of destiny are come to fetch me. Odin hath sent them from the habitation of the gods. I shall be joyfully received into the highest seat; I shall quaff full goblets among the gods. The hours of my life are past away. I die laughing.' This prose paraphrase is close to the substance of the original; but one of the most influential and long-lived mistranslations of Old Norse originates with this text. One stanza of the poem uses the phrase 'the hooked branches of skulls' as a kenning for animal horns, but in Ole Worm's *Runer*, the Latin version of the poem has heroes drinking not from horns, but from the skulls of fallen enemies, which came to be an enduring image of viking life.

The Ransome of Egill the Scald is Percy's version of Egill Skalla-Grímsson's *Höfuðlausn* ('Head-ransom'). It would have been of particular interest to British audiences, since it is presented in the saga as a poem in praise of Eiríkr blóðøx, who was ruling the Viking kingdom of York in the tenth century. According to *Egils saga* (the saga of Egill), the poet went to England to visit King Athelstan, but he and his crew were washed up in a storm somewhere in northern England, and fell foul of Eiríkr, an old enemy of his, in York. Eiríkr, egged on by his wicked wife Gunnhildr, determined to have Egill executed in the morning, but Egill used his night's grace to compose the *Höfuðlausn* in praise of the king, and it was so well received that Egill's life was spared. The surprising thing about the poem is that it employs end rhyme, which many scholars have taken to guarantee its inauthenticity, since end rhyme was foreign to Germanic tradition until very much later. The story in any case has all the dramatic implausibility of fiction. In addition, there is a hollow, brittle quality about its praise of Eiríkr – the verses notably lack any specific reference to the king's achievements or qualities – and it has even been suggested that the whole episode shows Egill fooling Eiríkr with an offensively inferior poem which the king didn't have the literary ability to see through. It is certainly true that two other long poems by Egill – the *Sonatorrek*, in which he at first laments, but eventually comes to terms with, the death of his sons, and *Arinbjarnarkviða*, which warmly celebrates his close friend and ally Arinbjörn – are striking in their depth of feeling

and sensitive expression of emotion, which adds to our unease about the *Höfuðlausn*.

Percy translated the poem *Hákonarmál* as *The Funeral Song of Hacon*, and no doubt Hákon's unease about facing Óðinn in Valhalla (and his mild but serious questioning of his defeat in battle) might have struck Percy and his readers as awe in the face of the sublimity of the most powerful god in the Norse pantheon, rather than as anxiety about his Christian past, to which Percy does not allude. *Hákonarmál*, with its intertextual reference to themes found elsewhere in Old Norse and Old English literature – as well as the possibility that Eyvindr's nickname meant 'the plagiarist' – also raises for a modern audience enticing questions about originality and allusion. But Percy's final poem, a fragment of a longer sequence of verses, which he called *The Complaint of Harold*, has been little read since the eighteenth century, in spite of its bearing on English history: its author King Haraldr harðráði (the Hard-Ruler) was the leader of the Norwegian army which met Harold Godwinson at the battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066, so shortly before the battle of Hastings. Haraldr harðráði is celebrated in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition as a conquering hero and a great patron of poetry. His *Complaint*, addressed to Ellisif, the daughter of Prince Jaroslav of Kiev (whom he married), is that it is impossible to impress her, in spite of his stupendous military triumphs; each stanza details one of these triumphs but ends 'Þó laetr Gerðr í Görðum / gollhrings við mér skolla' ('And yet the Russian goddess of the gold ring disdains me').

Thomas Percy's second great contribution to Old Norse-Icelandic studies was his translation, finally published in 1770, of Mallet's *L'Histoire de Dannemarc*, and in it he corrected Mallet's confusing use of 'Celtic' as a term for early Scandinavian peoples and languages. But while Percy's scholarly work provided valuable source material for those interested in the study of the Old North, what really caught the public imagination were the versions of Old Norse poetry produced by the poet Thomas Gray: his 'Odes from the Norse', *The Fatal Sisters* and *The Descent of Odin*.

Gray's 'Norse Odes'

Gray wrote his two Norse odes in 1761, before Percy had published either his *Five Pieces* or his translation of Mallet, but Gray had read

widely in early Norse scholarship, including even Arngrímr Jónsson's *Crymogæa*, and he attributes the source of *The Fatal Sisters* to Torfaeus's *Orcades* and to Thomas Bartholin, and *The Descent of Odin* to Bartholin. It seems that he first began work on translating these Norse poems as part of a major project: a history of English verse, which would include not only the Norse material, but also translations from Welsh and Gaelic – Gray had been greatly taken by Macpherson's Ossianic *Fragments*, whether they were the work of Macpherson ('this man is the very Demon of poetry') or authentic ('or he has lighted on a treasure hid for ages'). Gray never completed his grand history, but Norse poetry – at least in the shape of these two poems – became part of English literature nevertheless.

The poem which Gray called *The Fatal Sisters* is found in *Njáls saga*, in a lengthy digression describing the events surrounding the battle of Clontarf, in 1014, at which fifteen of the Icelanders who had taken part in the burning of Njáll were killed. The battle, which has long figured in popular Irish history as the moment when the country was at last rid of its Scandinavian invaders – even though King Brian Boru himself was killed – was in fact a victory for the combined forces of Norsemen and Brian Boru's Irish enemies. It was widely portrayed as a cataclysmic encounter, presaged by all manner of omens, and according to *Njáls saga*, on the morning of the battle, Good Friday 1014, in Caithness in Scotland, a man called Dörruðr saw twelve men on horseback ride into a farm building used by women for weaving; peering through its window, Dörruðr saw a grotesque vision of cloth being woven from men's innards, with human heads weighting the warp threads, and an arrow for a shuttle. The women weavers were reciting the poem which is now known *Darraðarljóð* ('the lay of Dörruðr'). It seems likely that the saga author knew the poem as *Darraðarljóð*, and invented the character Dörruðr to account for it. There are two possible explanations for the original title: the phrase in the poem *vefr darraðar* means either the web of darts (or perhaps of the battle flag), alluding to the cloth being produced, or the web of Dörruðr, another name for Óðinn, and thus a kenning for the battle itself. The valkyries who chant the verses figure themselves as pre-creating the pattern of events which is to be the coming battle; their weaving is a metaphor for determining the outcome of the battle (and the fates of individual warriors), and their weird cloth imagined, in all its gore, as causing the rain of blood which elsewhere

in Norse tradition presages violent death. Women's work as a metaphor for controlling men's fates is also used in the Eddaic poem *Grottasöngur*, in which giant maidens are incarcerated by the greedy king Froði endlessly to grind gold for him from a magic millstone; they rebel, and grind out warfare instead.

The women of *Darraðarljóð* predict the death of Brian Boru and his Norse ally Earl Sigurðr, and, cryptically, the victory of Scandinavian invaders:

Þeir munu lýðir	Those peoples will
löndum ráða	rule over lands
er útskaga	who outlying headlands
áðr of byggðu.	previously settled.

A literal translation of the Latin version reads 'Those people shall rule the land / Who on desolate headlands / Dwelled before' – which is remarkably close in spirit as well as linguistic detail. But Gray's lines illustrate how far beyond this he went:

They, whom once the desert-beach
Pent within its bleak domain,
Soon their ample sway shall stretch
O'er the plenty of the plain.

It is evident too how unlike the original metre Gray's trochaic quatrains are, though the alliteration of the original is strongly, if imprecisely, represented. He plays up the horror of the poem, as is clear from a comparison with the more literal rendering of the Latin translation:

See the grisly texture grow,
('Tis of human entrails made,)
And the weights that play below,
Each a gasping warrior's head.

(This web is woven with human entrails and human heads are tightly bound to the warp-thread.)

But there is spare, tense drama in the women's voices, even though this means rearranging the Latin quite considerably:

Horror covers all the heath,
Clouds of carnage blot the sun.
Sisters, weave the web of death;
Sisters, cease. The work is done.

What Gray called *The Descent of Odin* is now usually called *Baldrs draumar* ('the dreams of Baldr'); Bartholin called it *Vegtamskviða* ('the poem of Way-Tamed', a name Óðinn gives himself when travelling incognito). *Baldrs draumar* is an Eddaic poem which is not found in the Codex Regius, but which is entirely typical, in both form and subject matter, of the mythological poems which are. The god Baldr is having bad dreams, and his father Óðinn travels down to the underworld to question a *völva* – a seeress, as in the poem *Völuspá* – about what is in store for Baldr. Óðinn may well know the answers to the questions he asks; some critics have read the poem as a stylized but dramatic presentation of the central facts of Old Norse mythology: that Baldr will die (perhaps sacrificed by Óðinn himself in the expectation of his resurrection, a somewhat disturbing analogue to Christian theology) and that Óðinn will beget a son who will mysteriously reach maturity in the space of one night and will take revenge for the killing. But it is also possible that Óðinn is being represented as anxiously checking that everything will be righted in the end; if this is the case, he remained unreassured, because his final question to the *völva* – a traditional riddle based on the image of waves being like women throwing their headdresses in the air – somehow betrays his real identity to the *völva*, who testily sends him on his way. He gets no chance to check out the resurrection.

That Gray refers to this poem in his correspondence as *The Incantation of Odin* highlights the similarity of its appeal to that of *The Incantation of Hervor*, which also involves the terror and sublimity of waking the dead. Gray makes much of Óðinn's encounter with a dog from the underworld, which in *Baldrs draumar* figures only briefly, but which Gray presents as a terrifying 'dog of darkness' whose

shaggy throat he opened wide,
While from his jaws, with carnage filled,
Foam and human gore distilled:
Hoarse he bays with hideous din,
Eyes that glow and fangs that grin;

And long pursues with fruitless yell
The father of the powerful spell.

As modern editions are quick to point out, Gray borrows many of these ‘Gothic’ details from other English poets: Pope, Spenser and Dryden are all echoed in these few lines, and allusions to Milton and Shakespeare figure prominently in both Norse Odes. The effect – and perhaps the purpose – of Gray’s intertextuality here is to situate Old Norse-Icelandic poetry within the great tradition of English poetry; literary allusion serves the same political purpose as Gray’s projected History of English Poetry would have.

Percy’s scholarly works, and the literary bravura of Gray’s Norse Odes, together prepared the way for a literary craze for the weird and the warlike which dominated the later eighteenth century. By 1804, when William Herbert published his *Select Icelandic Poetry*, the fashion had faded. Herbert was the first English translator of Old Norse poetry to claim to be translating directly from the Icelandic, and he was scornful of those who had depended on Latin, complaining that a translation made ‘by a person unacquainted with the Icelandic language, through the medium of a Latin prose version, cannot be expected to represent the style and spirit of the originals’. Herbert acidly remarks of one of his predecessors, Amos Cottle, that had Cottle tried to pass off his translation of the *Poetic Edda* as his own work, ‘he could scarcely have been accused of plagiarism’. Coleridge passed this ‘translation’ on to Wordsworth, who politely told Cottle’s brother that it had afforded him ‘much pleasure’ in spite of its ‘many inaccuracies’.

The Romantic Viking

Herbert’s selection of Old Norse poetry in translation – which added poems from the Codex Regius (a scholarly edition of which had been published in Copenhagen in 1787) – was an impressive achievement, but the vogue for ancient sublimity had passed its height. In the nineteenth century, interest in northern literature took a new turn, as translations and imitations of the sagas came to dominate the scene. But though the once-fashionable aesthetic of the sublime, and the rooted belief that poetry (rather than prose) was the best measure of ancient societies, had faded, the Old North was still seen as the seat

of political liberty, democracy, legal freedoms and the independence of the individual. The martial ethic (so often inferred from Bartholin's widely copied poetic quotations in his treatise on the Danes' fearlessness in the face of death) remained a key feature, together with the importance of physical bravery and prowess. All this, coupled with the historical relevance of much of the subject matter of Old Norse-Icelandic, was to form the basis of the popular image of the archetypal Norseman – the glamorous, independent, valiant and overwhelmingly male Victorian viking – a word which only came into English usage in the nineteenth century.

The issue of Germanic peoples tracing their languages, literature, culture – and hence, racial origins – back to the authors of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, in an unbroken line back to a pure and unified Teutonic race, had for long underlain the work done by scholars and translators. Herbert, for example, offers in his preface 'the following translations from the old tongue of his [Danish dedicatee's] native country (which, as it is intimately allied to England in ancient blood and language, should ever continue joined to it by the closest ties of amity)'. This link between contemporary diplomacy and racial origins became even more explicit. As the nineteenth century wore on, new thoughts on nationalism and imperialism were easily incorporated into this matrix of old ideas.

The translation of saga prose had begun in Scotland, at a time when the passion for Norse-inspired sublimity was still at its height. In 1772, James Johnstone, who was a chaplain with the British diplomatic corps in Copenhagen, published yet another translation of *Krákumál*, which he called *Lodbrokar-Quida, or The Death-Song of Lodbrok*. Johnstone seems to have trusted in the historicity of Ragnarr Loðbrók and his exploits, and history was his primary concern, for his translations following the *Death Song* were of extracts of saga prose which illustrated early British history. Helped by the Iclander Grímur Thorkelín (celebrated in Old English studies as the transcriber of the *Beowulf* manuscript), Johnstone published *Anecdotes of Olave the Black, King of Man, and the Hebridean Princes of the Somerled Family* in 1780, and *The Norwegian Account of Haco's Expedition against Scotland* in 1782; both were translated from *Hákonar saga Hákonarson*, by the thirteenth-century Iclander Sturla Þórðarson, and their relevance to northern British history is evident from their titles. Johnstone was influential in the spread of interest in Old Norse-Icelandic literature in Scotland;

Walter Scott was inspired by his reading of Johnstone's translations. But saga translation in Victorian England began on a very different foot, with George Stephens's translation of *Friðþjófs saga*.

Friðþjófs saga was the first translation of a whole saga into English. The original is a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century Icelandic text, and with its valiant and handsome hero, its setting in a hazy Scandinavian past, its supernatural incidents and its focus on a love affair between Friðþjófr and the princess Ingibjörg, it clearly belongs in the category of sagas now known as *fornaldarsögur*, or legendary sagas; unlike Johnstone's texts, its historicity is minimal. George Stephens translated not only the medieval Icelandic prose, but also the narrative verse of a Swedish poet, Esaias Tegnér, who published in 1825 the full text of a long poem *Frithiof*, to which Stephens gave the confusing title *Fridthiof's saga* when he published it in 1839, with his saga translation 'appended'.

Tegnér's poem was valued for its lyricism, not for its faithfulness to the original saga, the ending of which Tegnér changes quite substantially. Tegnér himself was happy to make clear that this was no literal translation: 'In the saga, we find much that is high-minded and heroic . . . But at the same time, we meet occasional instances of the raw, the savage, the barbarous, which required either to be taken away, or to be considerably softened down.' Introducing, in 1876, three texts – a translation of *Friðþjófs saga*, a translation of another saga, and a reprint of Stephens's *Fridthiof's saga* (that is, Tegnér's poem) – Rasmus Anderson makes clear the primacy of the Tegnér: 'We beg the reader not to look upon the famous poem of the great Esaias Tegnér as a mere appendix to our work. Our saga translations should rather be regarded as two introductory chapters to the poem.' And Anderson also catches the importance of conveying the spirit of the original saga, as opposed to mere accuracy of translation, noting with sly modesty: 'Of our own translation . . . others must be the judges . . . We make no pretensions, and humbly ask forgiveness of the reader, where he thinks he could have performed the task better. Of course a criticism as to the *accuracy* of our translation must be based on some acquaintance with the originals in the Icelandic tongue.' Accuracy of translation was evidently not something for common readers to bother their heads about. By the time Anderson was writing, William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon had translated the saga itself; but by the end of Victoria's reign, there had been at least fifteen

translations of Tegnér's poem in English, and many others in other European languages.

Friðþjóf's saga – in all its forms – was enormously popular. Its hero Friðþjófr – Tegnér praises his 'fresh-living, insolent, daring rashness', the especial qualities of northern heroes from cold climates – falls in love with Princess Ingibjörg, but is not high-born enough to be considered a suitable match by Ingibjörg's brothers, although his father and King Beli, Ingibjörg's father, have been old friends. While they are abroad, the wicked brothers hide their sister away in a temple to the god Baldr, but Friðþjófr happily continues his courtship of her, undeterred by the possibility of the deity's wrath. On their return, the brothers send Friðþjófr off to the Orkneys to collect tribute on their behalf, but cunningly pay two sorceresses to whip up a storm at sea. In a section of the saga much admired by Victorian readers, Friðþjófr bravely survives the storm, and even recites stanzas of verse describing conditions at sea, his defiance of the waves, and his love for Ingibjörg. As William Herbert had said in the notes to his translations of Old Norse verse in 1804, northern warriors were 'habituated to speak in verse on every important incident; and the whole of their life was like a tragic opera'.

Or perhaps like a triumphant opera. Friðþjófr returns from the Orkneys to discover that Ingibjörg's brothers have burnt his farmstead to the ground, and married Ingibjörg off to King Hringr of Sweden. Friðþjófr hurls the tribute money at Ingibjörg's older brother, and burns Baldr's temple around them. He then becomes an outlaw, in Robin Hood mould: in Stephens's translation, which is printed in Gothic script, 'Wherever he went, waxed Frithiof exceedingly in riches and fame. Wicked and cruel men and grimful Vikings he slew, but peasants and merchants let he go free.' As it happens, Stephens was careful to distinguish between his heroes and their culture on the one hand, and the activity of a minority of early Scandinavians whom he described as 'the scourge of God, an intolerable plague': vikings. Friðþjófr – not a viking – spends a year at the court of King Hringr and finds himself, Hamlet-like, with an ideal opportunity to kill the king, but decently passes it up, and even rescues Ingibjörg and Hringr when they fall through the ice on a frozen lake. But all ends happily: Hringr dies – having offered Friðþjófr his kingdom, which at first he modestly refuses – and Friðþjófr becomes king of Norway and marries Ingibjörg.

It is easy to see the aspects of *Friðþjófs saga* which would appeal to its first English readers: its handsome, brave and honourable hero was interestingly both loyal to the various monarchies – good or bad – he encountered, and nobly independent and unafraid before them; his own non-hereditary elevation to kingship seemed to make an important political point. Friðþjófr came to typify the viking ideal with his bravery, physical prowess – and, of course, poetic genius. Friðþjófr's relationship with the god Baldr might have appealed on two levels: the thrill of the reference to paganism, but Christian satisfaction at Friðþjófr's independence about it – though Tegnér's change to the ending in fact involved Friðþjófr repairing both Baldr's temples and his relationship with the god. The romantic elements in the story must have confirmed what many earlier scholars of early Scandinavia had believed: that chivalry originated not in southern Europe, but in the north, brought into French tradition by the Normans. Tegnér himself valued this northern love interest more highly than the despised southern form: 'Song and Saga overflow with the most touching legends of romantic Love and Faith in the North, long before the spirit of Chivalry had made Woman the Idol of Man in the South.'

The basic story of the saga is plainly a version of the other poets' sagas in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition: the love triangle of the couple who are betrothed in secret but cannot marry; the enmity of the woman's family; the hero's travails when separated from his beloved; the recitation of verse. But missing from *Friðþjófs saga* are the less attractive features of the poets' sagas: the deception of the husband, and often obscene mockery of him by the lover; the lover's carelessness in failing to marry the woman; the unhappy ending. But there is a clear echo of the Icelandic *Gísli saga* in the scene in which Friðþjófr returns the tribute to Ingibjörg's brother: he hurls the money bag at him, knocking out his teeth, just as Gísli's wife Auðr throws Eyjólf's bribe back at him, causing his nose to bleed.

Our Friends in the North

Stephens's interest in Old Norse-Icelandic literature was heavily politicized. Stephens – rather in the tradition of William Herbert – believed in the shared ancestry of the English, especially the northern English, and the Danes. The cultural and linguistic roots of the British

nation were Scandinavian, and emphatically not Germanic. His linguistic vision was of 'a mighty and noble and thoroly Scandinavian NORTH ENGLISH . . . the birth-tung of England', and his translation of *Friðþjófs saga*, with its Norse-derived archaisms, exemplifies this kind of language. Culturally, Stephens identified with 'an independent race, of ancient north extraction and speaking a Northern tongue . . . our nearest homeland is Denmark; our furthest kin-land is Germany'. According to Stephens, contemporary German scholarship had, in imperialist fashion, 'annexed' not only this northern tongue (for instance in its insistence on the Germanizing term 'Anglo-Saxon') but also 'the whole mythic store of Scandinavia and England'.

Stephens's vision of racial and cultural unity – and a great literature – which supplied self-definition against Graeco-Roman classicism on the one hand (and, more disturbingly, in the United States, against a perceived threat from the supposedly inferior cultures of new waves of Greek and Italian – southern – immigration; in North America, the history of Leifr Eiríksson's voyage of discovery offered a welcome alternative to Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci) and against Teutonic imperialism on the other. But this racial entity was a thing of the imagination, a virtual space which became ever more circumscribed as the twentieth century neared. There were, however, hundreds of Victorian viking texts still to come – from scholarly translations to risible imitations. The ideals of British imperialism could be made to chime with an idealized view of the ancient north: one of the most celebrated Victorian translators, George Webbe Dasent, could even see contemporary industrialization reflected in his own image of the vikings: they were 'like England in the nineteenth century: fifty years before all the rest of the world with her manufactories and firms – and twenty years before them in railways. They were foremost in the race of civilization and progress; well started before all the rest had thought of running. No wonder therefore that both won.'¹

In fact, Old Norse-Icelandic literature and its many Victorian spin-offs could be made to reflect a very wide range of political opinion – from the medievalist socialism of William Morris (who, with the Icelander Eiríkur Magnússon, embarked on the ambitious Saga Library project to translate fifteen sagas, of which only six were completed) to the democratic republicanism of the Scot Samuel Laing, who translated Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*. Morris, in the tradition of George Stephens, deplored what he called the 'Frenchification' of English,

and his diction is dominated by words with Icelandic cognates. Culturally, his medievalism harked back precisely to a time before industry and empire. Laing's politics were sharpened by fierce anti-Catholic, anti-German prejudices, and he thought he found what he wanted to support this position in Old Norse-Icelandic historical traditions.

During the nineteenth century, contemporary intellectual currents in science, philosophy and politics all found echoes in readings of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Popular Darwinism, for instance, especially in its application to human society, seemed to justify a belief in the supremacy of the British or, more broadly, Teutonic race, descended from courageous and physically fit heroes from cold northern climes. German philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche developed ideologies of the strength and freedom of the human will, and the ability to transcend the mundane through a willingness to die – ideas which seemed to reflect the attitude of saga heroes, and recalled with uncanny closeness Thomas Bartholin's treatise on the Danes' disdain for death, as illustrated in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. And closely allied theories about the value of charismatic leadership (an important element in the route to twentieth-century fascism) came on the political scene, and bolstered admiration for the independence and autocracy of Old Norse-Icelandic heroes. Only one year after Stephens's translation of *Friðþjófs saga*, for instance, Thomas Carlyle's lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* were delivered in London; Carlyle defined hero-worship as 'transcendent admiration of a Great Man', and the first great man in his series of six was the Norse god Odin (Carlyle repeated Snorri Sturluson's theory that the Æsir were Asians who had emigrated from Troy), worship of whom was based on 'consecration of valour'. In Britain, though, post-Victorian interest in the vikings did not continue as a popular phenomenon; Old Norse-Icelandic studies was to find its place as an academic subject, usually on the furthest reaches of English literature syllabuses. In Germany, on the other hand, northern antiquarianism continued to contribute to popular political movements – most notoriously, national socialism.

In Germany, the *Volk* came to mean the people, or race, to which an individual almost mystically belonged. *Völkisch* ideas centred on the unity and purity of this race, and its rootedness in antiquity. This combined with a medievalist nostalgia – a yearning for a time and place before the supposed alienation from society felt by its

contemporary members. The real homeland of the *Volk* was thus a sort of pre-urban rurality. And on a more everyday level, the home life of family saga characters might be held up as exemplifying moral values appropriate to the Germanic races (although contemporary life in twentieth-century Iceland proved a great disappointment to representatives of Hitler's government who travelled out there in the hope of discovering unchanged a survival of Aryan culture). Old Norse-Icelandic literature, however, certainly seemed to preserve the expression of a national, or racial, culture. But German *völkisch* thought included an important strand which Old Norse-Icelandic could also be used to nourish: a kind of Aryan mysticism, an ancient wisdom passed down through generations of the *Volk*. Old Norse-Icelandic mythology provided the ideal texts for this. Together with Tacitus' first-century idealizing of the Germanic tribes – his *Germania* – Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts, especially Snorri's *Edda*, were greatly valued.

Völkisch occultism – as developed, for instance, by the Austrian scholar Guido von List, who believed that the ancient Germanic tribes had a Gnostic religion which he called 'Wotanism', after the German form of the name of the god Óðinn – always remained on the fringes of national socialism. Heinrich Himmler was rather taken with it, but Hitler himself was scornful, declaring that 'nothing would be more foolish than to re-establish the worship of Wotan'; Wotanists themselves he despised as play-acting cowards. Nazi anti-Semitism was not an extension of a *völkisch* mysticism, inspired by Old Norse-Icelandic mythological texts, but, at least to begin with, a Christian anti-Jewish doctrine. The modern version of Wotanism is known as 'Odinism'; its adherents – largely in the United States – call their religion the *Ásatrú* (the Æsir faith) and they too revere the mythological texts of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Odinists fiercely deny accusations of racism, but it is hard to disentangle their essentially *völkisch* ideology from the cruder racism of white supremacists.

Debate about the racial origins of the Scots – Celtic or Nordic – began, with great bigotry and bitterness, in the eighteenth century, and has been described as establishing the foundations for British racism ever since, in its pioneering of 'an absolutist racial determinism'.² Racial superiority was the key issue, and was often (intemperately) expressed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature – the novelist John Buchan, for example, was fiercely anti-Celtic, and modelled

his heroes on viking stereotypes who denigrate the Irish; one of Eric Linklater's characters derides the Celts, 'both drunk and sober', and concludes 'Thank God, I'm Norse.'

Old Norse-Icelandic Studies in Academia

The British beginnings of the academic study of Old Norse-Icelandic literature and language were at first inseparable from the history of translation. The diplomat Dasent was the first of the great Victorian saga translators to make available to readers of English some of those family sagas which present-day scholars regard as the classics of Old Norse-Icelandic prose literature, but he was also perhaps the last of the great gentleman translators, for whom Old Norse-Icelandic scholarship was a passion rather than a profession. Dasent's translation of *Njáls saga*, published in 1861, aimed at a contemporary register, but his sense of the dignity and grandeur of the original gives the English prose an inescapably formal and archaic ring. And Victorian sensibilities militated against literal translations of down-to-earth saga prose. We learn nothing from Dasent's translation of the saga about Unnr's sexual difficulties with her husband: according to Dasent, Unnr 'sang two songs, in which she revealed the cause of their misunderstanding; and when Mord pressed her to speak out, she told him how she and Hrut could not live together, because he was spell-bound, and that she wished to leave him'.

Two Icelandic scholars, Eiríkur Magnússon and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, working in England, in collaboration with English-speaking colleagues, were the first university-based translators – though their academic status, in shameful contrast to their academic standing, was marginal. Eiríkur Magnússon worked with William Morris on their Saga Library project, as well as producing translations of *Heimskringla* and *Völsunga saga* (the latter also included translations of Eddaic verse). Eiríkur had a job in the University Library in Cambridge, and could therefore provide tuition to interested students both inside and outside the university. His great rival, Guðbrandur Vigfússon, who had come to England to complete Richard Cleasby's Icelandic–English Dictionary, had Common Room rights at Christ Church, in Oxford, but no stipend; he lived for some time in penury, even though he was a remarkably prestigious academic, with an

honorary doctorate from the University of Uppsala. Guðbrandur collaborated with Frederick York Powell, and together they produced two monumental two-part volumes of edited texts with parallel translations, the *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* and *Origines Islandicae* ('Poetic Northern Corpus' and 'Icelandic Origins') (1883 and 1905). These two collections are full of insights and ideas, but also full of inaccuracies and eccentric editing, and were fiercely criticized when they first appeared; Ursula Dronke has described the *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* as 'so vast, so full of delights, and so unbelievably unreliable'.³

The first British scholar to be given a university appointment in Old Norse-Icelandic studies was John Sephton, who translated not only *Friðþjófs saga* (like everybody else) but also two important historical texts, *Sverris saga* and *The Saga of King Olaf Tryggvason* (this last, the so-called 'Longest' saga of Óláfr, published in 1895, has not been translated into English since). But throughout the twentieth century, family sagas dominated academic and literary attention. Skaldic verses – because of their heroic temper and martial content – were amongst the first Old Norse texts to be translated into English (and indeed from Icelandic into Latin or a Scandinavian language) and continued to be translated almost by default, as an integral part of so many sagas, but nevertheless they never became popular in their own right. Even as far back as William Herbert, their sheer difficulty was held against them: Herbert explained his preference for Eddaic verse over skaldic as follows: 'the most ancient [poems, i.e. Eddaic verse] are the simplest and most beautiful; for the Icelandic poetry degenerated into affectation of impenetrable obscurity and extravagant metaphors'. It is not now taken for granted that Eddaic poetry pre-dates skaldic (in fact, scholars have given Eddaic poems later and later dates as time goes on, so that now some poems are claimed by certain scholars to be almost as young as the thirteenth-century Codex Regius manuscript), but Herbert's characterization of the skaldic aesthetic was and is typical of critical responses. In 1975, in the introduction to his anthology (in parallel translation) of skaldic poetry, Gabriel Turville-Petre thought that he detected a rising swell of appreciation for skaldic verse amongst a younger generation brought up on 'difficult' poetry, but it is fair to say that outside academia skaldic verse remains unenjoyed.

In part, of course, the inaccessibility of skaldic verse is a problem: its intricate metres mean that translators must almost always sacrifice

readability and literalness if they try to reflect the form and style of their originals to any degree – as scholars such as L. M. Hollander have found. Compromise has proved inevitable, and the skaldic verses quoted in sagas have been a stumbling block to modern translators, who have sometimes resorted to offering literal prose translations of the verses in appendices to the saga. Skaldic verse, it seems, remains the province of specialists. The alliterative metres and arcane diction of Eddaic verse have proved less resistant to translators and less off-putting to readers; W. H. Auden's *Norse Poems* transmits the spirit and mood of the verse – and its poetic quality – very well, though it takes many liberties with the original poems. The introduction to the selection stresses the identity of Eddaic verse as oral text, in which there was no fixed or authoritative text until the time of the first manuscripts – which implicitly justifies the kind of reworking and reordering which characterize Auden's translations.

The Debate about Saga Origins

The reception of Old Norse-Icelandic literature in academia has continued to reflect contemporary political concerns. Academic debate about the origins of saga literature inherited earlier views about the significance of these texts as the preserved literature of a Germanic or Scandinavian ancestry, and thus their historicity or fictionality became the dominant issue. If sagas could provide a window on to a Germanic past, then their 'truthfulness', their authenticity, became a key issue. Guðbrandur Vigfússon, for instance, made an uncomplicated identification of historicity and literary worth: 'sagas of the good type such as this [*Hrafnkels saga*] are always true'. This longed-for belief in the truth of saga prose – applied to family sagas as well as historical writings, and as we have seen, in previous centuries even to legendary *fornaldarsögur* – forms the basis of what became known as the 'free prose theory'. This held that saga prose took shape almost immediately after the events it relates, in oral tradition, and was passed down through the generations – from father to son by Icelandic firesides, as the old sexist formulation had it – unchanged until it was written down (or up) in Icelandic manuscripts. As the American scholar Henry Goddard Leach put it in 1946, 'From the days of the settlements in the ninth century, the history of each family was recorded in oral recitation.'⁴

The free prose theory accounted extremely well for the characteristics of family saga prose: its consistent, anonymous style (held to have been polished by generations of retelling) and self-effacing narrative voice. It explained less well the immensely complex narrative structure of the longer family sagas, with events stretching over several generations, and some readers have felt uneasily (and perhaps unfairly) that the evident literary sophistication of the sagas does not suggest oral composition. Already, a compromise position had been outlined: Knut Liestøl, writing on family saga origins in 1930, prioritized the authenticity of the literary artefact over the authenticity of the events it relates; what sagas preserved was 'the old Germanic art of story-telling committed to parchment without any alteration'.⁵ The alternative to the free prose theory was, fittingly enough, the book prose theory. This held that saga narratives were composed as they were written – like modern historical novels. The appeal of this approach was not only literary critical (if such a thing as pure literary critical judgement exists) but political – and acutely so, in Iceland.

Iceland, as the earlier part of this chapter has made clear, was the safe haven in which texts were preserved, at first in oral transmission, and thereafter in manuscript, unchanged and still readable, until the rest of the world gained access to them. But in the twentieth century, when Iceland was gradually establishing its independence from Denmark, Icelanders felt the need for a national literature which reflected a national genius more for creativity than simply for conservation and archivism. The book prose theory, which located authorship squarely in the hands of Icelanders, thus had considerable political force. In addition to this fundamentally nationalist agenda, within Iceland there was tension between those traditionalists who believed that a modern Iceland could be modelled on the medieval society – rather like Eamon de Valera's vision of a traditionalist post-independence Ireland – and those who favoured a new urban culture. A literature which, unlike oral traditions, could be treated in the same way as other European literatures – with due attention paid to such issues as authorship, canonicity, fictionality and intertextuality – seemed somehow more in keeping with a new, outward-looking nation. The so-called Icelandic School of literary criticism, based on book prose ethics, was the ideological basis of the series of saga editions – *Íslenzk fornrit* – which is now usually used by scholars.

Book prose theory does not account very well for the distinctive and consistent narrative voice of saga writing – how could individuals from different parts of Iceland, writing at various times over two or three centuries, about different characters (though largely in the same society), produce such homogeneous narratives? But even outside the sphere of internal Icelandic politics, the idea of individual authors producing individual texts was one with which most modern readers and scholars have felt comfortable. Extreme forms of the book prose theory allow for claims that the sagas are actually *romans à clef*, coded narratives of thirteenth-century events, or that they are Christian allegories, promoting Christian doctrine in the guise of naturalistic family chronicles. But the critical consensus for a long period has viewed saga narratives as a patchwork of free prose elements – anecdotes, verses, genealogy, folktale elements and so on – together with variable amounts of authorial invention and overall architectural design. This maximally flexible model can accommodate all kinds of sagas – and any evidence of borrowing or influence from other literatures as it may turn up.

Compositional method is also an important issue in the debate about saga origins. It is hard to imagine the oral composition of a narrative as complex and wide-ranging as, say, *Njáls saga* – though it's just as difficult to envisage a work like *Njáls saga*, or Snorri's *Edda*, or *Heimskringla* being composed on to vellum, without all the drafting and detailed planning associated with contemporary paper culture, let alone electronic resources. Structuralist analysis of saga narrative – viewing family sagas as generated from a template of six key elements: introduction, conflict, climax, revenge, reconciliation and aftermath, as T. M. Andersson has done – brilliantly addresses the striking homogeneity of saga narrative, and offers an intuitive model of how a long saga might be orally composed, but in the end fails to do justice to the variety of saga narrative (so that sagas which don't fit the pattern, such as *Eyrbyggja saga*, are seen as 'troublesome and amorphous'). Carol Clover has adapted Chomskyan theories of generative syntax – mastery of a limited set of rules and moveable pieces (saga 'scenes') to generate a potentially infinite number of linguistic, or in this case literary, productions – to propose a free compositional method. This model could be developed to accommodate the sense which many readers have of a saga author's ability to select and shape his material to express a set of themes and develop

ideas distinctive to the ethos of each saga – to behave, in other words, just like a novelist.

How it was that Icelanders developed saga writing is another question which scholars have tried to address. The original literary impetus must surely be associated with the settlement of a new land, and the subsequent need – emotional and political – to inscribe in literary form a myth of origins and a set of national traditions: a textual foundation for a new nation. Of course, the most striking aspect of the beginning of saga writing is the sudden, almost fully formed, sophistication of the family saga. Scholars such as Gabriel Turville-Petre have traced the origins of saga writing from oral genealogical traditions via the Christian narrative of saints' lives; added to this might be the accumulated weight of an oral storytelling tradition, and the huge input of Christian written learning which came with the Conversion. The collision of Christian learning and native oral traditions must have been in itself a considerable catalyst. But alternative theories have proposed outside influences kick-starting saga writing. The Norwegian scholar Sophus Bugge, together with his son Alexander, argued at the beginning of the twentieth century that saga writing was impelled into being under the influence of Celtic storytelling: those Scandinavians who had settled first in Ireland learnt there how to fashion narrative, and, in their subsequent settlement of Iceland, practised this skill on native Icelandic subject matter, thus producing what we know as sagas. Others (most notably Paul Rubow) have identified a continental impulse – specifically, the influence of translated continental romance. Carol Clover has refined this theory, suggesting that 'saga and prose romance represent . . . independent responses to a common medieval aesthetic', and comparing saga narrative with the interlaced threads of French courtly romance. Recent scholarship has concentrated on the situation of Icelanders as pioneers, creating a new literature for their new settlement.

Modern saga translations have naturally reflected the critical consensus about the essential fictionality of family saga narrative. From the grandiose productions of earlier translators such as Dasent – both stylistically and materially lavish: the binding of Dasent's *Njáls saga* features an intricate gold-embossed design interlacing weapons and text – translations of sagas which both read and looked like novels were produced. The collaboration of Hermann Pálsson and Magnus Magnusson (both Icelanders living and working in Scotland)

resulted in a series of saga translations published during the 1960s and 1970s which represented saga style with a contemporary, idiomatic English, informal and colloquial, and deceptively easy to read. Medieval Icelanders seemed to speak and act just like their twentieth-century readers. Most translations since have followed a similar practice: the alterity, or 'otherness', of saga narrative has been effaced by a novelistic presentation, but its naturalism and humour have been made appealingly accessible.

On the critical front, however, the novelistic fictionality of sagas has begun to give way to a reassessment of their worth as historical sources. The so-called 'anthropological approach' has tried to distinguish historicity of event from historicity of social structure and setting. The sagas can be read as texts which represent with anthropological faithfulness the engines of medieval Icelandic society: the legal system, the workings of feud, social hierarchies and the distribution of power. And finally, the whole question of historicity and fictionality is being readdressed in the light of contemporary theory about the fictionality of history – history itself as not a record of events, but a recreation of the past from the perspective of the present.

Why is Old Norse English Literature?

The present-day stress on the sagas as fiction (and also, on mythological texts as literary recyclings of outmoded belief systems) has to a great extent obscured the question of why Old Norse-Icelandic literature in Britain and elsewhere is studied in departments of English literature. This is not an absolute rule: in the United States, departments of Germanic Studies are sometimes the place to find Old Norse-Icelandic; in the University of London, Old Norse is taught in the Scandinavian studies department, as well as forming part of degree courses in English literature. But the politics behind the location of Old Norse-Icelandic in English literature has an interesting history.

Icelandic (medieval and modern) is a language cognate with English. And Scandinavians similar in language and culture to those original settlers in Iceland not only – as vikings – ravaged the British Isles, but also settled in northern and eastern England, and in Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The extent of this settlement is still a matter

for historians to debate, but although the vikings have been remembered in history as lawless pagan sadists, the effect of the Scandinavian settlement on the English language, on British urban and industrial development, and, ironically, on the legal system has been underestimated, and is only now being restated; it has been argued that the Scandinavian settlements resulted in 'a thorough enrichment of the community',⁶ and some philologists describe the English language as the outcome of an Anglo-Scandinavian creole, or mix of two languages.

And as we have seen, historians in previous centuries have repeatedly claimed the Scandinavian – and often, specifically Icelandic – racial ancestry of the British. This 'ethnographic argument' has been refined; in 1954, in an address delivered at the Icelandic legation, Arnold Taylor – celebrated by generations of students of Old Norse-Icelandic literature as the reviser of E. V. Gordon's standard textbook, *An Introduction to Old Norse* – pointed out that in addition to the common origins of the two peoples, they also shared a common geographical situation, on the fringes of both western Christendom and Celtic culture, and both had an indigenous literary culture with a similar history: a Germanic, oral literature transformed, in complex but parallel ways, by the coming of Christianity. Taylor argued that none of this means that the two literary traditions are mirror images of each other – but that the two certainly need to be read in conjunction. Scientific advances have also unexpectedly bolstered the ethnographic argument: genetic research seems to show not only that the British and Icelandic people share the same degree of Celtic admixture in their DNA, but also that the gene pool in Iceland shares more of its features with that in Britain than with its supposed source population in Norway.

The geographical situation of Iceland has always played a part in its political history, and especially in its relation to the British Isles. Henry VIII was once offered Iceland as part of a diplomatic deal – but refused. In the twentieth century, when Iceland was gradually removing itself from Danish hegemony, British politicians were plotting behind the scenes to claim Iceland as a dependency in the new division of Europe following the Second World War. Noting at the beginning of the Second World War that the Icelandic parliament – still called the *Alþing*, though in its slightly different modern spelling, *Alþingi* – was debating whether to sever links with Denmark, one

British medievalist used a scholarly article about possible links between Old English and Old Norse-Icelandic literature as a platform for proposing Britain as a suitable new patron for Iceland; he also remarked on the military strategic significance of Iceland from Britain's point of view. He was sharply put down by the Old Norse scholar Gabriel Turville-Petre in the next issue of the journal.

Old Norse-Icelandic and English Medieval Literature

Relations between viking raiders and their Anglo-Saxon victims could hardly have been conducive to the exchange of literary ideas. But in spite of the highly coloured accounts of viking aggression which have come down to us, there must have been some friendlier relations between the two, and as contemporary myths of origins become more inclined to value racial diversity than to insist on racial purity, more academic space has been given over to exploring this. Amicable Anglo-Saxons and Norse would certainly have recognized a fundamental similarity between their two languages – mutual intelligibility would probably have been within easy reach, or even feasible from the outset – and also recognized similarities in both style (the characteristic alliterative metre of Germanic poetry, extending even to the fondness for compound words and kennings) and substance (heroic figures from the distant past, such as the mighty smith Weland, Old Norse-Icelandic Völundr, or set situations such as the attack on a hall at night, or the challenging reception given to unfamiliar visitors). They would have found that their heroes expressed similar sentiments and ideals – courage, especially in the face of death, a certain stoicism or fatalism, a high value placed on loyalty and vengeance, and a tendency to gnomic utterance – and perhaps that the religion and ethics of the Norse speakers chimed with whatever the Anglo-Saxons knew of their own pagan past.

Just as compelling would have been the differences: the Anglo-Saxons seem to have had nothing at all like skaldic verse (their royal praise poems which survive in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* are feeble, flaccid compositions), and much of their viking age literature was devoted to re-expressing, in time-honoured Germanic ways, Christian doctrine and stories. But we cannot know what proportion of

Anglo-Saxon literature has survived. And as archaeologists and literary historians are fond of saying, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. It is precisely the kind of literature which might most closely have resembled Old Norse-Icelandic – for example, mythological poetry, and the diction which characterizes it – which we would expect *not* to have survived, given the literary and scholarly hegemony of the Anglo-Saxon church. Historical and cultural circumstances in Anglo-Saxon England would tend to minimize similarities in the two traditions.

All surviving Old Norse-Icelandic literature was written down in the centuries following the Conversion of Iceland – that is, from the late eleventh century on. By this time, the Anglo-Saxon period – by any definition – had passed. So there are two quite separate reasons why it would be misguided to cite, for example, the absence of saga literature in Old English as a significant difference between the two cultures: for one thing, saga literature might have existed orally in Anglo-Saxon England, but failed to survive into writing; for another, the Norse themselves might not have developed saga literature – even in an oral form – until centuries later. And while there are good reasons for dating much skaldic verse to the viking age, given that it was not written down until centuries later, it is conceivable that some material in it could have been introduced into the corpus from Old English sources.

Perceived similarities between Old English and Old Norse are likely to be due to a shared literary and cultural heritage. Did the author of the Old English poem *The Seafarer* lend his striking formulation for hailstones – *corna caldast* ('coldest of grains') to the Norwegian author of a somewhat later rune poem, in which the 'H' rune (*hagall*, that is, 'hail') is also '*kaldastr korna*'? Or did an earlier version of the rune poem catch the attention of an Anglo-Saxon poet? Or was the phrase common to both traditions as a runic mnemonic from an early period, to be evocatively recycled by the Anglo-Saxon Christian poet? The Old English poet of *The Wanderer* concludes his poem by contrasting the everlasting security of heaven with the inescapable transience of this world, where riches, friends, kin and the individual are all fleeting. Is this a deliberate riposte to a similar passage in the Old Norse-Icelandic wisdom poem *Hávamál*, in which the transience of these same things is contrasted with the reliability of fame after death? Or, again, is it a Christian recycling of a common Germanic

perspective on life? Or even a Boethian sentiment, misattributed to Germanic tradition? And in the midst of these echoes, differences are always apparent: the voice of the exile, so poignantly expressive in both of these Old English poems, finds no place in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition.

Of course, there are some literary and mythological motifs which find analogues very widely in world literature – not because literary traditions far distant in time and place have somehow influenced one another, but simply because human responses to certain fundamental narrative or eschatological circumstances are bound to be similar. In short, then, such similarities as we can discover between Old English and Old Norse-Icelandic literary traditions may be the result of direct influence from the latter to the former (or even vice versa) – or they may reflect either universal responses or the shared literary heritage of the two communities. To illustrate how careful one must be in trying to distinguish Old Norse influence in the early period, I want to consider two specific instances: the Old English poem *Beowulf*; and an entry, dated AD 755, in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

Beowulf is an Old English heroic poem, over 3,000 lines long, which is set in a half-historical, half-legendary Scandinavian past. Beowulf himself is a dragon-slaying hero from Sweden; the poem opens with a brief celebration of the great deeds of the Danish royal dynasty, and moves swiftly on to the poem's present time: the court of the Danish king Hrothgar is tormented by a humanoid monster called Grendel, and Beowulf travels from his Swedish homeland to offer his services to the king. In a complex series of flashbacks and foreshadowings, we learn that the Danes' present difficulties are set in a long series of murderous feuds which have yet to reach their climax. The poem's pretext is that when Beowulf succeeds in ridding the Danes of the monster Grendel (and his even more dangerous and monstrous mother), Hrothgar has it in mind to offer the whole kingdom to Beowulf. But he is dissuaded, and the course of history – as presumably known to the poet and his audience – is not deflected: the Danes (and also Beowulf's people, the Geats) face a turbulent and violent future.

The poet of *Beowulf* was certainly an Anglo-Saxon Christian, but his poem is peopled by pagans, although Hrothgar is accorded an impressive command of pseudo-Christian ethics, and Beowulf's saving of the Danes is subtly presented as Christian, even Christ-like, behaviour.

Apart from one cryptic reference to the Danes in their despair over Grendel resorting to worshipping idols, the poet offers his audience no historical colouring or inside information about their pagan ways, such as he might have learnt from the Norse or their literature – but nor would one expect him to. Perhaps the poem's characteristically allusive narrative style implies that its audience was expected to know the early history of Scandinavia, and to appreciate the significance of the moment when everything might have taken a different turn, had a fictional saviour like Beowulf changed the course of a history notorious for its violent feuding. Or perhaps – on the contrary – it betrays the poet's sketchy knowledge of the traditions. And since no one is agreed on the date of *Beowulf* – is it a very early viking age poem, or does it date from the period when there was a substantial settled population of Scandinavians in Anglo-Saxon England? – it's hard to tell whether the poet is drawing on time-honoured literary memories of the heroic age of Scandinavia, or is weaving into his ambitious epic a whole lot of new information passed on by his new neighbours. Or was he even, towards the very end of the Anglo-Saxon period, amassing both sorts of detail for the edification of the new eleventh-century Danish rulers of England?

Given the Scandinavian subject matter of the poem, one might expect that if Scandinavian sources were used by the poet, then some trace of linguistic or stylistic influence might be evident. But the few Scandinavianisms which have been identified in *Beowulf* have not been convincingly distinguished from usages which might always have existed in Old English (but were not recorded), or which might have been borrowed into later Old English, and turn up in the poem simply because they were part of the poet's own Norse-influenced idiolect. There is one very striking parallel between the poem's description of Beowulf's fight with Grendel and his mother, and a pair of episodes in the Old Norse *Grettis saga*, which dates (in its surviving form) from the fourteenth century. In both texts, the hero takes on troll-like opponents, and many distinctive details are similar in both accounts: in each, for instance, one of the trolls lives in an underwater cave; in each, one of the monsters has an arm torn off by the hero. More broadly, in each case the hero's action is seen as a cleansing, and in each case he not only operates alone, without the support of companions, but also is actually abandoned by them. That these two accounts are analogous is beyond dispute. But how the parallels have arisen is

more difficult. Clearly there is no question of a fourteenth-century Icelandic saga having influenced an Anglo-Saxon poem. But what of the origins of the saga? Might early versions of some of its elements have existed as folktales, to be first passed on to Anglo-Saxons, and later woven – perhaps with little alteration – into the saga narrative? But if we propose a much earlier version of the Old Norse material, we might just as well go back to the underlying possibility that a monster-troll story with common features was part of the old shared Germanic heritage, if such a thing did indeed exist. And indeed, the critical consensus now seems to be that both the poem and the saga are separately derived from one primary Scandinavian folktale.

When *Beowulf*, facing likely death in his fight with the dragon at the end of the poem, reminisces about his childhood and forebears, he recalls the story of his grandfather Hrethel, king of the Geats, and a terrible accidental tragedy which befell him: one of his sons, Hæðcyn, accidentally shot dead his brother Herebeald. This precipitated a moral and dynastic crisis. Hrethel could not take vengeance on one son for the death of another, and could bring himself neither to love nor to hate the surviving son. In this dilemma, he died – he ‘chose God’s light’ – and the neighbouring Swedes, always on the lookout for weakness amongst the Geats, took immediate advantage, and attacked Hæðcyn. This situation of course mirrors *Beowulf*’s own dilemma: he has no sons, and if he is killed fighting the dragon, then his kingdom too – and its people – will be vulnerable to attack from the Swedes. But it also mirrors – with some significant differences – an episode in Old Norse mythology: the god Baldr is inadvertently shot by his brother Höðr, but their father Óðinn devises a novel way out of the vengeance dilemma by begetting a son who mysteriously attains maturity in the space of a day, dedicated wholly to avenging a brother he never knew. It has been argued that here we can see the *Beowulf*-poet not only reflecting his knowledge of Norse myth, but even shaping it for his own ends: to make a pointed contrast between Hrethel’s proto-Christian stoicism, and Óðinn’s single-minded commitment to the old imperative to avenge. In support of this interpretation is, amongst other things, the striking coincidence of the two sets of names – *Herebeald* and *Hæðcyn* as against *Baldr* and *Höðr* (the similar elements are in fact exact cognates in the two languages). Against is the fact that in the most familiar version of this story – Snorri Sturluson’s account in his *Gylfaginning* – a number of details are significantly different. But there

is good reason to believe that Snorri's thirteenth-century version does not reproduce without distortion or addition the contours of a viking age story – a good example of why one cannot uncritically cite Old Norse-Icelandic written sources to support or undermine the possibility of Scandinavian influence on Old English literature. Finally, the Baldr episode – if that is indeed what it is – is one of a number of episodes in *Beowulf* which seem to show the poet reshaping Norse-Icelandic myth – not least among them the dragon fight itself, in which the hero defeats and kills a foe so daunting that he himself does not survive their encounter – just like the god Þórr, who at Ragnarök fights the ultimate dragon, Miðgarðsormr, the World Serpent. Both die.

The production of family saga narrative in Iceland is undoubtedly the result of the very particular historical and cultural circumstances of the settlement of Iceland. But the apparent absence of saga literature from Anglo-Saxon England seems to have chagrined native scholars.



A romantic view of saga reading in an Icelandic farmhouse:
painting by August Schiott (1823–95).

Collection of Photographs and Prints, National Museum of Iceland

W. P. Ker, for instance, was keen to shrug off the possibility that the lack of Anglo-Saxon saga was due to some deficiency or inferiority: 'There seems no reason, as far as language and technical ability are concerned, why there should not have been in English, prose stories as good as those of Iceland.'⁷ But to recreate a hypothetical Anglo-Saxon 'saga' from the (undoubted) evidence of a tradition of popular, oral, secular storytelling in Anglo-Saxon England one must assume the existence of Norse sagas long before our first references (the wedding feast in Iceland in 1119 at which 'lying sagas' were told, discussed in chapter 3) or the first manuscript witnesses (thirteenth-century). Otherwise Anglo-Saxon narratives would pre-date Icelandic sagas – which would no doubt prove a tempting hypothesis to those anxious about supposed Anglo-Saxon inferiority.

Nevertheless, it is often claimed that one very distinctive entry in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 755 is written in 'the style of the Icelandic saga'. In 755, we are told, in the laconic prose typical of the entries covering the first few centuries of Anglo-Saxon England, King Cynewulf and the West Saxon councillors deprived King Sigebyrht of his kingdom because of his misdeeds, but he was allowed to keep Hampshire, until he killed one of his most loyal supporters, the Alderman Cumbra, upon which Cynewulf exiled him to the New Forest. There, a lowly swineherd took it upon himself to avenge Cumbra, and stabbed Sigebyrht to death. This little episode provides a highly moral lesson on how vengeance and loyalty might transcend social class: the king is treacherous; a swineherd behaves nobly. But unlike any other chronicle entry, the chronicler goes on to relate a dramatic sequel to these events. Thirty-one years later, Cynewulf finds himself contending against the brother of the man he had deposed in 755, and the brother, Cyneheard, takes the initiative, ambushing Cynewulf when he is on a discreet visit to his mistress, and has left most of his retinue at home. The king is killed, but, faced with certain defeat, the king's men nevertheless refuse to accept Cyneheard as their king in Cynewulf's stead, and they are all killed, except for one Welsh hostage, who is nevertheless badly wounded (another lesson in loyalty here). But in the morning, the rest of Cynewulf's soldiers arrive, and now Cyneheard is surrounded and outnumbered: the tables are turned. This time, it is Cyneheard's men who refuse terms in the face of certain defeat, and they are all killed in the ensuing fight – all except the godson of one of the attackers.

Although, as we have seen, in Icelandic the term ‘saga’ can refer to all manner of prose narratives, none the less, on grounds of length alone this story could hardly be called a saga, or even, with its neatly self-contained sets of symmetries, an episode from a saga. And of course its subject matter – the history of the royal house of Wessex – is peculiar to Old English literature. But might it be regarded as Anglo-Saxon history written up in the style of a saga (always supposing that in the late ninth century, when this part of the *Chronicle* was put together, there were sagas as we know them in existence amongst the Scandinavians)? In terms of prose style, one feature stands out as being very un-Icelandic: a confusion arising from the ambiguous use of pronouns. When the attackers find themselves outnumbered by the larger force of king’s men in the morning, and refuse the offered terms, they refer back to the confrontation the previous night: ‘and they said that the same offer had been made to their comrades who had been with the king’. With care and imagination, we can just about work out whose comrades are meant. But in linguistic terms, such confusion could never happen in Old Norse narrative, which, like Latin, has separate pronouns to distinguish ‘their’ and ‘their own’. Moreover, Old Norse saga narrative is notably unambiguous and transparent: there is never the sense, as there is here, that an author is struggling to express a complex situation with limited linguistic resources. The confusion here has arisen in the course of transforming a story told through dialogue into an authored narrative. It seems much more plausible, then, that the monastic compiler of the *Chronicle* knew the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard as a literary text – probably an oral one, and perhaps as a poem (though no traces of poetic diction remain) – and did his best to render it in chronicle prose narrative, and not that he converted his historical information into a text in ‘saga style’.

On the other hand, the ethical world of the story – its play on loyalty and courage, the ironies of the reversed situation, and even, perhaps, the sense of lives sacrificed to a harsh heroic principle – is reminiscent of some Old Norse-Icelandic texts. But is this distinct from a common Germanic ethic which the Anglo-Saxons might equally have inherited? And finally, there is something in the manner of telling which recalls saga narrative – the way the reader must fill in so much of the background, such as the fact that the first attack must have taken place at night, since the second act opens in the morning,

and that followers on both sides (and, indeed, the two combatants Cynewulf and Cyneheard) were closely related, since it turns out that the sole survivor of the second fight was the godson of one of the attackers, and we are casually informed at the close of the story that Cynewulf and Cyneheard were both valid claimants to the West Saxon throne. But perhaps this is the result of the monastic chronicler's urge to condense, to make an eventful story conform to the laconic entries more usual in his work. Or perhaps this allusive technique was a long-held tradition shared by both Anglo-Saxon and Norse storytellers. So if storytelling amongst the Anglo-Saxons, in a form which bears some similarities with the much later recorded Old Norse-Icelandic sagas, did exist, then the influence of the Scandinavians who first raided and then settled in Anglo-Saxon England is far from being an inevitable or obvious cause.

By contrast, the transference of story-matter from one community to the other – especially in the centuries following the first settlements – is so likely as to be almost inevitable. But evidence of Norse material in later medieval English literature is elusive. The bulk of popular narrative would have been oral, and has not only survived only very patchily, but is also protean by nature, changing its forms and emphases over the centuries until only the faintest similarities remain. Does the Old Man in Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* owe anything to Old Norse-Icelandic traditions of the god Óðinn – the old man who wanders the earth in disguise, and knows where Death has his abode? Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* remembers how bowled over she was by her first glimpse of her husband Jankyn's legs and feet – 'so clene and fair'. Does this recall Skaði, the daughter of a giant whom the Norse gods killed, and who was offered recompense by being invited to choose a husband from amongst the gods – but she was only allowed to see their feet and legs? (She picked out the most beautiful, assuming that they must belong to Baldr, the fairest of the gods, but she was wrong. This marriage too turned out to be a disaster.)

Tantalizing hints of the co-existence of Scandinavian and English literary traditions during the whole medieval period are contained in an extraordinary set of texts about Earl Waltheof, whose Danish father settled in England with King Canute (Knútr) in the eleventh century. Waltheof's mother was a Northumbrian aristocrat, and unusually, Waltheof held high office in northern England both before and after the Norman Conquest. But his relations with William the

Conqueror were precarious, and we learn from both the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the much fuller twelfth-century Latin history of Orderic Vitalis that Waltheof became involved in a conspiracy against Norman rule, and was executed by William in 1076. Both Orderic Vitalis and the author of the early thirteenth-century Old Norse-Icelandic text *Fagrskinna* present this execution as a full-blown Christian martyrdom. But even more interestingly, we are told in the Old Norse-Icelandic history that Waltheof had employed a professional skald, an Icelandic poet called Þorkell Þórðarson; Waltheof, a second-generation Anglo-Scandinavian, seems to have modelled himself on the Norwegian earls and kings of his ancestral homeland.

Fagrskinna quotes half a strophe from a memorial poem on his patron which Þorkell is said to have composed after Waltheof's death; this whole strophe, and another, are included in *Heimskringla*. This poetry is quite indistinguishable in style and content from Scandinavian praise poetry from the ninth and tenth centuries, with its savage glee at the vanquishing of Waltheof's enemies, its Óðinn kennings and its complex metre. Who, then, in post-Conquest England, would have appreciated (or indeed paid for) such a poem? Certainly not Waltheof's widow Judith, who was William's niece, and in fact betrayed her husband to him. If we take the poem to be authentic, we must imagine that Waltheof's circle was not only Norse-speaking, but also well-versed in the most esoteric literary traditions of their Scandinavian forebears. Archaeologists and social historians have long recognized that emigrant communities preserve the traditions of their homeland in more conservative – and even exaggerated – forms than the source community. Were there pockets of Scandinavian literary culture quite untouched by native Anglo-Saxon traditions throughout early medieval England? The later history of Waltheof's literary existence provides fascinating further evidence.

Waltheof had been a benefactor of Crowland Abbey in Lincolnshire, and after his execution, his body was claimed by the monks of Crowland and taken there, where he was venerated as a saint – though not, apparently, to any great extent in the century immediately following his death. Cynical historians link the revival of a cult around St Waltheof to a fundraising drive by the abbey after a disastrous fire at the beginning of the thirteenth century; certainly at around this time a Latin life of Waltheof was produced in Crowland. Much of what it contains derives from Orderic Vitalis's work, but its

information about Waltheof's Danish father, Siward, must have come from a very different source. Siward is said to be the son of a man nicknamed 'Bear's Son', who had furry ears to prove his bizarrely mixed ancestry. Siward is represented as a dragon-fighter – though unlike Beowulf (whose own name – Bee-wolf – may be a kenning for bear), he defeats and drives off his first dragon, in the Orkneys. On his way to kill a Northumbrian dragon, Siward encounters a mysterious old man who gives him advice and a war banner with a raven on it – evidently the god Óðinn. There is no real need to detail the Old Norse-Icelandic parallels to all these elements: their Scandinavian character is quite evident. Could it be that as late as the thirteenth century, in some parts of England stories so very like Old Norse-Icelandic *fornaldarsögur* were circulating, chancing to surface when hagiographical historians were building up retrospective celebrations of obscure saints? It certainly seems so.

But this is not quite the end of the Siward story. Following the old man's predictions, Siward travels to London, and presents himself to the king, Edward the Confessor. On a narrow footbridge in Westminster, he encounters Earl Tosti, who was married to the queen's sister, on his way to visit his political rival Edward. Tosti arrogantly tramples underfoot the hem of Siward's cloak – 'because at that time it was fashionable to wear a cloak without any cord to hold it up'. Siward is furious at the insult, but saves his revenge until Tosti returns from his royal visit; he then cuts off Tosti's head, presents it to the king, and is rewarded with Tosti's now vacant earldom of Huntingdonshire. This episode is remarkably reminiscent of the Icelandic historical tradition, especially in its fundamental naturalistic plausibility (the narrow bridge, the authenticating historical detail), its focus on insult and revenge, its personal perspective on political history, and its function as an entertaining anecdotal explanation of why Siward's son Waltheof was earl of both Northumbria and the geographically somewhat distant Huntingdon. Nothing could be more like the character of Old Norse-Icelandic historical writing – except, perhaps, an anecdote recorded by the twelfth-century historian Henry of Huntingdon: informed of his son's death in battle in Scotland, Siward is anxious to find out whether the fatal wound was in the young man's front or back – that is, was he advancing or retreating? It was in the front, and Siward is delighted, 'for no other death would be worthy of me or my son'. England's historians and hagiographers clearly had Norse sources –

unless, as used to be suggested by English scholars, these English traditions actually informed Norse narrative. Incidentally, Tosti's sister-in-law Edith, Edward the Confessor's queen, is said to have had as good a command of French as of Danish and Irish (though her first language was English) – pre-Conquest England must have been well placed to bequeath a rich legacy of literary traditions, even if the surviving evidence is faint or well hidden.

There is a significant coda to the Siward story, which takes us beyond the medieval period. The sixteenth-century English chronicler Raphael Holinshed picked up the story of Siward and his son's heroic death from Henry of Huntingdon, and from Holinshed it found its way into Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The closing scene of the play concerns the aftermath of the campaign in which Macbeth himself has been killed. Following Holinshed (and Henry) very closely, Shakespeare has Ross tell old Siward of his son's death, and Siward duly rejoices that his son's fatal wounds show that he was killed going forward into battle. But Malcolm, the next king of Scotland, doesn't share this heroic ethic; in the face of Siward's refusal to mourn a son who has died gloriously in battle, he rebukes Siward: 'He's worth more sorrow, / And that I'll spend for him.' Siward, however, is not to be deflected from what even the warlike Scots evidently recoil from as an alien and inhumane response: 'He's worth no more' is his brutal riposte. And echoing Old Norse poets who prioritize the forging of a good reputation over saving one's life in battle, Siward concludes 'They say he parted well and paid his score: / And so, God be with him!' Siward can call his son 'God's soldier', just like those who praised Norse warriors who fell in battle and went to Óðinn.

Even where it is clear that Shakespeare used sources which ultimately derived from Old Norse-Icelandic literature, one can't assume direct influence. The story of Hamlet, for instance, is told by Saxo Grammaticus in his twelfth-century *History of the Danes*, but most Shakespearian scholars are agreed that Shakespeare had it via Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques*. Saxo used Old Norse-Icelandic sources for his history, and there is one intriguing reference in Old Norse to Amloði – Saxo's Amleth, and Shakespeare's Hamlet. In *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri Sturluson quotes a snippet of verse by the eleventh-century poet Snæbjörn which (somewhat obscurely) uses the kenning 'Amloði's meal' to designate 'sand'; Snorri's own gloss confuses the issue further. But in Saxo's history, there is what might be an explanation:

we are told that Amleth's courtiers try to make him concede that sand on the shore is flour meal; he feigns idiocy by pretending to go along with them, remarking that this 'meal' has been ground small by the action of the sea. It seems that Hamlet's distinctive madness might go back a very long way. But it was not until the second half of the eighteenth century that Old Norse-Icelandic literature impressed itself again on the English literary imagination.

The Influence of Old Norse-Icelandic Literature

In the medieval period, the discernible influence of Old Norse-Icelandic literature on English literature is unexpectedly small. In the modern period (from the later eighteenth century onwards to the present day), it is unexpectedly large. If anything, it has been overstated with regard to the medieval period, and understated with regard to the modern one, for medieval scholars who are familiar with Old Norse texts have generally been well placed to apply their knowledge to other medieval texts, while modernists with Old Norse-Icelandic skills (and vice versa) are less common. The extent of Old Norse-Icelandic influence on later literary traditions – that is to say, on the literature of the British Isles and Ireland – is, in practical terms, immeasurable. In what follows, I offer some examples – brief samples – of the results of that influence. Some are well known; some are, I hope, surprising. This chapter runs parallel to the previous one, since the influence of Old Norse-Icelandic literature has been a function of its reception: its place in the eighteenth-century sublime, the Victorian vogue for vikings, the passionate sense of history and place so evident in the Scottish tradition, and the position of Old Norse on the syllabuses of students – and thus readers and writers – of modern English literature.

Blake

William Blake began writing poetry at almost exactly the same time as Thomas Percy published *Northern Antiquities*, his highly influential

translation of Mallet's work, that extraordinary storehouse of pseudo-history and mythological texts. Thomas Gray's Norse Odes had recently appeared, and Blake himself produced 116 illustrations to an edition of Gray's poems which included them. Blake's work is infused with the ideas and images of Old Norse-Icelandic literature and culture which were current at this time. The fashion for the sublime – for literature which dealt in an awe-inspiring grandeur of vision and emotion which enabled a sort of spiritual transcendence – was at its height. Blake's major poems were epic in form, the great prophetic books *Milton*, *Vala*, or *the Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem*. In these poems, and in the minor prophecies which preceded them, Blake created a vast, ever-shifting mythological system and imaginatively recreated his own cryptic versions of the major events and themes of biblical history: conflict, insurrection, fall, redemption and apocalypse. These themes – as well as prophetic and epic forms – are of course evident features of Old Norse mythological texts, and Blake equally evidently drew on them – probably via Percy's translation of Mallet. As the critic Harold Bloom has said, 'Blake's own true Sublime comes in a Northern [mode] in the traditions of the Icelandic Eddas.'¹ Blake does not simply import the Norse elements into his work unchanged; he reworks them, sometimes almost to the point of their being unrecognizable. In the poem *Vala*, for instance, the figure of Vala herself is usually understood to represent a female nature principle. And yet its opening line – 'The song of the Aged Mother which shook the heavens with wrath' – immediately recalls the poem *Völuspá*, in which the sibyl gives a cryptic, cosmic account of creation, fall and apocalypse. Though some critics have related the name 'Vala' to the word 'veil', it must also relate to the Old Norse word for sibyl: *Völu* – *spá* means 'sibyl's prophecy', and the word for sibyl – *völva*, in its Old Norse nominative – is sometimes rendered 'vala' or 'vola' in early Norse scholarship; Mallet related this form to Tacitus' 'Velleda', the sibyl of the Germanic tribes. Blake may have originally envisaged the whole poem as being spoken by Vala herself. Its division into nine nights recalls the celebrated account in *Hávamál* of how the god Óðinn hung on a tree for nine nights, paradoxically sacrificed to himself, in order to gain the wisdom of the underworld; in Percy's Mallet, the goddess of Niflheim (the underworld) rules over nine worlds, of which Niflheim is the ninth, and in *Völuspá* the sibyl announces that she remembers nine worlds. Blake's ninth night ('Being the last Judgement') contains many

echoes of Ragnarök as presented in *Völuspá* itself, and in Snorri's account in his *Edda*, both in Mallet. Los and Enitharmon, weeping over the crucified body of Jesus, are like the Norse gods who weep over the death of their radiant son Baldr. In the ensuing Norse apocalypse, two monsters rob the world of the sun and the moon, just as Los 'Siez'd the sun' and with his left hand 'like dark roots, cover'd the moon'. In Blake, 'The heavens are shaken and the earth remov'd from its place'; in the *Edda*, the earth is violently shaken and the stars are hurled from the heavens. Smoke and fire are rife in both.

The new world which follows this terrifying apocalypse is also strikingly reminiscent of *Völuspá*. In Snorri's *Edda*, the questioner Gangleri asks if any of the gods survive, and if there will be any longer a heaven and an earth. His informant Hár reassures him: 'There will arise out of the sea . . . another earth most lovely and verdant, with pleasant fields where the grain shall grow unsown.' Sun and moon are miraculously restored. Moreover, Hár continues, 'during the conflagration, a woman named Lif [life] and a man named Lifthrasir, lie concealed in Hodmimir's forest. They shall feed on the morning dew, and their descendants shall soon spread over the whole earth.' This lyrical vision is thrillingly echoed by Blake:

The Sun has left his blackness & has found a fresher morning,
And the mild moon rejoices in the clear & cloudless night,
And man walks forth from midst of the fires: the evil is all consum'd.

Little children play in this restored Eden, and 'the Sun arises from his dewy bed, & the fresh airs / Play in his smiling beams giving the seeds of life to grow'. Percy's Mallet invites the reader to compare the Norse apocalypse with the Book of Revelation – 'I saw a new heaven and a new earth' – and no doubt Blake would have been inspired in his own syncretism by these parallels.

It is also worth looking briefly at Blake's apparent use of Old Norse-Icelandic themes in an earlier prophetic work, *America*, whose opening *Preludium* recounts a violent and disturbing encounter between 'red Orc', a figure who has just reached sexual maturity, and a 'nameless', 'shadowy' female, the 'Daughter of Urthona'. This female figure is 'crown'd with a helmet', recalling Óðinn's valkyries. But it is the god Þórr who, blacksmith-like, wields a hammer with iron gauntlets, and one would expect this girl, who brings Orc his food in iron

baskets, and his drink in iron cups, her iron tongue enforcing her silence, to be associated with him rather than with Óðinn. Orc himself has been chained up by Urthona, and the fettered figure surrounded by ironwork reminds us further of not only classical smiths such as Hephaistus, but also the hero of the Eddaic poem *Völundarkviða*, the smith Völundr, crippled and caged by a ruler whose daughter visits him in secret, and is eventually raped by him. In his chains, Orc boasts that his spirit is yet free:

Sometimes an eagle screaming in the sky, sometimes a lion
Stalking upon the mountains, & sometimes a whale, I lash
The raging fathomless abyss; anon a serpent folding
Around the pillars of Urthona.

Óðinn is a great shape-shifter in Old Norse traditions (in Snorri's *Ynglinga saga* – not represented in Mallet – he is said to be able to assume the forms of bird, animal, fish or serpent, precisely as Orc claims here, though it's not clear where Blake could have picked up this detail), but so too is Loki, who causes the death of Baldr. As a punishment, the gods tie Loki up using a rope made from the intestines of his own son, and transform this rope into iron. A serpent's venom drips down on to his face, and his wife Siguna loyally collects the drops in a cup. But when she leaves to empty it the venom falls on Loki, and his anguished thrashing about, says Snorri, causes what men call earthquakes. Loki's most notorious offspring is the monstrous wolf Fenrir, who also has a remarkable history with fetters. He simply breaks the gods' iron bonds, but the Black Genii (as Percy's Mallet calls them) make an impossible fetter from the footfall of a cat, the beards of women, the roots of stones, the sinews of bears, the breath of fish and the spittle of birds. This fetter, 'as smooth and soft as a silken string', will hold Fenrir until Ragnarök, but then all bonds will come loose – including the iron chains which hold down Loki. Blake's Orc too lies bound until the end of time.

Within the political allegory of the poem, Orc represents a revolutionary force which pits itself against the oppression of British rule – interestingly, portrayed in 'dragon form, clashing his scales' (but reused differently in *The Book of Ahania*, in which the arch-oppressor Urizen himself faces 'an enormous dread serpent, / Scaled and poisonous horned'). In *America*, a new world is prophesied in the same

words as the rebirth at the end of *Vala*, with the sun's fresher morning, and the moon rejoicing. This new world is politically revitalized, a place of liberty where chains will be loosed. As Mallet's paraphrase of *Völuspá* puts it, 'This is the place that the just will inhabit.' America is repeatedly figured in *Northern Antiquities* as a second Scandinavia, where civilized values of justice and peace have grown out of primitive chaos:

There was a time when the whole face of Europe presented the same spectacle as the forests of America; viz. a thousand little wandering nations, without cities or towns, or agriculture, or arts; having nothing to subsist on but a few herds, wild fruits and pillage, harassing themselves incessantly by inroads and attacks, sometimes conquering, sometimes conquered, often totally overthrown and destroyed.

The cool northern climate was believed to have helped, and quoting Montesquieu, Mallet notes that liberty prevails in North America, but not South. And this takes us right back to the heart of Blake's own original and even perverse symbolism, for according to Mallet it is once forests are cleared that liberty and industry flourish, where 'the rays of the sun must have a freer access to warm the earth' and 'moist exhalations . . . [are] lessened'.

In *The Book of Ahania*, Urizen's Tree of Mystery is 'an endless labyrinth of woe', and in yet another echo of Norse myth, Urizen nails his dead rival Fuzon to 'the topmost stem of this Tree'. There are evident parallels between the biblical Tree of Knowledge and the great World Tree of Old Norse-Icelandic mythology, the ash Yggdrasill, on which Óðinn hangs to seek otherworldly knowledge; both relate in complex ways to the cross on which Christ was crucified. But one cannot disentangle which mythic system Blake is working with; he found in both biblical and Norse texts the symbols of oppressive authority and received wisdom which he challenges so fiercely, as well as models for sacrifice and revolt. Precise correspondences are hard to pinpoint, but there can be no doubt that Blake found in the representations of Old Norse-Icelandic mythology and literature available in his time a body of material which scholars such as Mallet celebrated for its grandeur and antiquity.

Mallet praises too the style of the Old Norse, which expresses 'the sentiments that prevailed at a very early period . . . with a greatness

and sublimity equal to the finest strokes of classical antiquity on the same subject'. But Blake had his Old Norse via an English translation of a French account of Old Icelandic texts translated into Latin: with little more than Mallet's assertions to work with, and limited indication of the verse forms of Eddaic poetry, Blake was free to transform the material into his own poetic idiom. And yet sometimes, what one might confidently identify as a Blakean tone is already there in Percy's Mallet. The description of the goddess Hel in Niflheim, the underworld for those who die (ignominiously) of illness or old age, with its suggestive allegory, is a good example: 'Hela or Death, there exercised her despotic power; her palace was Anguish; her table, Famine; her waiters were Slowness and Delay; the threshold of her door was Precipice; her bed Care; she was livid and ghastly pale; and her very looks inspired horror.'

The mythological poems of the *Edda*, perhaps having their origins as mnemonic devices to fix lists of details, are full of proper names and synonyms, some familiar and featuring in more extended narratives, some arcane and mentioned only once or twice. The poems also overlap in subject matter and theme. And Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, based on Eddaic poetry (and represented in full in the first edition of Mallet), is an overarching narrative which attempts to accommodate a mass of poetic allusions and quotations. Norse mythology, crowded, repetitive and often hectic, thus provides a rich matrix for writers whose imagination runs to the creation of a full-scale mythic system. For Blake, the apparent antiquity of the material, its acclaimed sublimity and its resonant parallels with biblical material must have made it an ideal source. For creators of fantasy worlds like J. R. R. Tolkien, Old Norse mythology was also a productive base.

Tolkien and Fantasy Literature

J. R. R. Tolkien was an Oxford academic who specialized in Old English and Old Norse. So just as it's hard to tell what's Anglo-Saxon and what's Scandinavian in *Beowulf*, it's hard to disentangle the two in Tolkien's work. His first book, *The Hobbit*, is peopled with figures from the margins of Norse mythology – the dwarfs (or, as Tolkien insisted they be spelt, dwarves) and elves about which we know very little, though it's clear from the Old Norse-Icelandic sources that these

spirits were not the cosy and diminutive figures they have become for modern readers, but may rather have been regarded as powerful and even malignant creatures who needed careful ritual placating. The names of Tolkien's dwarfs in *The Hobbit* are easy to source: Dwalinn, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur, Nori are all named in one stanza of *Völuspá* which constitutes part of a long list of dwarf names; its significance in the poem is not clear. In the original Norse, their names are still recognizable – Dwalinn, Bivörr, Bávörr, Bömburr and Nóri – and may also have semantic value; they have been translated as Dawdler, Trembler, Trumbler, Tubby and Shipper. Further down the list, other familiar names appear: Gandálfr, Þráinn, Þorinn (with Eikinskialdi – Oakenshield – a little further on), Fíli and Kíli. The sources tell us little if anything else about these names. The second element of Gandálfr plainly denotes 'elf' (however an elf was figured) but the first element is interestingly problematic: wherever the Norse noun *gandr* occurs, it is associated with magic or sorcerers, and an alternative name for the great World Serpent is Jörmungandr – 'Great Gandr'. So perhaps Tolkien has given Gandalf a name which befits his superior status as a wizard. But beyond these philological hints, Tolkien could not have discovered from his study of Old Norse-Icelandic texts much more information about who these figures were, or what they did. But the appeal of these lists of names was evidently sufficient inspiration: as Tolkien once wrote, 'To me a name comes first, and the story follows.'

The story of *The Hobbit* – an assault on a gold-guarding dragon – has many details in common with the story of Beowulf's encounter with the dragon at the end of the Old English poem, although when *The Hobbit*'s hero, Bilbo Baggins, confronts the dragon Smaug, their exchange is an interesting variation on the Norse hero Sigurðr's conversation with the dragon Fáfnir in the Eddaic poem *Fáfnismál* (the poem is, somewhat unexpectedly, an account of this dialogue rather than of the mortal combat). Much of the local colour is also taken from Norse sources, for instance the great forest Mirkwood, which as Myrkviðr (the black forest) features in Eddaic poetry as a mythic barrier for heroes or gods to cross, and the shape-shifter Beorn, who 'changes his skin: sometimes he is a huge black bear, sometimes he is a great strong black-haired man'. Beorn recalls the Norse hero Böðvarr Bjarki: his name means little bear, and in *Hrólfs saga kraka* his father Björn has been turned into a bear by a wicked stepmother. Böðvarr inherits this dual identity, and is cited by critics as a Beowulf figure. We might

also recall the story of Earl Siward and his father's furry ears, discussed in chapter 4. But in spite of this evocative blend of Old English and Old Norse, its sprinkling of Norse names and its distinctively mythic, northern setting, Tolkien's fantasy world, both in *The Hobbit* and in its immense extension *The Lord of the Rings*, has nothing stylistically in common with Old Norse-Icelandic literature. The arch humour of *The Hobbit* is based on the contrast between Bilbo's quaintly English idiom and timid bourgeois respectability on the one hand, and the enormity of the challenges he's faced with on the other. And while *The Lord of the Rings* might be called a saga on the grounds of its length and complexity, there is nothing of Icelandic saga style or narratology about it. Only in *The Silmarillion* does Tolkien echo the darkness of Old Norse-Icelandic myth and heroic literature, and its repeated focus on genealogy, miscegenation and betrayal.

Stories of dwarfs, elves, giants and dragons are by now the stuff of fairytale, of children's literature. Tolkien has influenced a century of children's literature dominated by adventure-filled quests for highly symbolic rings and swords. But fantasy literature has been produced for adults, its writers deepening, rather than diminishing, the darker themes. However, the ethos of their source material – lone heroes, racial purity, fights to the death – may, in modern times, easily serve ideologically sinister ends. The fascist undertones of the Scottish writer David Lindsay, for example, who bases his fantasy world on the structure of Old Norse mythology, are quite clear in his novels, especially in *Voyage to Arcturus*, with its Nietzschean exploration of the human will, and *Devil's Tor*, which is overtly racist. The most celebrated example of Old Norse mythological material being used to serve serious artistic ends is not in the field of literature at all, of course, but in music: Wagner's transformation of the mythology of *Völsunga saga* and the *Poetic Edda* into his Ring Cycle – giants and dwarfs for adults indeed. Ragnarök itself – so dramatically described in the Norse as a cataclysmic battle between gods and monstrous forces – is figured in *Götterdämmerung* as the burning of Valhalla, and forms a backdrop to the heroic plot. Representing Bifröst – the mythical bridge between the world of the gods and the world of men, the name meaning literally 'the quivering way', perhaps suggesting a rainbow – on stage is enough of a challenge to producers of Wagner's work; the final encounter between Þórr and the giant World Serpent, or the destruction of the wolf Fenrir, whose jaws (said to gape from the sky down

to the earth) are torn apart, would be a hopeless task. While Wagner's transformation of supernatural figures – gods, dwarfs and giants – into actors (and singers) in a great drama lends itself with ease to the hyper-reality of opera, the Ragnarök of the Norse sources can only be written and imagined.

Old Norse-Icelandic mythology may be best figured in primarily non-naturalistic literary forms – visionary poetry, fantasy narratives or opera libretti. But the heroic ethos, as originally expressed in either heroic poetry and *fornaldarsögur*, or, in a more naturalistic literary context, Old Norse-Icelandic histories or family sagas, proved to be a very rich and widespread influence on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novelists. Novels of adventure and romance featuring viking heroes were commonplace, their literary quality variable. It would be impossible even to survey all this material; I want to look at three very different works by English novelists whose literary reputations stand independent of their Norse-inspired adventure romances: Walter Scott, Charles Kingsley and H. Rider Haggard.

Scott, Kingsley and Haggard

The first of the great nineteenth-century British novelists to base a work on Norse material was Sir Walter Scott. *The Pirate*, which was enormously popular following its publication at the very end of 1821, is set in the Orkney and Shetland (Zetland) Islands at the end of the seventeenth century, a time when, historically speaking, the Norse language spoken there was dying out, and the cultural dominance of Scandinavia was crumbling. Scott's characters are fully – and articulately – aware of their Norse identity; and Scott himself presses this home, presenting his characters' manners and customs – and especially their literary practice – as reflecting those of the viking north. Mordaunt Mertoun, the son of a mysterious incomer to Zetland, urges the native housekeeper Swertha to share with him 'her knowledge of old Norwegian ballads, and dismal tales concerning the Trows or Drows (the Dwarfs of the Scalds)'. Ironically, he compares his father's outbursts of anger to 'the fury of those ancient champions you sing songs about', and Swertha obligingly transmits, in her answer, some helpful information from Scott: 'O ay . . . the Berserker were champions who lived before the blessed days of St. Olave.'

THE PIRATE

BY

SIR WALTER SCOTT, BART.

Nothing in him—
But doth suffer a sea-change.
Tempest.



LONDON AND EDINBURGH
ADAM AND CHARLES BLACK
1893



If the repeated references to scalds and berserker present a familiar picture, one of Scott's early letters explains; in 1792 he describes himself as 'poring over Bartholine'. Thomas Bartholin's *Danish Antiquities on the Pagan Danes' Disdain of Death*, with its Latin translations of many Old Norse poems, lies behind much of the Scandinavian colour in *The Pirate*, just as it lay behind almost all of the Norse-inspired poetry of the eighteenth century. But Scott's library at Abbotsford included over fifty volumes on Scandinavian subjects, including Olaus Magnus' *History of the Northern Peoples*, which Scott certainly made more of than his hero Magnus Troil, who is shown in *The Pirate* poring over this book – but since it was 'unluckily in the Latin language' he could only marvel at the illustrations. Perhaps the most dramatic – and daring – piece of Old Norse colour is Scott's portrait of the latter-day seeress, Norna of the Fitful Head. Norna is a mad prophetess with a tendency to sneak up on people 'like the Valkyriur, or "chusers of the slain"'; her first name recalls the Norns, female supernatural beings represented in Eddaic poetry as determining men's fates. Fitful Head is a real (Norse-derived) placename in Shetland, though its application to a madwoman like Norna is perhaps unfortunate. Describing a séance in *The Pirate*, Scott's representation of what he calls 'extemporaneous composition' does reflect the way skaldic verses are incorporated into many saga narratives. However, when, elsewhere in the novel, he introduces a verse claiming it to be a translation from the Norse, the verse's idiom and content too often give the lie to his claim.

Scott had produced an abstract of the family saga *Eyrbyggja saga* (included in a nineteenth-century edition of *Northern Antiquities*), and had reviewed William Herbert's *Select Icelandic Poetry*, whose author claimed knowledge of the original Icelandic. But the appeal of sensational images via the Latin texts was clearly hard to resist. And Scott claimed that they were not necessarily archaisms. In a footnote to *The Pirate*, he recalls a story he had been told during a recent visit to Orkney and Shetland (a visit which probably inspired the writing of

(*opposite*) Norna of the Fitful Head: an engraving in a late nineteenth-century edition of *The Pirate* by Scott. In this novel, Scott portrays his eighteenth-century Orcadian characters such as this seeress as preserving (and practising) the supposed traditions of their Old Norse ancestors. From *The Pirate* by Sir Walter Scott, 1893

The Pirate). Gray's Norse Ode *The Fatal Sisters* (*Darraðarljóð*) had apparently at once been recognized by its Orcadian listeners as a version of a poem they knew in its original Norse, preserved until modern times in oral tradition. (Scott remarks that this would have been 'singular news' to Gray, 'when executing his version from the text of Bartholin'). As Scott himself points out: 'the circumstances will probably justify what is said in the text [of *The Pirate*] concerning the traditions of the inhabitants of those remote isles at the beginning of the 18th century'.

That Norse culture should have left its mark on Orkney and Shetland is no surprise. A form of Norse was spoken there until the late eighteenth century, and the dialect is still full of Norse-derived lexical and grammatical forms. Shetland was governed by Norwegian law until 1611, and land-owning laws continued to accord more with Scandinavian than with British custom for a long time afterwards (a fact made much of in *The Pirate*). A recent survey of the genetic make-up of the British Isles came to the unsurprising conclusion that the inhabitants of Orkney and Shetland have the most Scandinavian genes in the country.

Scott did not confine his vision of the Norse roots of British life – and the survival of these origins – to Orkney. In 1813, he published his narrative poem *Rokeby*, set in the countryside around the family seat of his friend John Morritt. The Norse element in the history of south Durham and north Yorkshire expresses itself, as Scott shows, in the placenames:

When Denmark's raven soar'd on high,
Triumphant through Northumbrian sky,
Till, hovering near, her fatal croak
Bade Reged's Britons dread the yoke,
And the broad shadow of her wing
Blacken'd each cataract and spring,
Where Tees in tumult leaves his source,
Thundering o'er Caldron and High-Force;
Beneath the shade the Northmen came,
Fix'd on each vale a Runic name,
Rear'd high their altar's rugged stone,
And gave their Gods the land they won.
Then, Balder, one bleak garth was thine,
And one sweet brooklet's silver line,
And Woden's Croft did title gain

From the stern father of the slain;
But to the monarch of the Mace,
That held in fight the foremost place,
To Odin's son, and Sifja's spouse,
Near Stratforth high they paid their vows,
Remember'd Thor's victorious fame,
And gave the dell the Thunderer's name.

Rokeby is a romance set in the aftermath of the civil war battle of Marston Moor; here Scott uses contemporary evidence – placenames – to transport us to a much earlier civil war, with all the familiar trappings of northern antiquity: the raven banner, the fatal sign, the 'runic' tongue, sacrificial altars and, as ever, the gods of the Norsemen.

Charles Kingsley's *Hereward the Wake* is set in another civil conflict: the struggle between the English and the Normans. Its subtitle – *The Last of the English* – disguises the most colourful element in Kingsley's recreation of eleventh-century England: that half of the country was Danelaw, its inhabitants Anglo-Scandinavians at least as conscious of their northern heritage, language and literary culture as Scott's Orkney and Shetland islanders. Hereward is himself a very mixed protagonist – even an anti-hero – and his delinquency in youth causes him to be outlawed. But he wants to be a great hero, and his models are familiar vikings: 'Regnar Lodbrog, or Frithiof, or Harold Hardraade'. Those early translations from Old Norse cast a very long shadow.

What is most reminiscent of saga narrative in *Hereward the Wake* is how the narrative positions itself with regard to history: Kingsley purports to be basing his story on chronicles and popular traditions about Hereward, and often substantiates it with phrases such as 'as the story says' or 'as the chronicler says'. He often actually names the authority from which he claims to have derived his material: Orderic Vitalis, or Richard of Ely. But no consistent distinction is drawn between what exists in the historical record and what is filled in from novelistic imagination. Sometimes Kingsley distances himself rhetorically from his own fictionality by openly speculating, like a careful biographer, when the chronicles fall silent: 'Hereward may very well have joined Siward in the Scotch war.' But mostly the history and the fiction are seamlessly run together, rather as they are in Icelandic family sagas and historical sagas. Kingsley also incorporates stanzas of

verse in his prose, as saga authors do. Quite often the metre of these stanzas reproduces the six-syllable measures of *dróttkvætt* with their final trochaic foot – but without the alliteration or rhyme of skaldic metre. The effect is still eerily reminiscent of skaldic verse.

Kingsley's Norse knowledge is mainly evident in the dialogue of the Anglo-Scandinavians, who pray to God that they may meet old friends in Valhalla, or swear 'by the head of Odin's horse', and in the heroic ethos of the narrative – all manly valour and indomitability. There is one final twist. Hereward, like many a Norse hero before him, proves his valour by killing a bear. But this brings him into conflict with his historical contemporary, the young Waltheof (later St Waltheof), who, it will be remembered, had quite recent ursine ancestry. Hereward benefits from Kingsley's historical hindsight: 'His [Waltheof's] face was not that of a warrior, but of a saint in a painted window', he muses. Hereward brushes off Waltheof's resentful misunderstanding of a joke about killing one of his kinsmen:

It was a bear, Lord Earl, a great white bear. Cannot you understand a jest? Or are you going to take up the quarrels of all the white bears that are slain between here and Iceland? [How many white bears were there between Lincolnshire and Iceland?] You will end up by burning Crowland Minster, then; for there are twelve of your kinsmen's skins there, which Canute gave forty years ago.

Waltheof is horrified at the thought of such sacrilege as burning one of God's houses; Hereward is horrified by Waltheof's piety: 'a monk-monger into the bargain', he sneers, betraying his proud viking disdain for soft Christianity – and, possibly, Kingsley's own celebrated opposition to Catholicism.

Scott and Kingsley use Norse colour as a backdrop to their work – in seventeenth-century Scotland, and eleventh-century England, the characters both recall and embody their Norse heritage, and are the vehicles for their authors' scholarly knowledge of it. The influence of the formal properties of Old Norse-Icelandic literature is intermittent and unpredictable. But Rider Haggard's *The Saga of Eric Brighteyes* is completely different: here we have a remarkable pastiche of an Icelandic saga.

H. Rider Haggard travelled to Iceland in 1888, and began writing *Eric Brighteyes* (published in 1891) on his return. His own highly enthusiastic accounts of tours of saga sites show that he was already well versed

in saga literature; and by this time, a very wide range of sagas was available in translation. Haggard's introduction to *Eric Brighteyes* makes clear not only his aims in writing the work, but also his acute critical response to the saga literature he had read. Haggard was convinced by the historicity of family sagas: 'the Njal saga', as he terms it, is 'obviously true', because he has seen for his own eyes the scene of Njáll's burning at Bergþórshváll in Iceland, and the topography is authentic in every detail. But there are clearly episodes in sagas which could not be 'true', and this applies also to his own saga about Eric. If *Eric Brighteyes* were a real saga, Haggard explains, 'the tale of Eric and his deeds would be true; but the dream of Asmund, the witchcraft of Swanhild, the incident of the speaking head and the visions of Eric and Skallagrim, would owe their origin to the imagination of successive generations of skalds' (Haggard, like many other saga enthusiasts, uses the word 'skald' not simply for court poet, but also for saga author). This view of the essential historicity of sagas, which accommodates a degree of fictionality, is in line with modern saga scholarship.

But as Haggard notes, a saga can be a hard read, given 'the multitude of its actors; [and] the Norse sagaman's habit of interweaving endless side-plots, and the persistence with which he introduces the genealogy and adventures of the ancestors of every unimportant character'. *Eric Brighteyes*, Haggard reassures his readers, is tidily 'clipped of these peculiarities'. None the less, he remains a devotee of 'the prose epics of our own race', and writes that his work will be justified if it serves to bring readers to real sagas. Certainly, readers who turn from real sagas to *Eric Brighteyes* will be struck by how densely and ingeniously the novel reprocesses familiar narrative motifs from a wide range of sagas, and with what unexpected success Haggard makes his narrative read like a saga.

Eric is a hero who is loved all his life by two women, the good Gudruda and the wicked Swanhild. Swanhild tries to thwart Eric's love for Gudruda by witchcraft, just as the witch in *Kormaks saga* tries to keep Kormakr and Steingerðr apart. Eric and Gudruda have sworn that he will never have his hair cut by any other woman (slightly reminiscent of Haraldr Finehair, who vows never to have his hair cut until he brings the whole of Norway under his rule, but even closer to *Víglundar saga*, whose hero refuses to have his hair cut or washed by anyone but his lover), but Swanhild tricks him into breaking his vow, and then makes him drink a love potion (just as Sigurðr is drugged

into forgetting Brynhildr). Swanhild is married to a thoroughly decent older man, Earl Atli, clearly modelled on Steingerðr's husband Bersi in *Kormaks saga*; but unlike the poet-lovers in the skaldsagas (see next section), who don't at all mind trying to deceive their lovers' husbands, Eric is horrified by the infidelity induced by the love potion (and rather delicately only implied in the novel).

Swanhild, scorned by Eric when he comes to his senses, hatches a plot with one of her servants to tell 'a false tale' to her husband before Eric can tell him the truth. Victorian propriety accords perfectly with the saga technique of allowing the readers to infer what has happened, and draw their own conclusions. Swanhild 'caused Koll the Half-witted to be summoned. To him she spoke long and earnestly, and they made a shameful plot together.' Just like a real saga author, Haggard avoids the assumption of omniscience and leaves their planning a secret – as when, in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Snorri and his neighbour Víga-Styrr discuss how to deal with Styrr's troublesome berserks. In *Eric Brighteyes*, the plot is simply that the servant Koll is to corroborate Swanhild's allegation about Eric (which remains unspoken).

As in *Kormaks saga*, a duel ensues between the hero and the wronged husband. But the novel now moves seamlessly away from the motifs of the skaldsagas, and begins to echo a very different text, *Grettis saga*. In a celebrated analogue to Beowulf's fight with the monster Grendel, Grettir confronts a great troll-like figure, Glámr, who has been terrorizing the neighbourhood. In their hand-to-hand struggle, Glámr falls backwards, with Grettir on top of him. As translated by William Morris and Eiríkur Magnússon, the scene continues: 'Bright moonlight was there without, and the drift was broken, now drawn over the moon, now driven off her; and, even as Glam fell, a cloud was driven from the moon, and Glam glared up against her.' In this dramatic moment, Glámr pronounces a curse on Grettir: 'Hitherto hast thou earned fame by thy deeds, but henceforth will wrongs and manslayings fall upon thee, and the most part of thy doings will turn to thy woe and ill-hap . . . this weird I lay on thee, ever in those days to see these eyes with thine eyes, and thou wilt find it hard to be alone – and that shall drag thee unto death.'

Haggard's version of this has Eric's defeated opponent as the elderly husband, rather than the nocturnal monster, but it's remarkable how much Haggard preserves of the scene. The sudden shaft of light is metaphorically extended: 'of a sudden, a light brake upon his [Atli's]

mind, as even then the light of the setting sun brake through the driving mist.' Atli learns of Swanhild's deceit, and forgives Eric, but with his dying words still pronounces Eric's doom, not because he is still hostile, but because it is fated by the Norns: 'Henceforth thou art accursed. For I tell thee that this wicked woman Swanhild shall drag thee down to death.' Close verbal parallels and the same images are maintained even though the underlying 'plot' has been radically remodelled.

Haggard echoes the narrative stance of the saga author with great skill; he maintains external focalization to a surprising degree: the story advances mostly through dialogue, and there is little direct authorial intervention (though we might note the judgemental adjective 'shameless' in the mention of Swanhild's plot against Eric). We are, however, often told what the characters are thinking, and what has motivated their action. But less obvious characteristics of saga style – the habit of slipping into the present tense, especially when features of the landscape are being described, for example, or the narrative trick of leaving an issue hanging at the end of a scene – 'And Swanhild smiled, but Gudruda was afraid' – all contribute to the success of Haggard's mimicry of saga style. Eric's final lament for Gudruda even echoes something of the alliteration of skaldic stanzas:

Long ago, when swept the snow-blast,
Close we clung and plighted troth.
Many a year, through storm and sword-song,
Sore I strove to win thee, sweet!

None the less, the softness and sentimentality of Eric's poetic idiom is not very reminiscent of the bravura of Old Icelandic poets, who were more often moved to invective against the beloved's husband than to celebration of undying love.

Although in his introduction, Haggard claims that *Eric Brighteyes* is 'cast in the form of a romance of our own day' and avoids archaisms as much as possible, its idiom still seems far from contemporary: 'Hearken, my husband. I have been a good wife to thee, though thou hast not been all good to me. But thus shalt thou atone: thou shalt swear that, though she is a girl, thou wilt not cast this bairn forth to perish, but wilt cherish and nurture her.' But Haggard does echo the idiom of his own day in one very particular sense: the novel is written in the distinctive style of contemporary Victorian saga translations.

Landor, Arnold and Morris

One of the strangest products of the influence of William Herbert's *Select Icelandic Poetry* at the very beginning of the century was an early poem by Walter Savage Landor, *Gunlaug and Helga*, based not on one of Herbert's admired verse translations, but on a brief prose summary of *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* – one of the Icelandic skaldsagas – which Herbert included in his volume of translations. The skaldsagas comprise a handful of family sagas which share a love triangle theme: two men – one or both of whom are poets, or skalds – are in contention for the love of one woman. In all the skaldsagas, the first lover – who is always the poet – for some reason fails to marry his beloved. Just why this marriage fails is variable, and a very useful control point for adjusting the balance of sympathies in the narrative. For example, in *Kormaks saga* the hero Kormakr is an unreliable lover who is believed by Steingerðr's family to be compromising her honour by dallying with her, so they marry her off secretly to an elderly husband. In one of the greatest of the family sagas, *Laxdæla saga*, the hero Kjartan is simply too proud, or too private, to send a message back to Iceland from Norway, where he is staying, and his best friend and foster-brother returns before him and marries Guðrún, Kjartan's match in pride, who is humiliated by Kjartan's silence. The aftermath of the mismarriage is tragic in this case, and emphasizes the love triangle's relationship with the heroic story of Sigurðr and Brynhildr, as told in the heroic poems of the *Edda*, and in their prose reworking, *Völsunga saga*; in all the texts, the primary match fails, and the lovers are unhappily married to others.

In *Gunnlaugs saga* (his nickname, *ormstunga* – snake-tongue – is a reference to his satirical gifts as a poet), Gunnlaugr is betrothed to Helga, and is bound to return to Iceland from Scandinavia in three years to marry her. He misses the deadline for no very good reason, but back in Iceland Helga's father puts off the wedding which has been pressed by Gunnlaugr's rival Hrafn, to give Gunnlaugr a chance, and indeed Gunnlaugr just manages to get back to Iceland before the wedding takes place – but then twists his ankle in a wrestling match, and Helga is married off to Hrafn. Gunnlaugr challenges Hrafn to a duel, and they are both killed.

Landor's poem follows the outlines of Herbert's summary fairly closely. Herbert neglects to point out that when Gunnlaugr has been

hurt in the wrestling match, he has already missed the deadline, and Landor increases our sympathy for Gunlaug further by describing a much more lurid leg injury ('a rotten pointed stake was hid') than the original saga's rather prosaic twisted ankle. But if Landor keeps to the story of *Gunnlaugs saga*, he transforms Herbert's incisive, no-nonsense prose into a hectic rush of octosyllabic rhyming couplets, all breathless exclamations and poetic inversions. Landor greatly admired Herbert's volume, which, he wrote, 'it is impossible to read without improving the taste and warming the imagination'. But Landor's Gunlaug is a quite extraordinary viking. He longs to go fighting abroad 'Ere fierce invaders come to spoil / Our verdant Iceland's native soil' – though one hazard Iceland's inhabitants never did have to face was invasion, and 'verdant' is not a very obvious description for Iceland. Landor's picture of the Icelandic countryside – where 'the sandy dog-rose blows' – is a gentle one, like his presentation of the charmingly innocent relationship between Helga and Gunlaug:

Her milk-white rabbit oft he fed
And crumbled fine his breakfast-bread;
And oft explored, with anxious view,
Spots where the crispest parsley grew.

This is a very refined medieval Iceland, and a refined pair of child-like lovers. And yet there is a real threat beneath the surface of what may seem to modern readers a risible treatment of the material. Gunlaug helps Helga by riding her 'restive horse' and 'quite subdued her stubborn kid, / Who lately dared to quit her side, / And once, with painful rashness, tried / His ruddy horn against her knee, / Bold as his desp'rate sire could be'. The lovers will grow up, just like the baby kid, and Helga's unwilling marriage to Gunlaug's rival Rafen is as unpleasant as the image of the adult goat in this otherwise pastoral scene. There is, however, a place in *Gunlaug and Helga* for the more familiar image of the viking north: the poem includes an allusion, by Helga herself, to 'the enchanted sword of Angantyre'; Herbert also included a translation of part of *Hervarar saga* in the volume – though not the more familiar 'Incantation of Hervör' as translated by Hickes and Percy.

Matthew Arnold's long poem 'Balder Dead', written sometime between 1853 and 1854, is also a startling transformation of the ethos of Norse material, although Arnold based his poem on the standard

fount of knowledge – Percy’s *Northern Antiquities*, in the 1847 edition revised and expanded by I. A. Blackwell. Arnold’s Odin echoes the spirit celebrated (and made celebrated) by Bartholin when he berates his fellow gods for lamenting the death of Baldr: death will come to all of us, he declaims,

But ours we shall not meet, when that day comes,
With women’s tears and weak complaining cries.

And in his depiction of Valhalla, Arnold has the gods and heroes drinking out of ‘gold-rimmed skulls’ – he must have deliberately ignored the correction Blackwell made in his version of *Northern Antiquities* to Ole Worm’s original error, which had become very influential because it was repeated by Mallet. But Arnold’s gods and heroes inhabit an unmistakably classical milieu. Asgard, the home of the gods, is a classical city, with streets, a harbour, and houses with lighted windows. In the *Edda*, the mysterious dwelling place of Baldr’s mother Frigg is Fensalir (literally, ‘fen-halls’); Arnold’s Fensaler is an elegant mansion, peopled with figures from classical sources:

The prophetesses, who by rite eterne
On Frea’s hearth feed high the sacred fire
Both night and day.

Arnold begins his poem *after* the extraordinary scenes which lead to Baldr’s death, in which the gods, taking advantage of his magic inviolability to weapons, hurl missiles of all kinds at him. It is very hard to gauge the tone of Snorri’s *Edda* here; once Baldr has been fatally wounded by the (improbably) lethal mistletoe, the distress of the gods is evident enough, but the spirit in which the gods use him for target practice – is it a game? a sacrifice? horseplay? – is uncertain. Throughout ‘Balder Dead’, Arnold irons out the grotesqueries which characterize the Norse sources – often replacing them with classical material, and maintaining at all times the dignity and propriety of the gods and heroes. The treatment of Baldr’s funeral is a good example. In the *Edda*, the gods attempt to launch Baldr’s funeral ship Hringhorni, but it sticks on the rollers, so they call up a giantess, Hyrrokkin, who arrives on wolf-back, with snakes for reins. At her first touch, Baldr’s boat shoots down to the sea, sparks flying, and the god Þórr

turns on the giantess, and has to be restrained by his colleagues. There is no mention of any of this in 'Balder Dead'; Arnold's funeral for Balder echoes and imitates the description of Patroclus' funeral in the *Iliad*.

Arnold's cool, steady iambic pentameters also heighten the sober and elevated tone of 'Balder Dead'. Very striking is his use of the Homeric, or epic, simile. For instance, one evening Hoder passes close by his brother Hermod:

And as a spray of honeysuckle flowers
Brushes across a tired traveller's face
Who shuffles through the deep dew-moistened dust,
On a May evening, in the darkened lanes,
And starts him, that he thinks a ghost went by –
So Hoder brushed by Hermod's side.

Landor's dog-roses spring to mind here. This is a deeply Mediterranean Asgard, and one cannot imagine what Bartholin and Mallet would have made of it.

Hermod travels to the underworld in an attempt to reclaim Balder for the gods, and meets with partial success: the goddess Hela will give back Balder if the gods can make everything in the world grieve for him (in the event, one giantess – Loki in disguise? – refuses to weep, and Baldr is lost to Ásgarðr). But before Hermod can deliver his message, Arnold's Lok derides his mission:

See, here is Hermod, who comes single back
From Hell; and shall I tell thee how he seems?
Like as a farmer, who hath lost his dog,
Some morn, at market, in a crowded town –
Through many streets the poor beast runs in vain,
And follows this man after that, for hours;
And, late at evening, spent, and panting, falls
Before a stranger's threshold, not his home,
With flanks a-tremble, and his slender tongue
Hangs quivering out between his dust-smeared jaws,
And piteously he eyes the passers-by;
But home his master comes to his own farm,
Far in the country, wondering where he is –
So Hermod comes to-day unfollowed home.

The Eddaic poem *Lokasenna* consists of a dialogue between Loki and the gods in which Loki taunts each one in turn about their indulgence in all manner of sexual practices – incest, bestiality, promiscuity, homosexuality and more. Hermod's cosmic journey to the otherworld to reclaim the most beloved of the gods may be demeaned by being compared to a farmer's trip to market, and the failure to return with Balder compared with the loss of a faithful dog, but by Loki's standards, Hermod got off lightly.

Arnold does not use Mallet only for the narrative of Baldr's death, but weaves into his poem versions of the Norse accounts of creation and apocalypse. When Odin proposes to countermand Hela's decree that Balder stay dead, his wife Frea reminds him how he created the world in the first place, and set Hela to rule over hell – will he now undo what he created then? Frea's impassioned speech outlines the process of creation as the *Edda*, derived from poems such as *Völuspá*, relates it. At the end of the poem, a vision of Balder – now reunited in hell with his wife Nanna – greets the grieving Hermod for the last time: 'Hail and farewell!' Hermod regrets that Balder will not be around to help the gods at Ragnarök, but, echoing the Norse sources, Balder looks forward to the new world after the apocalypse, 'in times less alien to a spirit mild', when

There reassembling we shall see emerge
From the bright Ocean at our feet an earth
More fresh, more verdant than the last, with fruits
Self-springing, and a seed of man preserved,
Who then shall live in peace, as now in war.
But we in Heaven shall find again with joy
The ruined palaces of Odin, seats
Familiar, halls where we have supped of old;
Re-enter them with wonder, never fill
Our eyes with gazing, and rebuild with tears.

Like Blake, Arnold evidently felt the powerful, universal and apparently timeless appeal of the vision of a new heaven and a new earth as figured in Norse mythology; those elements in the Norse sources which remained resistant to his classical transformations or visionary idealism he simply omitted.

In 1887, William Morris published *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*, a retelling in verse of *Völsunga saga*. Morris and

his Icelandic collaborator, Eiríkur Magnússon, had already translated from the original Old Norse not only the saga itself, but also many of the Eddaic poems on which it draws. Morris himself thus had unparalleled knowledge of the sources he transformed into what George Bernard Shaw called 'the greatest epic since Homer'. Morris's metre – sixteen-syllable rhyming couplets, with a marked caesura – gives the material a slow, stately feel quite different from the savage brevity of the original poems, or indeed the awkward simplicity of the saga prose. Morris creates a fully rounded (and indeed seductively detailed) material world for his heroes, something which is markedly lacking in the poetic sources, and only perfunctorily filled in by the saga prose. He supplies motivation and characterization which the originals leave the reader to infer – or simply pass over – imposing coherence on material which in the Norse represents the uneasy bringing together of a collection of items from different times, places and cultures. The saga prose struggles to reduce and homogenize its sources, forcing its paraphrases of Eddaic poems into a continuous narrative with unconvincing linking passages, and factitious motivation. And the individual poems of the anthology we call the *Poetic Edda* were almost certainly never designed to fit together as a consistent sequence of events from a single cycle – the story of the Volsungs. A comparison of the final section of *Sigurd the Volsung* with the story of Guðrún and Atli (Attila the Hun) in the Eddaic poems *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál*, and the same material in *Völsunga saga*, illustrates Morris's transformations.

In the Norse, Guðrún, grieving after the murder of her husband Sigurðr, but given a forgetfulness potion by her mother-in-law Grimhildr, is subsequently married off to Atli. In both poems, Atli's invitation to Guðrún's brothers to visit him and Guðrún is not the friendly, familial overture it might seem. The traditional hostility between the Huns and Gunnarr's Burgundians is immediately evident: Atli's messenger finds the Burgundians in their hall, sitting around their central hearth in a defensive, inward-looking stance; they fall silent as he approaches. Atli's message is laced with the promise of great treasure for the Burgundians: weapons, horses, gold, great estates around the River Dnieper. But Gunnarr and his brother are not to be bought, and coolly disparage these exotic gifts. Perhaps they recognize (though they do not say so) the irony here: Atli is planning not to offer treasure, but to claim it, because since the murder of Sigurðr the

dragon-slayer, Gunnarr is now the owner of the legendary hoard of the Niflungs.

Guðrún tries to warn her brothers about the reason behind Atli's invitation, sending them a ring wrapped around with a wolf's hair – a symbol of Atli's treachery. But in the perverse world of heroic imperatives, the warning seals the fate of her brothers: to heed a warning would be cowardly, and Gunnarr and his brother Högni have no choice but to ride to the enemy hall of Atli, where Guðrún awaits their arrival, and still tries to make them turn back. In the ensuing fight, the brothers are captured, and Atli offers to spare Högni's life if Gunnarr will give up the gold. But Gunnarr, bafflingly, inverts the ransom offer, implying that he will only co-operate with Atli if his brother Högni *is* killed. Högni laughs defiantly as he is brutally maimed and killed, and Gunnarr too triumphs, for, as he gloatingly explains, Atli will now never learn the whereabouts of the great hoard: 'a doubt was always with me / while both of us lived; / now there is none / when only I am left alive'.

Guðrún, like so many other women in Germanic legend – and, perhaps, early Germanic society – is caught up in the violence between her husband and the family she was born into. In the earlier poems of the *Edda*, her loyalties are different, for her brothers brought about the death of her beloved husband. But in *Atlakviða* we see another Guðrún altogether (and of course different heroic episodes, with different sets of motivation and patterns of loyalty, have evidently attached themselves to the name of Guðrún, who should not be thought of as a consistent 'character', but rather as a figure used by generations of poets as a matrix for legends in which a woman plays a crucial part). The Guðrún of *Atlakviða* is not the passive lamenter of the earlier poems, and her loyalties are straightforwardly with her brothers. In a magnificently inhumane act of revenge, she kills her young sons by Atli, serves them up to him during the celebrations following the ritual execution of her brother, and announces what she (and he) has done:

Sona hefir þinna	You have your sons'
sverða deilir	– O sword-dealer –
hiörto hrædreypog	corpse-bloody hearts,
við hunang of tuggin.	chewed with honey.
Melta knátto, móðugr,	You've been chewing, O proud one,

manna valbráðir,	the slaughtered meat of humans,
eta at ölkrásom	eating it as drink-delicacies
ok í öndugi at senda.	and sending it to the seat of honour.

Taking advantage of the drunken confusion, Guðrún kills Atli and burns down his hall.

The horrific, even sensational nature of the events of *Atlakviða* naturally dominates our impression of the poem. But its verbal texture is also quite remarkable, as even this most gruesome stanza shows. Guðrún holds back the revelation of what Atli has done until the last possible syntactical moment, even interrupting the announcement with an apparently deferential kenning for Atli – sword-dealer – which in this context only exposes the violence Atli himself lives by, and had shown to Guðrún’s brothers. Guðrún’s revenge recalls the dreadful torture – cutting Högni’s heart from his living body – which Atli has just perpetrated. Her emphasis on the physicality of the act of eating – chewing, digesting – is juxtaposed with the refined food Atli was expecting: morsels of meat cooked with honey, canapés to take the edge off the drink. Like her brother Gunnarr, Guðrún is shown transcending her natural human instincts in pursuit of an heroic imperative: Gunnarr triumphantly sacrifices his brother’s life as well as his own rather than lose the gold to Atli; Guðrún overcomes (not without cost to her sanity, as the poem makes clear) her maternal and indeed wifely affections in order to avenge her brothers.

The so-called ‘Greenlandic’ *Atlamál* covers the same ground, but in a rather different idiom: the tense allusiveness of *Atlakviða* is replaced by a more discursive narrative in which the characters – especially Guðrún and Atli – argue and recriminate, and the social status of all the characters is popular rather than aristocratic. In keeping with this shift in social register, instead of the awe-inspiring, rarefied morality of *Atlakviða*, the motivation of the *Atlamál* characters is less uncompromising: Guðrún tries to warn her brothers of Atli’s treachery, but her runic message is maliciously tampered with. Högni still dies bravely, but Gunnarr does not openly exult in his passing. And Atli expresses his horror (which, however, in the circumstances cannot appear as other than an understatement) at Guðrún’s child murder. The narrative of *Völsunga saga* blends both accounts, but introduces even more elaborations: when her brothers arrive, Guðrún wonders if they should seek a settlement with Atli; and we are told how she confronts

her little boys to slit their throats, and how they reproach her for her cruelty.

From these mixed sources, Morris produces the final book of his epic. He opens immediately after the death of Sigurðr: the Burgundians (Niblungs) have inherited both the treasure and the status of Sigurd; Gunnar and Hogni are married; and their mother Grimhild is enjoying the grandeur and apparent security of their situation:

She saith: Where then are the Gods? What things have
they shapen and made
More of might than the things I have shapen? Of whom
shall our hearts be afraid?

But one summer's evening, a messenger comes from Atli, to ask for the hand of their sister Gudrun. Only Grimhild knows where she is, and takes the brothers to see her. Gunnar is touchingly excited and moved to be reunited with his sister, whose husband he has murdered, but the meeting is dreadful: Gudrun thinks – or pretends to – that they have come with news of her husband, and Gunnar is abashed and ashamed. But Hogni speaks up, unafraid to explain their mission, and Grimhild has brought a potion 'blent for the deadening slumber that forgetteth joy and bale'. Gudrun drinks, and forgets the enmity she bears towards her brothers, but not her grief for Sigurd. From this point on, Gudrun – whose loyalties are irreconcilably divided in the Norse sources, since she blames her brothers for Sigurðr's death, whilst warning them about Atli – becomes a strange, passive creature, drugged by Grimhild's potion into an impenetrable inscrutability. Married to Atli, she 'looks with steadfast eyes / On the guile and base contention, and the strife of murder and lies' in the court of the Huns, in the grip of obsessively repeating nightmares about the death of Sigurd. By day, in 'a queenly voice and cold', she taunts Atli about the hoard of Niblung gold, until at last he sends his messenger again to the Burgundians, to invite them back to his hall. This is where the poem *Atlakviða* begins.

As in the Norse poem, Gunnarr and Hogni are not impressed by Atli's promises of treasure for them. But Morris's Gunnar has a more pressing urge – to see his sister. Atli's messenger plays on this, telling Gunnar that she longs to see her brothers too. Gunnar determines to visit her and Atli: no heroic imperative, but a brother's love. Atli's

messenger, confident that Gunnar will not now be persuaded against going, tells Hogni the truth: that Gudrun has never stopped grieving for her murdered Sigurd. So Hogni alone bears the weight of the heroic fatalism in the poem, travelling to meet certain death, and doubly warned by his wife's premonitory dreams. Grimhild too realizes the truth, but 'her cunning hand is helpless' and she utters a terrifying lament for the ends of the Niblung dynasty.

Gunnar and Hogni are met by an eerie silence when they arrive in the land of the Huns:

they look to the right and the left hand, and see no folk astir,
And no reek from the homestead chimneys; and no toil of men
they hear;
But the hook hangs lone in the vineyard, and the scythe is lone in
the hay,
The bucket thirsts by the well-side, the void cart cumpers the way.
Then doubt on the war-host falleth.

The city, when they reach it, is silent too, and Atli's hall. The only living creature there is Gudrun, waiting for them. She ignores Gunnar's anxious, loving greeting, but responds to Hogni's knowing question about when and where they will die: 'Ye shall die today, O brethren.' The battle between the Huns and the Niblungs (absent altogether in *Atlakviða*, and briefly and conventionally described in *Atlamál*) is a grand affair, full of defiant speeches, and laughter at the possibility of death. Hogni has already defeated Atli, because, knowing that their journey was doomed, he has consigned the great treasure hoard to the depths of the Rhine. Atli is at first puzzled, and then chastened, by his inability to frighten, threaten, or reach in any way a man who claims to be unafraid of death. Gunnar, imprisoned in a snake pit, sings of the Norse creation, and sees his little life in proportion to the grandeur of the gods' whole created cosmos. At dawn, he dies, a victim of one sleepless snake, 'the grey Worm, Great and Ancient', kin to the monstrous World Serpent who will oppose the gods at Ragnarök.

All this time, Gudrun has watched, apparently unmoved: she neither laments her brothers' passing, nor celebrates their defeat with her husband Atli, though she sits with him at the victory feast, and offers him wine to drink. After the feasting, alone at dawn, she

sets fire to Atli's hall, and in the confusion murders her husband with a sword thrust. There is no child killing, only Gudrun's repeated lamenting for Sigurd, and the poem ends when Gudrun walks out into the sea, and is swept away.

Throughout the whole poem, there are passing verbal echoes to half lines in *Atlakviða*, which Morris evidently knew well, but he has completely remodelled the Eddaic poem, smoothing away its rough edges and elaborating its emotional currents. The story of Guðrún and Atli has been recast as an atmospheric family drama.

Stevenson, Hardy and Galsworthy

In the autumn of 1892, in his home in Samoa, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote a short story which he called 'The Waif Woman'. His subtitle, 'A Cue from a Saga', makes his source quite clear, and 'The Waif Woman' is a close adaptation of an episode from *Eyrbyggja saga* in which a mysterious Hebridean woman called Þórgunna arrives in Iceland; after her sudden death, various bizarre hauntings take place in the district. In a letter dated November 1891, Stevenson had asked to be sent volumes of the Saga Library – the series of saga translations projected by William Morris and Eiríkur Magnússon. Morris and Magnússon had published *The Story of the Ere-Dwellers* (*Eyrbyggja saga*) in 1892, and Stevenson must have received the volume, and read it without delay, because in an unsent letter to Morris, dated February 1892, he rather heavy-handedly teases Morris about his archaic language – especially his use of 'whereas' in place of 'where' in the volume. A glance at 'The Waif Woman' reveals Stevenson's indebtedness not simply to the saga itself, but specifically to Morris's translation of it.

The saga's anti-heroine, Þuríður, is named Aud the Light-Minded by Stevenson – a nice play on the actual name of an impressive Icelandic matriarch who is mentioned at the opening of the saga, Auðr the Deep-Minded (Auðr was to become one of Hugh MacDiarmid's muses, as we shall see later on in this chapter). In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Þuríður is characterized as a woman fond of showy things, and very anxious to get her hands on Þórgunna's cargo. But Þórgunna not only refuses to sell, but also insists that her beautiful bed-clothes be burnt after her death. Þuríður disobeys these dying wishes, and the hauntings ensue, including the extraordinary reappearance of Þórgunna, when her

coffin-bearers are denied decent hospitality at a farm on their way to bury her; stark naked, the ghost of Þórgunna herself prepares a meal for them, shaming and terrifying the farmer and his wife.

Stevenson develops Þuríðr's character with considerable conviction and insight into the saga narrative: 'her mind was set on trifles, on bright clothing, and the admiration of men, and the envy of women; and it was thought she was not always so circumspect in her bearing as she might have been, but nothing to hurt'. Desire for Þórgunna's goods turns Aud's weakness of character into real wickedness; for instance, she steals a brooch (and is rebuked by her own young daughter) and as in the original, refuses to have the bed-covers burnt – although Stevenson adds the terrifying detail that she invites her husband to sleep in between the dead Þórgunna's sheets. Stevenson flirts with Gothic horror in Aud the Light-Minded's response to the sight of a beautiful cloak of Þórgunna's – 'I would give my soul for it' – and then exploits it to the full: Aud dies horribly, not only tormented by the reproachful voice of Þórgunna in her head, but also attended by her ghost: 'There lay Aud in her fine clothes, and there by her side on the bed the big dead wife Þórgunna squatted on her hams. No sound was heard, but it seemed by the movement of her mouth as if Þórgunna sang, and she waved her arms as if to singing.'

'The Waif Woman' was not a success, however. Fanny Stevenson's daughter recollected: 'My mother said it showed the influence of a Swedish [*sic*] author Louis had been reading, and was not in his own clear, individual style', and Stevenson wrote to his publisher in November 1892: 'My wife protests against *The Waif-Woman* and I am instructed to report the same to you.' One of Stevenson's biographers speculates that Fanny disliked the story so much because she recognized herself in the unflattering depiction of Aud the Light-Minded. The story was not included in a collection.

Whether Stevenson's reading of Norse literature might have influenced other works of his, even when there may be no supporting documentation, is a more difficult question – especially if the influence is a matter of style or narrative method, rather than more easily identifiable subject matter. Writing about his chosen narrative method for his novel *The Master of Ballantrae*, for example, Stevenson might easily have been describing the features of family saga narrative: 'The realism I love is that of method; not only that all in a story may possibly have come to pass, but that all might naturally be recorded',

he writes, and describes a new found 'love of the documentary method in narrative'. In an essay he called 'The Genesis of *The Master of Ballantrae*' Stevenson records how he determined to make a tale whose narrative 'may be treated in the same summary, elliptic method as the book [he] had been reading and admiring'. But his book, according to Stevenson, was not a translation of a family saga, but *The Phantom Ship*, a third-rate adventure story by Frederick Marryat. Puzzlingly, *The Phantom Ship* is not at all 'elliptic' in narrative method, and seems such a very unlikely model or inspiration for *The Master of Ballantrae* that a recent editor of the latter novel has surmised that Stevenson was actually covering his tracks, and introduced Marryat as 'a cunning distraction' from more obvious models. But saga literature is nowhere mentioned.

In brief, the 'documentary method' of *The Master of Ballantrae* committed Stevenson to narrating only what a third person narrator could himself have seen or heard. The chief narrator in the novel is the manservant Ephraim Mackellar, whose trusted position in the Durrisdeer household enables a very full account from him (though Stevenson is scrupulous: Mackellar can only infer what he does not observe, as when Henry Durrisdeer and his wife are privately reconciled, and Mackellar reports 'I had the satisfaction to see Mr. Henry come from his wife's room in a state most unlike himself . . . he seemed to me to walk upon the air. By this, I was sure his wife had made full amends for once'). Though Mackellar is a far from impartial narrator, nevertheless the effect of his fly-on-the-wall reportage is very reminiscent of saga narrative, especially when he is reporting dialogue, with no intervening comment.

Stevenson found this narrative method very hard to maintain, and nearly gave up on the novel because of the technical problems it entailed. A good deal of the action of the novel takes place beyond Mackellar's purview, and Stevenson had to invent another narrator to provide the necessary eye-witness account to events abroad. The novel's sensational ending certainly suffers from the constraints of the documentary method. It does seem that it was not a 'natural' way of framing a narrative, and it might be argued that its imposition may have been the result of borrowing.

At the core of the novel is the relationship between Henry Durrisdeer, the younger brother of the Master of Ballantrae himself, and the woman who would have been the Master's wife, but in his

absence, and presumed death, marries Henry. Mistaken marriage to the lesser of two men of course lies at the heart of the Old Norse-Icelandic skaldsagas, and texts about Sigurðr the Volsung. Stevenson had certainly read William Morris's version (in 1881 he wrote 'Morris' *Sigurd* is a grrrrreat poem'; Morris and Magnússon's translation of the saga itself had already been published). Versions of the skaldsagas might have been available to Stevenson (as we have seen, William Herbert had included a 'brief account' of the love triangle theme in *Gunnlaugs saga* in his *Select Icelandic Poetry*). But there is no evidence I have found which records that Stevenson actually knew any family or skaldsaga narratives which could provide him with models for either the love triangle theme, or his challenging documentary narrative method, before he read Morris's translations in 1891–2, resulting in his production of 'The Waif Woman'. In one of his undated Fables, 'Faith, Half Faith and No Faith At All', Stevenson's three speakers are a priest, a virtuous man and 'an old rover with an ax', who turns out to be a believer in Óðinn, but Óðinn in any case belongs to the world of the heroic and mythological, not to family saga narratives.

In 1887, when Stevenson started work on *The Master of Ballantrae*, Thomas Hardy published *The Woodlanders*. Hardy had plainly been reading something of Old Norse mythology, as several allusions in *The Woodlanders* make clear. Marty South, working late into the night, steps out of her cottage into the dark; the night was 'like the brink of an absolute void, or the ante-mundane Ginnung-Gap believed in by her Teuton forefathers'. In the Eddaic poem *Völuspá*, and in Snorri's *Edda*, the *ginnunga gap* (literally, 'great chasm') is a figuring of primal chaos. Hardy's version of the name is a slight anglicization, and perhaps not a significant change – unlike Joyce's sinister play on the name in *Finnegans Wake*: the Grinning Gap. Hardy's dramatic reference to a yawning abyss where frost and fire met before the beginning of time, and gave rise to the giant Ymir, is not apparently used to denote a specifically Scandinavian ethos: Hardy's local Wessex landscape was historically at the heart of Anglo-Saxon England, and his reference to Marty's Teutonic ancestry denotes her Germanic, as opposed to Celtic, origins. There is nothing at all of a Scandinavian ethos in *The Woodlanders*, and certainly no discernible influence of the style of Old Norse-Icelandic literature.

Marty South is working late to earn money because her father is too ill to work, but she is offered a sovereign if she will sell her

beautiful hair to a wigmaker. When she cuts it off, she cannot bear to look at herself in a mirror; 'she dreaded it as much as did her own ancestral goddess the reflection in the pool after the rape of her locks by Loke the Malicious'. Snorri tells in his *Edda* about the god Loki who cut off the hair of the goddess Sif. Threatened with dire punishment by Sif's husband Þórr, Loki got some dwarfs to make a head of hair out of gold for Sif; magically, it rooted to her scalp. The relevance to Marty's lovely hair – which is to be used to make a wig for another woman – is obvious, but what is interesting is that nowhere in the Norse sources are we told of Sif's distress at her reflection. Hardy must have had the detail of Sif looking into the pool of water from one of the many literary reworkings of the original material. Was it his knowledge of this scrap of Old Norse mythology which prompted the whole story of Marty South and the ill-fated hairpiece?

Hardy's next Old Norse reference – to the mythical wood Járnvíðr – occurs in the midst of a lengthy description of a Wessex wood. On a cold, windy day, the trees have mostly shed their leaves, but the remaining ones 'rustled in the breeze with a sound almost metallic, like the sheet-iron foliage of the fabled Jarnvid wood'. Although the Norse word translates literally as 'Ironwood', the Norse sources (the Eddaic poem *Völuspá* and Snorri's *Edda*) only mention this forest very briefly, as the home of giantesses. There is no explanation of how the name arose, and certainly no mention of iron leaves on the trees. Again, Hardy must have taken his allusion from secondary sources. His fourth and final Old Norse reference is to Niflheimr ('mist-world'), envisaged in the Norse sources as a deep, dark underworld guarded by the goddess Hel. One dark, misty afternoon, Giles Winterbourne is cutting down a high elm tree. When Grace Melbury calls up to him that her father has persuaded her not to continue with their engagement, Giles does not protest: 'he continued motionless and silent in that gloomy Niflheim or fog-land which involved him, and she proceeded on her way'. This is clearly a key moment in the narrative, and Hardy has matched the gloomy, foggy afternoon to the bleakness of their exchange, linking the two with his reference to the grim underworld of Old Norse mythology. But it's odd, nevertheless, to mention Niflheimr in the context of Giles's high perch in a tree, when in the Old Norse it is so clearly deep beneath the world of the living.

In the text of *The Woodlanders*, Hardy's references to Old Norse mythology seem to serve as little more than learned allusions: they

do not contribute any 'northern' air to the narrative, for instance. At the beginning of *The Return of the Native*, however, Hardy makes an elaborate, and very attenuated, comparison between Egdon Heath, the novel's celebrated setting, and Iceland; he muses on how fashions for particular landscapes change, and that a 'mournful sublimity' in the natural world – such as may be found, he says, in Iceland or Egdon Heath – may be more 'in keeping with the moods of the more thinking among mankind'. In implying that Egdon Heath may be a kind of Iceland, Hardy may be making a coded comment on the whole of the rest of his novel, for the broad outlines of *The Return of the Native* echo surprisingly closely the Old Norse-Icelandic story of Sigurðr and Brynhildr, and the self-enclosed world of Egdon Heath is reminiscent of the oddly isolated court of the Burgundians, where Gunnarr and his sister Guðrún so disastrously marry Brynhildr and Sigurðr, who should have been married to each other.

In William Morris's translation of *Völsunga saga*, published six years before Hardy began writing *The Return of the Native*, Sigurðr the dragon-slayer encounters Brynhildr on a mountain top, surrounded by fire. This is exactly how Eustacia Vye and Damon Wildeve meet clandestinely on Egdon Heath, signalling each other's presence by the lighting of a bonfire. In fact, Eustacia is repeatedly associated with fiery images throughout the novel – her soul is 'flame-like'; her passions burn – and like Brynhildr, she is half-human, half-supernatural, described by Hardy as 'the raw material of divinity', and presented outright as a witch in an early version of the novel. Like Sigurðr, Wildeve is an outsider. In spite of his passion for, and relationship with, Eustacia, he marries Thomasina Yeobright, 'a confoundedly good little woman', and in all respects very unlike Eustacia. It is not entirely clear, beyond a capricious streak in Eustacia's character, why she and Wildeve did not marry at the first; this is an evident difficulty in the Norse sources too, solved by a magic potion of forgetfulness administered to Sigurðr by Guðrún's mother Grímhildr, who is anxious for her daughter to marry the great hero. In *The Return of the Native*, Thomasina Yeobright is the cousin of Clym Yeobright, whom Eustacia marries – but in Hardy's first version of the story, Thomasina and Clym were brother and sister, like Guðrún and Gunnarr, and Mrs Yeobright was not Thomasina's aunt but her mother. Like Grímhildr, Mrs Yeobright resorts to what Hardy's chapter title calls 'a desperate attempt at persuasion' to make Wildeve marry her niece/daughter –

not a magic potion, but the threat of another suitor. Many critics have been puzzled by the prominence of Mrs Yeobright in *The Return of the Native*; Grímhildr figures large in the Norse sources.

Eustacia's marriage to Clym Yeobright, like Brynhildr's to Gunnarr, ends in tragedy. Mrs Yeobright's ambitious plans for him (another echo of Grímhildr's role in the Norse) come to nothing when he becomes a humble furze-cutter. Clym's now lowly social status is stressed repeatedly in the novel, most dramatically when Mrs Yeobright sees him at his work from a distance, and simply cannot recognize her son in this menial figure. Significantly, given the way that Sigurðr's supposed social superiority to Gunnarr provides an additional spur to the murder, Hardy explicitly contrasts Clym's and Wildeve's social status. A local woman has seen Wildeve at Clym's house, and describes him. Clym imagines that it is himself – the furze-cutter – that the woman has seen, but she replies firmly 'No: 'twas not you. 'Twas a gentleman.' When Brynhildr realizes the impossibility of her situation, she incites her husband Gunnarr to kill Sigurðr, and then has herself burned on Sigurðr's funeral pyre. Eustacia Vye and Damon Wildeve both die in the same pool of water – a 'boiling hole'. Hardy leaves open the question of whether Eustacia actually killed herself: Clym and Wildeve merely hear the sound of a body falling into the water, though immediately before this, Eustacia soliloquizes about her hopeless situation; as Hardy puts it, 'the wings of her soul were broken'.

That John Galsworthy hit on the idea of making *The Man of Property* the first volume of an extended family chronicle he would call *The Forsyte Saga* strongly suggests the influence of Old Icelandic family sagas – all of which had been translated by 1921, when Galsworthy wrote about his grand plan. But it seems likely that Galsworthy's knowledge of Old Norse-Icelandic literature was even more sharply defined than Hardy's. It would be tempting to look for parallels between *The Forsyte Saga* and a family saga such as *Laxdæla saga*, which recounts the history of an ambitious clan of Icelanders with cool detachment, were it not for Galsworthy's extraordinary preface to his trilogy:

The word Saga might be objected to on the ground that it connotes the heroic, and that there is little of heroism in these pages. But it is used with a suitable irony; and after all, this long tale, though it may deal

with folk in frock coats, furbelows and a gilt-edged period, is not devoid of the essential heat of conflict. Discounting for the gigantic stature and blood-thirstiness of old days, as they have come down to us in fairy-tale and legend, the folk of the old Sagas were Forsytes, assuredly, in their possessive instincts, and as little proof against the inroads of beauty and passion as Swithin, Soames, or even young Jolyon. And if heroic figures, in days that never were, seem to startle out from their surroundings in fashion unbecoming to a Forsyte of the Victorian era, we may be sure that tribal instinct was even then the prime force, and that 'family' and the sense of home and property counted as they do to this day, for all the recent efforts to 'talk them out'.

Ironically, Galsworthy is here first contrasting his idea of saga literature with his own writing, and then arguing that it might even be the case that there were similarities after all – when all the time family saga narratives could have provided him with ready parallels to his own work, although his preface suggests that he knew little about them, and was thinking more of *fornaldarsögur* or heroic lays. One striking allusion in *In Chancery* offers a familiar image of such literature: June Forsyte is described 'with her red-gold hair and her Viking-coloured eyes, and that touch of the Berserker in her spirit'. Though *The Forsyte Saga* explores the themes of possessiveness about property, social status and family solidarity – just as *Laxdæla saga* does – Galsworthy's references to fairytales, days that never were and gigantic heroes shows that the Icelandic family sagas were far from being in his mind when he was writing, in spite of striking similarities.

By the time *The Forsyte Saga* had been published, a wide range of translations of Old Norse-Icelandic literature was available – including, notably, the monumental editions, with parallel translations, of the Icelandic scholar Guðbrandur Vigfússon and his collaborator Frederick York Powell: the two-volume *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* (subtitled *The Poetry of the Old Northern Tongue from the Earliest Times to the Thirteenth Century*) and the two-volume *Origines Islandicae* (subtitled *A Collection of the More Important Sagas and Other Native Writings Relating to the Settlement and Early History of Iceland*). And weighty scholarly works about Norse – or, more generally, Germanic – mythology, such as Rydberg's *Teutonic Mythology* (translated from Swedish and published in 1891) or the four-volume English version of Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* (1882–8), had appeared. There were by now many possible sources for writers interested in Old Norse.

**MacDiarmid, Mackay Brown,
and Auden and MacNeice**

The Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid, born in 1892, grew up in a building which also housed the local library; apparently he took books home in clothes-basketfuls. A number of his short poems make clear his debt to Old Norse-Icelandic literature, and he cited Auðr the Deep-Minded, the great Icelandic family saga matriarch mentioned above, who had a mixed Norse and Celtic identity, as one of his muses – and a fitting symbol of Scottish identity and ethnicity. MacDiarmid's poem 'Audh and Cunaide', for example, celebrates

Audh, the deep-minded, mother
Of Hebridean chiefs,
Who, widowed, went to Iceland
And sleeps in one of its cold reefs.

Imagining 'her resourceful heroic old body / Lying there like a cameo under glass', MacDiarmid wonders if

A cry might be found to bring back
Audh, wife and mother, whose intrepid blood
Still runs in far generations
Of her children's children.

MacDiarmid had visited Iceland, and writes lyrically about one of the Vestmannaeyjar (the islands of the men of the west – that is, the Irish), a group of islands off the south coast of Iceland which, incidentally, made international headlines in 1963, when a submarine volcanic eruption led to the rising up of a wholly new island, named Surtsey, after the fire-giant Surtur in the Old Norse poem *Völuspá*, and in 1973, when there was a massive eruption of the volcano Eldfell ('fire mountain') on the island of Heimaey. In 'Happy on Heimaey' MacDiarmid celebrates a more peaceful, even idyllic scene there; 'Lying at the foot of black volcanic cliffs / In the shadow of dead Helgafell', he watches

a few farmers scything
(Careful of the little birds' nests,
Iceland wheatear, snow bunting, white wagtail, meadow pipit,

And leaving clumps of grass to protect them)
A sweet but slender hay-crop.

Observing the midnight sun 'roll slowly along the northern horizon / To dip behind the great ice-caps' of Iceland itself, MacDiarmid quotes two lines in Gaelic 'from an ancient poem ascribed to Colum Cille', according to his own footnote, also describing the pleasure of watching the sea from an island. Contrast this pastoral vision with a prose celebration of the pleasures of Heimaey in MacDiarmid's politicized travel book, *The Islands of Scotland*:

And I even know iron-black Heimaey, 400 sea-miles north-west of the Hebrides, an island the very name and existence of which is hardly known to anybody at all – though there is electricity, central heating, the telephone, and the radio in every one of the homes which house Kaupstadur's 3,700 citizens!

This was indeed an impressive degree of material comfort in 1939, but the acclaim sits oddly with the drift of 'Happy on Heimaey', which is to deprecate the scientific analysis of the 'the departing smells of the countryside' such that 'hedge-roses [will be explained in terms of] Phenyl-Ethyl-Propionate'.

Tolerance – even cultivation – of such inconsistency has been claimed to be a characteristic feature of Scottish literature in general, of MacDiarmid's work in particular, and, even more specifically, of his long poem *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, which was published in 1926. *A Drunk Man* is a difficult poem, both because of its perceived abrupt shifts in register, subject matter and argument, and because of the uncertainty surrounding MacDiarmid's central symbol, the thistle which apparently prompts the poem's speaker to his visionary monologue. Furthermore, the whole poem is written in broad Scots. The speaker, famously not 'fou' sae muckle as tired – deid dune' ('drunk, so much as tired – dead done'), is lying down to rest, after a night's drinking, on a hillside, and from this position he sees the thistle, with its 'shaggy mien', towering above him like a monstrous tree. MacDiarmid actually refers to the great Norse World Tree Yggdrasill by name later on in the poem. There is a fundamental irony in the way a scrubby, common plant – the thistle, 'this sorry weed' – is used in the poem to represent fundamental and major themes: the poet's own self-hood, the link

between 'Man and the Infinite', the potential of humanity and the whole cosmos itself. Only a drunken man could transform a thistle into a symbol of such overarching power and significance.

As David Daiches has suggested, this transformation is essentially a visionary one: 'the logic of dreams and the logic of drunkenness are similar'.² But the Norse sources offer a further angle on the drunken man, for in the *Prose Edda*, and the poems from which it is derived, poetry itself is 'inn dýri mjöðr' ('the precious mead'), and poetic inspiration is thus figured as a kind of drunkenness. Norse writers did not shy away from what modern readers might regard as a certain tastelessness in this complex of images. According to Snorri, the god Óðinn stole the mead (which had been brewed from a mixture of honey and the blood of a humanoid creature called Kvasir, who had himself been created from the collective spittle of the gods) by drinking it, and then flew back to Ásgarðr in the form of an eagle, and sicked it up into jars which the gods set out for the purpose. But closely pursued by the giant Suttungr, Óðinn in his panic also let fly a little of the mead backwards – excreted it – before he reached Ásgarðr, and this little bit is said to be the source of human poetic inspiration. In similar vein, the celebrated Icelandic skald Egill Skalla-Grímsson, hero of *Egils saga*, drinking heavily one night, recites a verse in which he describes himself as letting liquid dribble over his lips – is this beer, vomit or poetry? MacDiarmid's frank depiction of the physical effects of drunkenness on the poem's speaker conflates the drunk man and the poet in precisely the same way.

MacDiarmid sometimes uses the thistle to denote the figure of the poet himself: 'The munelicht's like a lookin' glass, / the thistle's like mysel'. In the Norse sources, a squirrel runs up and down the trunk of the ash tree Yggdrasill, and this makes sense of MacDiarmid's lament that his elderly, drunken body is not what it was: 'nae langer up and down / Gleg as a squirrel speils the Adam's apple.' Typically, there are several allusions packed into these few words: perhaps a reference to a Gaelic simile, 'as quick as a squirrel'; almost certainly a reference to the biblical Tree of Knowledge, and the apple eaten by Adam and Eve; but not least, an allusion to Yggdrasill's bobbing squirrel.

The squirrel is not the only creature which infests Yggdrasill. A serpent, Níðhöggr ('Malice-Striker'), gnaws at its roots. MacDiarmid repeatedly connects the World Tree with a serpent, though he seems to have conflated the Miðgarðsormr, the World Serpent, and Níðhöggr.

An earlier poem, 'The Sea-Serpent' – 'It fits the universe man can ken / As a man's soul fits its body' – clearly depicts the World Serpent, which in skaldic verse is represented as a great belt which holds together the whole of the cosmos, even though MacDiarmid also links it to the biblical monster Leviathan. In *A Drunk Man*, the speaker shows his awed respect for this creature: 'Content to glimpse its loops I dinna ettle / To land the sea-serpent's sel' wi' ony gaff.' In this respect, he is unlike the god Þórr (surely alluded to ironically here), who did have ambitions to land the World Serpent, and would have caused a cosmic catastrophe doing it, had not the giant Hymir cut the fishing line.

The point of Yggdrasill being constantly gnawed and nibbled at is that the World Tree – first viewed by the sibyl in *Völuspá* as a shoot which has yet to break the surface of the earth – has a lifespan, like any other organic thing, and at Ragnarök, the Norse apocalypse, it will creak and shudder, an old tree about to fall. MacDiarmid's 'shudderin' thistle' is 'shiverin' like / a horse's skin aneth a cleg'. The drunken man sometimes sees it in its cosmic magnificence – a 'mighty trunk o' Space that spreads / Ramel o' licht that ha'e no end', with 'Comets for fruit' and humankind as the tiniest twig upon it, but it is, like the great ash Yggdrasill, and the whole universe, vulnerable to change and decay. It may be reduced to a 'shrivelled' shadow of itself, a mere 'restit [dried] herrin'' compared with a cosmic sea-monster. In the Eddaic poem *Skírnismál*, the giant maiden who holds back from union with the god Freyr is threatened by Freyr's messenger to a sexless, sterile future – like 'the thistle / that was crushed / at the end of the reaping'.

In the section of *A Drunk Man* labelled 'A Stick-Nest in Ygdrasil', MacDiarmid links the World Tree with the biblical Tree of Knowledge. Elsewhere, the thistle is associated with the crucifixion – but this too relates quite powerfully to Yggdrasill, whose name means 'Óðinn-steed', and in the Eddaic poem *Hávamál* we hear that Óðinn hung on a tree for nine nights, a sacrifice to Óðinn – the god sacrificed to himself. MacDiarmid's drunken man demands to know what God's purpose with the thistle is, and laments that 'still the idiot nails itself' / To its ain crucifix'.

MacDiarmid – unlike Scott, a century earlier – is unromantically sceptical about the influence of Norse culture on the Orkneys and Shetlands, noting acerbically that they are 'happily very little encumbered with "memorials of the past" of any kind', and 'have

no developed artistic or literary tradition'. George Mackay Brown, who was born in Orkney, and lived virtually all his life there, evidently saw his role as the restorer of a literary culture in Orkney which could stretch back seamlessly not only to the Norse settlement in the medieval period, but beyond, to the Picts and the unnamed prehistoric inhabitants of his homeland. Mackay Brown's work – poetry and prose – is not so much rooted in the past as focused on the historical continuum of past and present: in Orkney.

The literary expression of this continuum is evident in both the title and the content of *An Orkney Tapestry*, a collection of pieces in various literary forms – essays, a play, poems, folklore – which disregard conventional distinctions between history and fiction in the composite picture of Orkney they present. The third chapter takes as its subject the Old Norse text *Orkneyinga saga* ('the saga of the people of Orkney', more often subtitled 'The History of the Earls of Orkney'), which was a central influence on Mackay Brown's work. Mackay Brown did not study Old Norse-Icelandic literature; his knowledge of *Orkneyinga saga* was based on Arnold Taylor's 1938 translation, with its wealth of scholarly apparatus (the most recent translation of the saga, by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, is dedicated to Mackay Brown). *Orkneyinga saga* was composed around 1200, and almost certainly by an Icelander. Although it begins with the early, mythical history of Norway, it swiftly moves on to the reign of King Haraldr inn hárfagri (Harald Finehair) in the ninth century. Haraldr conquered Orkney, Shetland and the Hebrides, and gave them to the Norwegian earl Rögnvaldr; his brother Sigurðr took them over, and Haraldr made him the first of the earls of Orkney. In chronicle fashion, *Orkneyinga saga* recounts the often bloody and violent history of the islands from this point up to the present day of the saga author.

In spite of the centrality of *Orkneyinga saga* to his works, Mackay Brown was repelled, rather than attracted, by the conventional image of viking violence. In *An Orkney Tapestry* he dismisses 'sentimental, make-believe history' peopled by 'blond butchering Vikings', 'unreal figures and hollow voices'. His aim is to 'see the Vikings plain'. In *A Portrait of Orkney* he urges 'Praise rather the first breakers of the earth, the hewers of stones, the subtle ones who divined water and opened wells': the prehistoric precursors of the Norse settlers. He is particularly scathing about any claim made by Orcadians to have pure viking blood, as in the poem 'The Storm':

A curious hotch-potch, these people,
Proud of their purity of race.
Purity?

Orkneyinga saga moves from those first pagan viking earls to the Christian era, and includes a vivid account of what is perhaps the most influential event in Mackay Brown's historical imagination: the martyrdom of St Magnús of Orkney. Mackay Brown's novel *Magnus* is a rewriting of the saga account of the life (and death) of St Magnús. The novel's narrative style is experimental, suddenly shifting into that of twentieth-century newspaper reportage. More conventional in style is the historical novel *Vinland*, based on the Norse sagas which recount the discovery of North America (*Grænlandinga saga*, the Greenlanders' saga, and *Eiríks saga rauða*, the saga of Eric the Red), but centring on the fictional (or at least, non-saga) figure of Ranald Sigmundson, an Orkney islander who stows away on the ship of Leifr Eiríksson, and sails with him to the New World. Ranald Sigmundson is a stowaway throughout the voyage of early Norse history, meeting the big names in the historical sagas, such as King Óláfr Tryggvason, who first sent missionaries to Iceland, and present at the notorious battle of Clontarf, in which both Brian Boru (in fact supported by Norsemen) and Earl Sigurðr of Orkney (in fact supported by Irish forces) were both killed. By the time of the battle, in 1014, Iceland, Norway and the Orkneys had all been Christianized. Ranald himself ends his life in Christian piety, celibate in spite of his marriage (like Magnús himself), and passing the time in isolated meditation, reading 'fragments of *Ecclesiastes* out of the monk's scroll'.

In his novels, Mackay Brown makes no attempt to imitate saga style; *Greenvoe*, set in contemporary Orkney, has sometimes been said to be reminiscent of saga narrative, but although it is a portrait of a community, its narrative method (especially its reliance on the interior monologue of its characters) is nothing like that of any saga. But in two short stories, ('Tartan', in *A Time to Keep*, and 'The Story of Jorkel Hayforks', in *A Calendar of Love*), Mackay Brown is clearly producing pastiche. These two stories are, in both tone and narrative method, very like the *þattir* (short stories; literally, 'single-stranded' narratives) of Old Norse-Icelandic tradition. In the more successful of the two, 'The Story of Jorkel Hayforks', the hero Jorkel and six companions set out west from Norway. In folktale manner, his

companions are cut down one by one: the first, a poet, is seduced by the excellent ale of a farmer's daughter, and stays in Shetland; he 'made no more poems after that day' – an ironic reversal of the traditional relationship between poets and drink. Flan the blacksmith is knocked off a cliff trying to catch a sheep; as Jorkel wryly remarks, what do blacksmiths know about shepherding? One of the company deserts the voyage to join the monks on Papa Westray. Like a saga author, Mackay Brown makes no comment on this bizarre set of events – Jorkel states the obvious: 'This is a strange voyage . . . It seems we lose a man at every station of the way.' Jorkel is eventually left with only one companion, who is killed in a fight with farm labourers; in the course of the fight, Jorkel is badly wounded (and in an undignified way) with their hayforks, thus earning his nickname. He retires to Orkney, ever hopeful that he will at length return to his native Norway, but he never does. The 'point' of this narrative is never made clear; its incidents are uncomplicated by plot. It is evidence of the selective conception modern readers have of the saga – elevated, epic, grand, serious – that these stories have been described as 'parodies' of saga narrative, as 'disfigurements' of saga style, 'too hilarious to be taken seriously'.³ In fact, they are amongst the very few modern imitations of sagas which might actually be mistaken for the real thing.

Many of Mackay Brown's short poems also rework the events of *Orkneyinga saga*, or are set in its time, place and ethos, among the farmers and fishermen of saga Orkney. Few are imitations of actual Old Norse-Icelandic poems. In the collection *Winterfold*, however, there is a sequence entitled 'Twelfth Century Norse Lyrics of Rognvald Kolson, Earl and Saint', which includes several versions of skaldic stanzas quoted in *Orkneyinga saga*, and attributed in the narrative to the twelfth-century Earl Rögnvaldr *kali* Kolsson, who is celebrated in Norse literary history not only for his career in the Orkneys, but for his journey to the Holy Land; on the way, according to the saga prose, he visited the south of France, where he learnt about troubadour poetry, and composed some skaldic stanzas in praise of Queen Ermengarde of Narbonne. Mackay Brown's strophes are based on Arnold Taylor's translations, which, as Taylor states in his preface, simplify the kennings, and avoid rather than solve 'the problem of a suitable English metre'. But in spite of their inevitable distance from the originals, Mackay Brown's poems, like the best translations,

succeed in their own terms. The simplest of Rögnvaldr's stanzas is aptly titled by Mackay Brown 'The Accomplishments of an Earl'. Taylor's version is close (but not absolutely literal):

I'm a master of draughts,
And of nine kinds of sport.
I'm adept at runes,
And in letters a scholar.
Glide I on ski;
Shoot and row well enough,
Play the harp and make verses,
Or toil in the smithy.

A literal prose rendering of the original might read: 'I'm quick at draughts, I know nine feats, I hardly spoil runes, I'm used to books and a smith's work, I can slide on skis, I can shoot and row usefully, I can get my head round both of these: harp plucking and the composition of poetry.' Arnold's translation sacrifices not only the complex metre of the original – its six-syllable lines, alliteration, assonance and full rhyme – but also its distinctive blend of specificity and subtlety, and its ironic, witty modesty. But Mackay Brown adds (to Taylor's version) his own extensions of metaphor and image:

Chessboard, tiltyard, trout-stream
Know my sweet passes.
Old writings are no mystery to me
Nor any modern book.
Ski across winterfold flashes.
Deep curves I make with arrow and oar.
I know the twelve notes of a harp.
At the red forge
My clamorous shadow is sometimes rooted.

The translation by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards of Rögnvaldr's stanzas to Ermengarde of Narbonne conveys very vividly the disturbing, even baroque, entanglement in his poetry between elegant compliment and crude violence:

I'll swear, clever sweetheart,
you're a slender delight

to grasp and to cuddle,
my golden-locked girl:
Ravenous the hawk, crimson
-clawed, flesh crammed;
but now, heavily hangs
the silken hair. [my italics]

Mackay Brown's version is dignified, whilst losing none of the significance of the juxtaposition:

Your hair, lady
Is a long, bright waterfall.
You move through the warriors
Rich and tall as starlight.
What can I give
For the cup and kisses brought to my mouth?
Nothing.
This red hand, a death-dealer.

This is, as Mackay Brown himself put it, 'see[ing] the Vikings plain', but filtered through a distinctively modern sensibility and idiom.

W. H. Auden liked to believe that he was of Icelandic ancestry. His 'evidence' was partly physical – his flaxen hair and pale complexion supposedly betraying Scandinavian racial origins – and partly philological – his surname perhaps derived from the Icelandic name Auðunn. Auden's father once wrote to Eiríkur Magnússon (William Morris's collaborator) asking about the even more thrilling possibility that the name Auden might be a variant of 'Odin', but he received a very dusty answer. Whatever the truth of the Auden family origins, George A. Auden not only immersed himself in early Norse history (publishing impressive scholarly papers on Scandinavian antiquities in the *Danelaw*), but also immersed his son in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. W. H. Auden said that he knew more about Northern mythology than Greek, and that he regarded Iceland itself as 'holy ground'. *Letters from Iceland*, the unconventional travelogue which Auden and his fellow poet Louis MacNeice published in 1937, after a visit to Iceland, contains a number of (often whimsical or obscure) allusions to Old Norse-Icelandic literature, as one might expect from Auden's literary enthusiasms. For example, in a verse letter to Christopher Isherwood, Auden refers to some of the literary sights worth visiting:

The site of a church where a bishop was put in a bag,
The bath of a great historian, the rock where
An outlaw dreaded the dark.

The bishop here was Guðmundr the Good, a twelfth-century bishop of Hólar who opposed the power of the Icelandic chieftains, and was regarded as a saint in Iceland, though he was never canonized; stories about his life tell of the many physical humiliations he suffered at the hands of his enemies. The 'great historian' is the thirteenth-century writer Snorri Sturluson; his 'bath' is a stone-lined pool, fed by hot springs, which can still be seen at Reykholt, where Snorri lived. In *Íslendinga saga* (the saga of Icelanders – part of the compilation known as *Sturlunga saga*, and not to be confused with the Icelandic term for a family saga), written by Snorri's nephew, there is a description of Snorri and his friends sitting in this pool, discussing politics. And the outlaw who dreaded the dark was Grettir, hero of *Grettis saga*, who was cursed by the monstrous revenant Glámr always to be afraid of the dark, and thus to be dependent on the company of men – a hopeless failing in an outlaw. In the *Letters*, MacNeice's long poem 'Eclogue from Iceland' features two travellers in Iceland who are addressed by the ghost of Grettir, who describes himself as

The last of the saga heroes,
Who had not the wisdom of Njal or the beauty of Gunnar,
I was the doomed tough, disaster kept me witty.

This is exactly how Grettir is presented in his saga, and reveals MacNeice's close knowledge of this saga at least. But elsewhere in the *Letters*, MacNeice's throwaway remarks about Icelandic literature seem dismissive:

The tourist sights have nothing like Stonehenge,
The literature is all about revenge.

Outside the *Letters*, however, he occasionally based prose writings and poems on Old Norse material, such as his 'Dark Age Glosses', with their oddly ungrammatical titles betraying his ignorance of the language: 'On the Grettir saga' or 'On the Njal saga'. This last poem

contrasts Hallgerðr's betrayal of her husband Gunnarr with male saga heroes, who, in a wonderfully circular argument, 'had the nobler qualities of men'.

Auden also wrote for inclusion in the *Letters* 'a little donnish experiment in objective narrative' – that is, a humorous parody of saga style, summarizing part of their travels: 'After three days they all returned to Isafjörður and dwelt at the Salvation Army Hostel there. They did not go out of doors much but spent the day drinking brandy and playing cards. People said they had not behaved very well.' The short paragraph from which these few sentences are taken captures with ease and wit the characteristic narrative style of the family saga. But overall, there is surprisingly little trace of influence from Old Norse forms on Auden's work. His poetry often echoes the metre and the mood of Germanic verse, but the primary influence here is from Old English poetry; it is hard to be certain about what, if anything, is distinctively Old Norse-Icelandic. Auden's poetic drama *Paid on Both Sides*, the story of a blood-feud between mining families in Durham, is sometimes said to evoke the atmosphere of Icelandic sagas. His remark in the *Letters* – 'I love the sagas, but what a rotten society they describe, a society with only the gangster virtues' – seems to confirm this. But the title *Paid on Both Sides* is a reference to the Old English poem *Beowulf*, in which the poet twice deplors the futility of feuding which would have to be paid for on both sides with the lives of relatives, and the idiom of the drama's poetry is certainly influenced more by Old English than by Old Norse, though there are some echoes from Norse poetry. The events of *Paid on Both Sides* are difficult to follow, and seem often to be symbolic or coded; nothing could be further from the down-to-earth clarity of Icelandic feud narratives, in which the initial basis for the hostility is invariably some strikingly naturalistic occurrence – an inevitable insult, a boundary dispute, the theft of livestock – and the ensuing feud narrated in the startlingly clear light of plausible, not to say inexorable, cause and effect.

Auden's translations of Old Norse poetry, published in selection in 1969 as *The Elder Edda* and complete in 1981 as *Norse Poems*, were criticized by Old Norse-Icelandic scholars for being too free. They would certainly not do as cribs for students, and in some cases – notably the version of *Völuspá*, called by Auden 'Song of the Sibyl' – poems have been quite drastically, and silently, rearranged. Auden's

collaborator was the medieval scholar Paul Taylor, who states in a preface that Auden 'went to the Icelandic itself', but then backtracks: 'I gave him my translations in the best poetic line I could manage, and he turned that verbal and metrical disarray into poetic garb.' This procedure recalls the methods of those early translators of Icelandic poetry who depended on a collaborator with knowledge of the original language. *Norse Poems* is not restricted to the poems of the *Edda* manuscript, the Codex Regius, but also includes those poems which were eighteenth-century favourites: 'The Waking of Angantyr' and 'Hjalmar's Death Song'. Auden's poetic idiom is neither quirkily contemporary (unlike his own poems) nor fully archaic, and he conveys quite tactfully the alliteration of the originals. But the fact that his translations seem to capture so well the spirit and form of the originals is no doubt an historical illusion: he is our near-contemporary, and translates the poems as modern scholars read them.

With *Letters from Iceland* in their kit bags, in 1994 the poets Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell travelled to Iceland, and in 1996 *Moon Country*, a similarly unconventional travelogue of poems, plays and prose, was published. But Maxwell and Armitage were clearly not inspired to undertake their journey by Icelandic literature, which is the occasion of jokes and mockery in *Moon Country*. A character in their play 'Harald and the Lonely Hearts', a poet who claims to have composed 'a modern-day *Edda*' and 'a brand new million-part Icelandic saga', effortlessly clears the room with his recitation of a 'saga' (actually, a parody of alliterative verse, thus repeating a centuries-old misconception about saga prose):

sky scary with skeletons
wolf walks wrathfully
twas twelve score hours
trees tussle tittering

and so on. Maxwell and Armitage's account of their visit to the manuscript institute in Reykjavík actually mystifies the contents of 'the manuscripts pinned open under glass, like prehistoric butterflies'; watching a very celebrated palaeographical scholar, they remark that 'following his finger across the lines of red and black ink was like watching Merlin poring over a book of potions'. There is nothing of the literary pilgrimage in *Moon Country*.

Heaney and Muldoon

Seamus Heaney's references to viking history and culture in his volume *North* are well known. The viking phase in Irish history – 'the Norse ring on [the] tree', as the image in 'Belderg' has it – was, in traditional accounts of Irish history, played down, and the Celtic origins of the nation given pride of place. But revised historical accounts – accelerated by intense interest in the archaeological excavations of viking settlements in Ireland, especially Dublin's Wood Quay – have re-evaluated the Scandinavian contribution to Irish history and culture. Heaney's *North* often focuses on that archaeology, as, for instance, in the sequence 'Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces', which describes artefacts delicately and vividly inscribed with viking ornamentation: 'a trellis to conjure in' or 'an eel swallowed / in a basket of eels'. Placenames and Ulster English are also seen as bearing striking witness to Norse influence: the townland in which Heaney was born, Mossbawn, is etymologized in 'Belderg' as a Norse/Irish hybrid, a 'forked root' from his native earth. The element 'moss', meaning 'bog' or 'swampy ground', is a usage particular to Scotland, from where, Heaney suggests, it probably came into Ulster English (it's cognate with the Old Norse 'mosi' with the same meaning, and used similarly in Icelandic place-names). The second element, 'bawn', may be derived from the Irish word 'bábhun', denoting a cattle enclosure; but ironically, it came to designate, in an Ulster context, the fortified house of a planter, or landed emigrant from Scotland or England. Elsewhere in *North*, Heaney draws attention to the Scandinavian element in Strangford and Carlingford – 'the Strang and Carling fjords' – and the poems are suffused with Scandinavian references: a funeral procession like 'a black glacier'; allusions to the god Þórr in a bay 'hammered out' overlooking the 'thundering' Atlantic; a line of mourners like a serpent. But in *North*, the dominant connection between contemporary Ulster and the viking north is violence, and Heaney's source for his depiction of viking violence is its representation in the literature.

In 'Trial Pieces', there is a savage extension of 'the expertise / of the Vikings' from exquisite bone carving to the appalling craftsmanship of 'blood-eagling', a mutilation in which

With a butcher's aplomb
they spread out your lungs

and made you warm wings
for your shoulders.

The so-called 'rite of the blood-eagle' seems to have involved exactly what Heaney describes: the transformation of the dead or dying body of an enemy into the form of an eagle by drawing out the lungs and spreading them over the backbone. Amongst Old Norse scholars, a bitter debate is still in train about the authenticity of this practice: some prefer to believe that prose accounts of it were based on medieval misinterpretations of cryptic skaldic verse. Even the vikings couldn't have perpetrated such grotesque horrors. But for Heaney, there is a distinction between the sensational outrages of viking violence and the violence depicted in the family sagas. In the title poem of *North*, Heaney imagines viking voices warning him. The message is that:

Thor's hammer swung
to geography and trade,
thick-witted couplings and revenges,

the hatreds and behindbacks
of the althing, lies and women,
exhaustions nominated peace,
memory incubating the spilled blood.

This is the grim social context of violence – a clear-eyed summary by Heaney of the worst of Icelandic saga-life, not the dubious, half mythic glamour of 'those fabulous raiders'. 'Neighbourly murder' – Heaney's celebrated phrase from the poem 'Funeral Rites' – might be taken as an epigraph for the Icelandic family saga, just as Heaney uses it to characterize the events of the troubles in Ulster.

'Funeral Rites', in which Heaney juxtaposes contemporary, pre-historic and viking age death rites, is often taken as a poem which offers some hope for an end to the cycle of murderous revenge. This poem contains Heaney's most sustained allusion to Old Norse literature, a reference to Gunnarr, one of the heroes of *Njáls saga*, and presents an uplifting and brightly positive picture of the aftermath of neighbourly murder: after a dignified funeral in contemporary Ireland, the mourners imagine the dead in the prehistoric funeral mound of Newgrange to be

disposed like Gunnarr
who lay beautiful
inside his burial mound,
though dead by violence

and unavenged.
Men said that he was chanting
verses about honour
and that four lights burned

in the corners of his chamber:
which opened then, as he turned
with a joyful face
to look at the moon.

In these lines, Gunnarr is a beautiful corpse, laid to rest. The cynical reader may sense a faint, disturbing hint of sanctimony – ‘such a lovely corpse’ – in Heaney’s lines, undermining our trust in the poem’s speaker. This mistrust is shockingly borne out for anyone who turns to *Njáls saga*. There, Gunnarr is buried sitting up – not laid to rest – and his mother has prevented his favourite weapon from being buried with him, because this is the weapon with which he must be avenged. The sons of his best friend Njáll want to take legal proceedings against Gunnarr’s killers, but the due process of the law is useless in the north, because Gunnarr has previously been outlawed by his enemies. Njáll cynically suggests an unorthodox – but all too familiar – recourse: killing a couple of Gunnarr’s enemies will put a dent in the standing of their supporters. And then Gunnarr’s son, Högni, and Skarpheðinn, the most violent and unpredictable of the sons of Njáll, see the vision of Gunnarr in his burial mound. Gunnarr looks happy – joyful, even – and he is speaking a skaldic verse. But this exultation is his triumphant confidence that the violence will continue. The climax of the verse is his declaration that he would rather die than yield to his enemies – the old viking ‘death before dishonour’ ethic, not the serene resignation of self-sacrifice. Högni and Skarpheðinn have heard their own message from the dead, and they duly set about avenging Gunnarr, thus prolonging the cycle of violence.

The sagas do not celebrate feuding; they celebrate the peace-makers, the arbitrators, the conciliators. But in *Njáls saga*, it takes the

extraordinary self-sacrifice of a man who forbids vengeance to be taken for the death of his son to bring an end to the feuding, and this does not happen until nearer the end of the saga. In his glowing account of this earlier episode, Heaney has buried, like an unexploded mine, a dark – even hopeless – truth: the dead continue to cause the deaths of their successors. The grandeur of the funeral rite – a magnificent mound, or a great sombre line of mourners – cannot in itself ensure closure, and literary voices – contemporary poets or long-dead saga authors – can tell us this. Knowledge of the context of Heaney's allusion to *Njáls saga* does not so much enhance our understanding of 'Funeral Rites' as completely transform it. The allusion has a disturbing life of its own within the poem.

The title of Paul Muldoon's poem 'Yggdrasill' (in *Quoof*, published in 1983) makes perfectly plain its reference to the World Tree of Old Norse mythology. But to make any sense of this poem – to make the link between Yggdrasill and shamanism – it's not enough even to know the Norse sources first hand; one needs to be familiar with academic scholarship on them.

The relatively few, and cryptic, allusions to the great ash Yggdrasill (literally, 'Odin-steed') in Old Norse-Icelandic literature centre on two oddly separate functions: the tree as the centre of the cosmos, both sustaining and figuring the whole universe; and the tree as a gallows on which Óðinn sacrificed himself in order to gain the wisdom of the dead. 'Yggdrasill' seems at first sight to have little connection with either Óðinn or the cosmos. But it opens with the speaker climbing a real tree ('a birch, / perhaps', not an ash at all), and it soon becomes clear (in a very unclear poem) that gaining and passing on wisdom is indeed the goal. Scholars of Norse mythology suggest that Óðinn's mounting of the tree to gain occult wisdom is not in fact Germanic, but derived from the shamanistic rituals of the Finns and Lapps – the neighbours of the Norse. Shamanism is a cult practice amongst north Eurasian peoples of Siberian Europe and the indigenous peoples of North America; the shaman is a priest-figure who practises shape-shifting transformations, entering a spirit world to bring back wisdom for the spiritual welfare of his or her tribe. Shamans commonly access this world by climbing – either literally or figuratively – a tree or pole which symbolizes, in microcosm, the great world tree around which the whole universe is arranged. And shamanism is a key theme in *Quoof*. The volume's epigraph describes an old Inuit shaman who can

change her shape (and gender), and the long poem which forms the climax of *Quoof*, 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants', is about a contemporary shape-shifter, a man on the run, in disguise, with multiple identities.

In 'Yggdrasill', the poem's speaker looks up at the tree, which seems to the speaker to arch its back – that is, to have some degree of animal life, like the Norse and Eurasian world trees. With 'nose . . . pressed to the bark' the speaker sees a cigarette burn on the trunk of the tree (a knot in the wood?) – now, disturbingly, regarded as if it were the abused body of a woman; amongst some Siberian tribes the tree is figured as female. The climbing of the tree is a public performance – 'They were gathered in knots / to watch me go' – as is a shamanistic seance, and the tethered pony reminds us of the Norse metaphor of the tree as a steed to be mounted, with its parallel sexual meaning; elsewhere in Norse mythology, the horse is the usual means of journeying to the underworld. The whole poem is clearly set in an Arctic or at least far northern landscape: there is 'hard-packed snow', the air is 'aerosol- /blue and chill' and the tree is pine, or birch. As the poem's speaker climbs, the World Tree is suddenly and iconoclastically reduced to a mere paper spike, and the wisdom the shaman is seeking after to a scrap of paper transfixed on it. At this moment, the speaker assumes the portentous voice of authority, the voice of the shaman – 'my people yearn / for a legend' – and he is tempted to bluff, to offer them 'the black page from *Tristram Shandy*'. But the prophecy he brings back from the top of the tree reveals that the whole affair is a cheap sham: the message is no more than the old, tired Communist threat, dressed up as a prophecy in a recycled, or rather, artfully garbled, quotation:

*'It may not be today
or tomorrow, but sooner or later
the Russians will water
their horses on the shores of Lough Erne
and Lough Neagh.'*

This brief selection of texts influenced by an author's knowledge or reading of Old Norse-Icelandic literature cannot of course give anything like a complete picture. Where the Old Norse influence has already been well documented (as, for example, in Tom Shippey's

work on Tolkien) I have been relatively brief; but often, the influence of Old Norse-Icelandic texts has only been noted – if at all – in patchy and inaccurate endnotes to modern editions of nineteenth-century texts. And I have confined myself to literature in English and Scots – no space for Günther Grass, for example, or Jorge Luis Borges. But one can still suggest some interesting patterns. Old Norse-Icelandic mythology excited poets from the very beginning, with, for instance, Blake's reworkings of mythological themes; but it is striking that 'difficult' poets, such as the modernist MacDiarmid and the so-called postmodernist Muldoon, have been drawn to the complex symbolic power of the World Tree Yggdrasil. Other material from myth and heroic legend had its northern ethos quite transformed by Victorian writers such as Matthew Arnold and Thomas Hardy. William Morris created his own heroic world with spell-binding success. Walter Scott and Charles Kingsley – along with a host of lesser writers – recreated their own version of a viking ethos, and used their reading of northern material to do it. And writers with a strong geographical or historical affiliation – Scott again, or George Mackay Brown and Seamus Heaney – have made connections between their own sense of place – the Orkneys and Shetlands, or Ireland – and the literature of the Norse who settled there. W. H. Auden, with his self-perceived Icelandic origins, is a special case of this.

The influence of the family sagas, now the focus of critical and popular attention in the Old Norse-Icelandic canon, has been much less, and much less successful. As we have seen, Robert Louis Stevenson's recasting of an episode from *Eyrbyggja saga* did not meet with approval (though those who know the saga admire it greatly) and Rider Haggard's pastiche *The Saga of Eric Brighteyes* is a mere literary curiosity. The chronotope of the family saga – Iceland in the settlement period – has not lent itself to literary transfer. But the practice of literary allusion, of learned reference to the body of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, on a par with classical allusion, as in the work of Thomas Hardy, will no doubt continue. And intertextuality has a life of its own. In George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Philip Wakem is reading Scott's *The Pirate*. A. S. Byatt's Victorian poet-hero Randolph Ash in *Possession* is celebrated for a poem about Ragnarök. There is no reason to suppose that Old Norse-Icelandic literature will cease to be a fruitful quarry of ideas, themes and images for writers still to come.

Appendix:

Hrafnkel's Saga

[The story of Hrafnkell is a family saga in miniature, with only one central storyline, and only one or two main characters. But the way its author tells the story and presents the characters is entirely typical of the genre.

This is a literal (but idiomatic) translation based on the text of the saga in E. V. Gordon's *Introduction to Old Norse*, 2nd edn, rev. A. R. Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).]

During the reign of King Haraldr Fine-Hair, the son of Hálfðan the Black, the son of Guðröðr the hunting king, the son of Hálfðan the Generous and Food-Stingy, the son of Eysteinn Fart, the son of Óláfr the tree-cutting king of the Swedes, a man called Hallfreðr sailed to Iceland, to Breiðdalr. That's below the Fljótsdalr district. In the ship were his wife, and his son who was called Hrafnkell. He was 15 years old, promising and able. Hallfreðr built a farm. In the winter, a foreign servant woman called Arnþrúðr died, and so it's been called Arnþrúðarstaðir – Arnþrúðr's steads – ever since.

In the spring, Hallfreðr moved his home north over the moor, and built a farm in a place called Geitdalr. And one night, he dreamed that a man came to him and said: 'There you lie, Hallfreðr, and rather carelessly. Move your farm away west over Lagarfljót. That's where you'll do best.' After that, he wakes up and moves his farm away over the Rang river in Tunga, to a place which has been called Hallfreðarstaðir – Hallfreðr's steads – ever since, and he lived there until old age. But he left behind a nanny-goat and a billy-goat. And the very day that Hallfreðr moved away, a landslide fell down on the house, and these two animals were killed, and so the place has been called Geitdalr – Goatdale – ever since.

It was Hrafnkell's practice to ride over the moors in the summer. At that time, Jökulsdalr was fully settled as far up as the bridges over the river.

Hrafnkell rode up along Fljótsdalr Moor, and saw where an uninhabited valley branched off Jökulsdalr. The valley seemed to Hrafnkell to be more habitable than the other valleys he'd seen so far. When Hrafnkell got home, he asked his father for his share of the family assets, and said that he wanted to build a farm for himself. His father gives him this, and he builds a farm for himself in the valley, and calls it Aðalból – the Manor. Hrafnkell married Oddbjörg Skjöldólfsdóttir, from Laxárdalr. They had two sons. The older was called Þórir, and the younger, Ásbjörn.

When Hrafnkell had occupied the land at Aðalból, he held great sacrificial feasts. Hrafnkell has a great temple built. Hrafnkell worshipped no god more than Freyr, and dedicated to him half of all his most valuable livestock. Hrafnkell settled the whole valley, and apportioned out land to other men, but insisted on being their overlord; he took the authority of a priest-chieftain over them. His name was therefore lengthened by the addition of Freysgoði – Freyr's-chieftain – and he was a very unjust man, though able. He forced the men of Jökulsdalr to serve as his supporters at the Assembly, and was kind and reasonable with his own men, but harsh and inflexible with the men of Jökulsdalr, and they got no justice from him. Hrafnkell became involved in many duels, and he never paid compensation for anyone – no one got compensation from him, whatever he did.

Fljótsdalr Moor is hard to cross, very stony and muddy, but nevertheless, father and son were always riding to visit one another, because they were on good terms. Hallfreðr thought that the route was too difficult, and he sought out a way over the fells on Fljótsdalr Moor. He established a drier – though longer – route, and it's been called Hallfreðargata – Hallfreðr's Way – ever since. Only those people who are really familiar with Fljótsdalr Moor use this route.

There was a man called Bjarni, who lived at a farm called Laugarhús. That's in Hrafnkelsdalr. He was married, and he and his wife had two sons, one called Sámr, and the other Eyvindr, promising, enterprising men. Eyvindr lived at home with his father, but Sámr was married, and lived in the northern part of the valleys in a farm called Leikskálar, and he was very wealthy. Sámr was a very ambitious man, and knew all about the law, while Eyvindr became a merchant and went over to Norway and spent a winter there. From there, he travelled abroad and went to Constantinople, and was highly favoured there by the king of the Greeks, and stayed on there for a time.

Hrafnkell had one animal in his possession which he considered better than any other. This was a stallion, brown-grey, with a dark stripe down its back, and he called it Freyfaxi – Freyr-mane. He dedicated half of the horse to his favourite god Freyr. He had such regard for this stallion, that he made a solemn vow, that he would kill anyone who rode it without his permission.

There was a man called Þorbjörn. He was Bjarni's brother, and lived at a farm called Hóll in Hrafnkelsdalr, opposite Aðalból to the east. Þorbjörn was not rich, but had lots of dependants. His oldest son was called Einarr. He was tall, and capable. One spring, Þorbjörn said to Einarr that he would have to look for some employment – 'because I've no need for any more work done than the workers here get through, but you'll be well-placed to get a job, because you're very able. It's not lack of affection which prompts sending you away, because you are the one child of mine I rely on the most. It's more my lack of resources, and poverty. My other children will get jobs as farm labourers. But you'll have a chance of better employment than them.'

Einarr replies, 'You've told me this too late, because by now people have taken all the best jobs, and I don't like being stuck with the leftovers.'

One day, Einarr took his horse and rode to Aðalból. Hrafnkell was sitting in the main room. He greets him warmly and enthusiastically. Einarr asks Hrafnkell for a job.

He replied, 'Why are you asking for this so late, because I would have taken you on first? But I've sorted out all the positions now, except for the one job you won't want to have.'

Einarr asked what it was.

Hrafnkell said that he hadn't taken on anyone to look after the sheep, although he badly needed someone to do it.

Einarr said he didn't mind what he did, whether it was that or something else, and he said he needed to be taken on for a full year.

'I'll make you a quick offer', said Hrafnkell. 'You must drive the fifty ewes back home to the shieling, and gather all the summer firewood. This work will be one year's employment. But I will make one particular stipulation with you, as I have done with my other shepherds. Freyfaxi roams way up in the valleys along with his herd. You must keep an eye on him winter and summer. But I am warning you about one thing: I insist that you never ride him, no matter how great your need to do so, because I swore a solemn oath that I would kill anyone who rode him. He has twelve horses with him. Whichever one of them you want to have, night or day, will be available to you. Do as I say, because as the old saying goes, "Warning wards off blame." Now take note of what I've said.'

Einarr said that he would never do such a dangerous thing as to ride the one horse which was forbidden to him, if there were several others available.

Now Einarr goes home for his clothes, and moves to Aðalból. Then he moved to the shieling at the head of Hrafnkelsdalr, at a place called Grjótteigssel. Things go well for Einarr all summer, so that he never lost any sheep right up until midsummer, and then nearly thirty sheep went missing

one night. Einarr searches all the fields, but doesn't find them. They were missing for nearly a week.

One morning, Einarr went out early, and the mist from the south, and the drizzle, had lifted. He takes a staff in his hand, and a bridle and saddle cloth. Then he sets off out over the Grjótteigr river. It flowed in front of the shieling. There on the gravel banks lay the sheep which had been at home during the night. He drove them back to the shieling, and goes to look for the missing ones. He now sees the stud horses over on the gravel banks, and thinks about getting himself one of them to ride, supposing that he'll cover the ground faster if he rides rather than going on foot. And when he came to the horses, he went after them, and now they shied away, horses which had never drawn back from people before – all except Freyfaxi. He was as still as if he were rooted to the ground.

Einarr knows that the morning is wearing on, and he thinks that Hrafnkell wouldn't find out even if he does ride the horse. Now he takes the horse and bridles it, puts the saddle cloth on the horse's back under him, and rides up by the side of Grjótargil, and so up to the glaciers, and west along the glaciers to where the Jökull River flows from under them, and so down along the river to Reykjasel. He asked all the shepherds at the shieling if anyone had seen the sheep, but no one had. Einarr rode Freyfaxi right from early dawn until early evening. The stallion carried him quickly over a lot of ground, because it was a good horse. It occurred to Einarr that it was time to go back, and to make a start by rounding up the sheep which were at home, even though he hadn't found the others. Then he rode east over the shoulder of land into Hrafnkelsdalr. But when he comes down to Grjótteigr, he hears the sound of bleating over by the ravine he'd ridden out along earlier. He turns towards it, and sees thirty ewes running towards him – the very ones which had been missing for a week – and he drove them home with the rest of the flock.

The stallion was soaked in sweat, so much so that it dripped off every hair; it was covered in mud, and absolutely exhausted. It rolled over a dozen or so times, and then begins to neigh loudly. Then it sets off at a great pace down along the paths. Einarr goes after it, and means to head off the stallion, and planned to seize it and lead it back to the herd, but it shied away so much that Einarr couldn't get anywhere near it. The horse gallops down along the valleys and never stops until it reaches Aðalból. Hrafnkell was sitting there at the table. And when the horse gets to the door, it neighed loudly. Hrafnkell told a woman who was serving at the table to go to the door, because a horse was neighing – 'and I thought it sounded like Freyfaxi's neighing'. She goes over to the door, and sees Freyfaxi, very filthy. She told Hrafnkell that Freyfaxi was outside the door, very dirty.

‘What can have made the fine fellow come home?’, said Hrafnkell. ‘This is ominous.’

Then he went out, and sees Freyfaxi, and said to him, ‘I’m not happy that you’ve been treated like this, my pet, but you had your wits at home to tell me about it, and it will be avenged. Go to your herd.’

And at once it gallops up the valleys to its stud.

Hrafnkell goes to bed that evening, and slept through the night. In the morning, he had a horse brought to him, and saddled, and he rides up to the shieling. He rides in dark clothes. He had an axe in his hand, but no other weapons. By then, Einarr had just driven the sheep into the pens. He was lying on the wall of the pens and was counting the sheep, and the women were busy milking. Einarr and the women greeted Hrafnkell. He asked how they were getting on.

Einarr replies, ‘I’ve had a bad time, because thirty sheep went missing for nearly a week, but they’ve been found now.’

He said such a thing counted for little. ‘But hasn’t a worse thing happened? It hasn’t happened as much as might have been expected, that sheep have gone missing. But didn’t you ride my Freyfaxi a bit yesterday?’

He said that he couldn’t deny that.

Hrafnkell replies, ‘Why did you ride this one horse which was forbidden you when there were plenty you were allowed to ride? I would have forgiven you one fault, if I hadn’t sworn so solemnly about it, although you’ve admitted it well.’

And in the belief that no good comes of people who break solemn oaths, he leapt down at Einarr and struck him a death-blow.

After that he rides back to Aðalból with no more ado, and announces what has happened. Then he sent another man to look after the sheep at the shieling. He had Einarr carried to a hillside west of the shieling, and raised a cairn by his grave. This is called Einarsvarða – Einarr’s cairn – and from the shieling, it marks mid-afternoon.

Over at Hóll, Þorbjörn hears about the death of his son Einarr. He was very distressed about it. Now he takes his horse and rides over to Aðalból and demands compensation from Hrafnkell for the killing of his son.

He said that this wasn’t the only man he’d killed. ‘You’re well aware that I never compensate anyone, and people just have to put up with that. But I admit that this does seem to me to be one of the worst killings I’ve committed. You’ve been my neighbour for a long time, and I’ve got on well with you, and it’s been mutual. No other trivial thing would have come between me and Einarr, if he hadn’t ridden the horse. But we will often regret this, if we keep on about it, and we would have less cause for regret, if we said less rather than more about it. I will show you now that I think that what I have done is worse than other acts I have committed. I will supply your farm with

cattle in the summer, and meat in the autumn. I will do this for you every year for as long as you live on the farm. With my support, we'll find places for your sons and daughters, and provide for them so that they'll get on well. And from now on, if there's anything you know I have in my possession, and which you need, then just say, and you'll never need to go without it, if you need it from now on. Stay at your farm as long as you want to, and then come here, when you have had enough. I will take care of you as long as you live. We can agree on this settlement. I imagine that most people will say that the man was a dear one.'

'I refuse the offer', said Þorbjörn.

'Then what do you want?', asked Hrafnkell.

Then Þorbjörn replied, 'What I want, is for us to appoint arbitrators between us.'

Hrafnkell said, 'Then you must be thinking that you're my equal, and we'll never reach a settlement on that basis.'

Then Þorbjörn rode away down along Hrafnkelsdalr. He came to Laugarhús, and meets Bjarni, his brother, and tells him what has happened; he asks if he will take some part in this case.

Bjarni said that he [Bjarni] wasn't dealing with his equal where Hrafnkell was concerned. 'And even though we're pretty well off, we can't take on Hrafnkell, and it's a true saying, that a wise man knows his limitations. Hrafnkell has entangled many men in law suits, men of greater standing than us. I think you've been stupid to have refused such good terms. I'm not going to have anything to do with it.'

Þorbjörn then spoke many hard words to his brother, and he says that the more there is at stake, the less courage he has.

Now he rides away, and they part very coldly.

He doesn't stop, until he comes down to Leikskálar; he knocks at the door there. Someone came to the door. Þorbjörn asks Sár to step outside. Sár gave his kinsman a friendly welcome, and invited him to stay. Þorbjörn responded stiffly. Sár sees Þorbjörn's unhappiness, and asks what has happened; he told him about the killing of his son Einarr.

'It's no big news', says Sár, 'that Hrafnkell has committed another killing.'

Þorbjörn asks if Sár would be willing to offer him some help. 'The case is like this: though I'm the person most closely related, nevertheless, the blow has been struck not far from you.'

'Have you tried to get any compensation from Hrafnkell?'

Þorbjörn described exactly what had happened between Hrafnkell and himself.

'I've never before heard it said', says Sár, 'that Hrafnkell has made to anyone an offer like the one he's made to you. Now I'll ride up to Aðalból

with you, and we'll approach Hrafnkell on our bended knees, and find out whether he will keep to the same offer. He'll behave well one way or another.'

'For one thing,' says Þorbjörn, 'Hrafnkell won't want to repeat the offer, and for another, I'm no more inclined to accept it now than I was when I rode away from him.'

Sárr says, 'It's a serious matter to take on Hrafnkell in a law suit.'

Þorbjörn says, 'The reason why it's impossible to get anywhere with you young men is that everything seems such a big deal in your eyes. I think that no one can have such worthless relatives as I have. In my opinion, it's poor behaviour from men like you, who regard themselves as experts in the law, and are keen to take on trivial cases, but don't want to take on a case like this one, which is so clear cut. You'll be shamed on account of this, and rightly so, because you are the most ambitious of our family. I can see now the turn things are taking.'

Sárr answers, 'How will you be better off than you were before, if I take on this case and we are both humiliated?'

Þorbjörn answers, 'But it will be a great comfort to me if you take on this case, come of it what may.'

Sárr answers, 'I'm not keen to go into this. I'm really only doing it because you're a relative of mine. But I'm telling you, that I reckon I'm helping a fool, in helping you.'

Then Sárr stretched out his hand, and took over the case from Þorbjörn. Sárr has a horse brought and he rides up along the valley and rides to a farm, and announces the killing – he gets men together – and accuses Hrafnkell. Hrafnkell hears this, and thought it was risible that Sárr had taken up a law suit against him.

Now winter passed. But in spring, when the days for summoning people to appear in court came up, Sárr rides from home up to Að alból and summons Hrafnkell for the killing of Einarr. After that, Sárr rides down along the valleys and called up neighbours to ride to the Assembly with him, and then keeps quiet, until men are getting ready for the journey to the Assembly. Hrafnkell sent men down through the valleys and called people up. He gathers seventy men from his assembly district. With this company he rides east over Fljótsdalr Moor and so round the head of the lake and over the ridge to Skriðudalr and up along Skriðudalr and south to ~~Karhei~~ ^{Ör} as far as Berufjörðr and [from there] the usual route to the Assembly. South from Fljótsdalr, it takes seventeen days to ride to Þingvöllr – the Assembly plain.

But after he had ridden away out of the area, Sárr gathers men together. Most of those he gets to ride with him are men of no fixed abode, and those whom he had called up. Sárr goes and gets weapons and clothes and provisions for these men. Sárr leaves the valleys by another route. He goes north

to the bridges, and crosses over and travels from there over Möðrudalr Moor, and they spent the night in Möðrudalr. From there they rode to Herðibreiðstunga, and so over Bláfjöll and on to Króksdalr, and on south to Sandr, and they came down to Sandafell, and from there to Pingvöllr, and Hrafnkell hadn't got there. He had a slower journey, because he took a longer route.

Sámr sets up a tented booth for his men nowhere near where the men from the Eastern Fjords usually camp, and a little later Hrafnkell came to the Assembly. He sets up his booth in the usual place, and heard that Sámr was at the Assembly. He thought it was a joke.

This Assembly was extremely crowded. Most of the chieftains who were in Iceland were there. Sámr goes to meet all the chieftains, and asked them to help and support him, but they all responded in the same way: no one owed Sámr to such an extent that they were willing to take on Hrafnkell the chieftain, and thereby risk their standing; they also point out that it has always turned out the same way for anyone who has had dealings with Hrafnkell: that he has routed everyone who has taken out a law suit against him.

Sámr goes home to his booth, and he and Þorbjörn were miserable, fearing that their case would collapse, and that they would get nothing from it except humiliation and dishonour. And the two men are so depressed, that they can neither sleep nor eat, because all the chieftains had shied away from offering them support, even those whom they had expected to help.

Early in the morning, old Þorbjörn wakes up. He wakes Sámr, and told him to get up. 'I can't sleep.'

Sámr gets up and puts on his clothes. They go out, down to the Ǫ River, below the bridge. They wash themselves there.

Þorbjörn said to Sámr, 'It's my advice, that you have our horses rounded up, and that we get ready to go home. It's now evident, that we'll get nothing but dishonour.'

Sámr says, 'That's all very well – but you insisted on taking on Hrafnkell, and refused to accept terms which many people with a close relative to see to would have accepted eagerly. You cast aspersions about cowardice at me and at all those who didn't want to get involved in the case with you. I will now never give in until it seems to me to be out of the question that I'll get somewhere.'

Then Þorbjörn is so moved that he weeps.

They see on the west side of the river, a little down from where they were sitting, that five men were walking together out of a booth. The one in front was a tall man, not heavily built, dressed in a leaf-green tunic, with a decorated sword in his hand; he was a regular-featured, fresh-complexioned man, distinguished in appearance, with a fine head of chestnut-coloured hair. He

was easily recognizable, because he had a light-coloured streak in his hair on the left side.

Sámr said, 'Let's get up and go west over the river to meet these men. '

Now they go down along the river, and the man in front greets them, and asks them who they were.

They introduced themselves.

Sámr asked the man for his name, and he said he was called Þorkell Þjóstarsson.

Sámr asked where he came from, and where he lived. He said that he was born and bred in the Western Fjords, and that he lived in Þorskafjörður.

Sámr said, 'Are you a chieftain?'

He said far from it.

'Are you a farmer?', said Sámr.

He said he wasn't.

Sámr said, 'What sort of person are you?'

He says, 'I'm of no fixed abode. I came back to Iceland the winter before last. I've been abroad for seven years, and been out to Constantinople, and I'm one of the personal retainers of the emperor of Constantinople. But at present I'm staying with my brother, whose name is Þorgeirr.'

'Is he a chieftain?', says Sámr.

Þorkell replies, 'He certainly is – in Þorskafjörður and beyond in the Western Fjords.'

'Is he here at the Assembly?', says Sámr.

'He certainly is.'

'How many men has he got?'

'He has seventy men with him,' says Þorkell.

'Are there more brothers?', says Sámr.

'A third', says Þorkell.

'Who is he?', says Sámr.

'He's called Þormóður,' says Þorkell, 'and he lives in Garðar in Alptanes. He is married to Þórdís, the daughter of Þorólfr Skalla-Grínsson, from Borg.'

'Will you give us any support?', says Sámr.

'What do you need?', says Þorkell.

'The support and power of chieftains,' says Sámr, 'because we have a case against Hrafnkell the chieftain for the killing of Einarr Þorbjarnarson, and we can rely perfectly well on our presentation of the case, if you back us.'

Þorkell replies, 'It's as I've said – I'm not a chieftain.'

'Why have you been passed over, given that you're a chieftain's son like your other brothers?'

Þorkell said, 'I didn't say that I never had it; I passed it on, my authority, to my brother Þorgeirr, before I went abroad. I haven't taken it back since,

because I think it's in good hands as long as he has charge of it. Go to see him. Ask him for help. He is a high-minded person, a fine man, and accomplished in all respects; and he's young and ambitious. Men like him are the most likely to give you help.'

Sámr says, 'We won't get anything from him, unless you involve yourself in our pleading with him.'

Porkell says, 'I promise to be more on your side than against you in this, because it's my feeling that taking out a law suit on behalf of a near relative is a necessary enough thing. Go now over to the booth, and go into the booth. People are asleep. You'll see where two leather sleeping bags are laid out across the inside of the booth; I got up from one, and my brother Þorgeirr is lying in the other. He's had a huge boil on his foot ever since he came to the Assembly, and he hasn't slept much at night. But last night the boil burst, and the core of the boil has come out. And he has now fallen asleep after that, and he has stretched the foot out from under the bedclothes and up against the end of the bed because of the inflammation in the foot. The old man should enter first, and go right into the booth. He looks to me as if he's very much weakened by both bad sight and old age. And when you, my man,' says Porkell, 'come up to the sleeping bag, you must stumble heavily and fall against the footboard, and grab hold of the toe which is bandaged up, and jerk it towards you, and see how he reacts.'

Sámr said, 'You must be well disposed to us, but this doesn't seem like good advice to me.'

Porkell replies, 'You only have two choices: to take my advice, or not ask me for it.'

Sámr spoke, saying, 'It will be done as he has advised.'

Porkell said he would come later – 'because I have to wait for my men'.

And now Sámr and Þorbjörn set off, and come into the booth. Everyone was asleep. They soon see where Þorgeirr was lying. Old Þorbjörn went first, and stumbled badly as he went. And when he got to the sleeping bag, then he fell against the footboard, and grabs at the toe which had been hurting, and jerks it towards him. And Þorgeirr wakes up at this, and leapt up out of the sleeping bag, and asked who was moving around so clumsily as to step on people's toes which were already hurt.

And Sámr and his companion had nothing to say.

Then Porkell darted into the booth, and said to his brother Þorgeirr, 'Don't be hasty or cross about this, kinsman, because no harm will come to you. Many people behave worse than they mean to, and it happens to lots of people, when they have a lot on their minds, that they can't watch out for everything at once. And it's your excuse, kinsman, that your foot hurts, and it has caused you a lot of pain. You have felt this more than anyone. Now it might also be the case, that an old man is no less pained by the death of his

son, and he can't get any compensation, and he himself lacks the necessary. He'll feel this himself more than anyone, and it's to be expected, that a man who has a lot on his mind can't watch out for everything.'

Porgeirr says, 'I didn't think he could blame me for this, because I didn't kill his son, and so he shouldn't be taking this out on me.'

'He didn't mean to take it out on you', says Þorkell; 'he just came at you harder than he meant to and he paid for his short-sightedness, but he was expecting to get some help from you. It's a fine thing to help a needy old man. For him it's a necessity, and not greed, to prosecute a case on behalf of his son, and now all the chieftains are shying away from helping this man, and I think that's very dishonourable.'

Porgeirr said, 'Who are these men bringing a charge against?'

Þorkell answered, 'Hrafnkell the chieftain has killed Þorbjörn's son for no reason. He commits one bad deed after another, and won't pay anyone any compensation.'

Porgeirr said, 'It's going to be the same with me as with the others: I don't see that I'm in debt to these men to such an extent that I'm willing to take on Hrafnkell. It seems to me that the same thing happens every summer to men who take out cases against him – most of them get little credit, or none at all, when it's over; I see the same thing happening every time. I imagine that's why most people are unwilling to get involved, people who are not forced into it by necessity.'

Þorkell said, 'It may be, that I'd be the same, if I were a chieftain – that I wouldn't be keen to contend with Hrafnkell; but it doesn't look like that to me, because it would seem to me actually preferable to take on someone who had driven off everyone else. In my view, it would only enhance someone's standing – mine, or that of any other chieftain – if that person could get the better of Hrafnkell, and my standing wouldn't be diminished, if what happened to others happened to me, because there's no reason why I shouldn't share the same fate. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.'

'I can see', says Porgeirr, 'how you feel: that you want to help these men. I will now hand over to you my chieftaincy and authority, and you can have it for as long as I have so far, and from then on we can share it equally between us, and you can help anyone you like.'

'In my opinion,' says Þorkell, 'the longer you have charge of our chieftaincy, the better. There's no one I'd rather entrust it to than you, because you are the most impressive of us brothers in lots of ways, and I still haven't decided what I'm going to do with myself. And you're well aware, brother, that I haven't involved myself in much since I came back to Iceland. Now I can see what you think of my advice. I've now said as much as I want to on this occasion. Þorkell streak might just go and find somewhere where more notice is taken of his opinions.'

Porgeirr says, 'I can see the turn things are taking, brother – you're not pleased, and I can't bear that. We'll support these men, whatever comes of it, if that's what you want.'

Porkell said, 'I'm only asking for something I think ought to be granted.'

'What do these men think that they can do', says Porgeirr, 'to bring their case to a successful conclusion?'

'It's just as I said today, that we need the support of chieftains, but I'll take charge of the pleading.'

Porgeirr said that helping him would be easy, 'and the thing to do now, is to prepare the case as meticulously as possible. And I think that Porkell will want you to visit him before the court convenes. As a result of your persistence, you'll either get some sort of consolation, or else even more humiliation than you've had already, and misery and frustration. Go home now, and be cheerful, because if you're taking on Hrafnkell you're going to need to keep your spirits up. And don't tell anyone that we've promised to help you.'

Then they went home to their booth, and they were elated. Everyone marvelled at how their mood had changed, given that they'd been so gloomy when they'd set out.

Now they stay where they are until the courts convene. Then *Sárr* calls up his men and goes to the Lawrock. The court was set out there. *Sárr* stepped boldly up to the court. He begins at once to cite his witnesses, and prosecuted his case against Hrafnkell according to the due law of the land, without any mistakes, and with impressive eloquence. Next, the Þjóstarssons arrive with a great body of supporters. Everyone from the west of Iceland joined them, and that showed what popular men the Þjóstarssons were. *Sárr* prosecuted his case in court, to the point at which Hrafnkell was called up to make his defence, unless there might be anyone present who was willing, according to the due process of the law, to put forward a defence on his behalf. There was loud applause for *Sárr*'s presentation. No one said he was willing to offer a defence on Hrafnkell's behalf.

People rushed to Hrafnkell's booth and told him what was going on.

He reacted at once – he summoned his men and went to the courts, thinking that he would meet with little resistance. It was his intention to make insignificant people less keen to take out cases against him. He meant to break up the court in front of *Sárr*, and drive him off the case. But now this wasn't an option. There was such a large crowd of people in front of him that Hrafnkell couldn't get anywhere near. It was hard for him to put forward his legal defence. But *Sárr* prosecuted his case to the full extent of the law, so that Hrafnkell ended up by being declared a full outlaw at this Assembly.

Hrafnkell goes at once to his booth, and has his horses brought, and rides away from the Assembly and was angry about how the case involving him had turned out, because such a thing had never happened to him before. He

then rides east over Lyngdalsheiðr, and on east to Síða, and he doesn't stop until he's at home in Hrafnkelsdalr, and he settles himself at Aðalból, and behaved as if nothing had happened.

But Sár stayed on at the Assembly, and went around cock-a-hoop.

Many people are pleased, even though things had turned out that way, that Hrafnkell had been shamed, and now they call to mind how he has shown injustice to many people.

Sár waits until the Assembly is over. People are then getting ready for home. He thanks the brothers for their help, and Þorgeirr, laughing, asked Sár how he thought things had gone. He said he was pleased.

Þorgeirr said, 'Do you think you're any better off than before?'

Sár said, 'It seems to me that Hrafnkell has suffered disgrace, and this disgrace of his will be talked about for a long time, and there's a lot of money involved.'

'No man is a full outlaw until a court of confiscation has been set up, that has to happen at his own home. It must happen fourteen days after the weapontake.' (It's called the weapontake when everyone rides away from the Assembly.)

'I reckon', says Þorgeirr, 'that Hrafnkell will have got home and will be expecting to sit it out at Aðalból. I bet that he will maintain his authority over you. You're probably expecting to ride home and settle down on your farm – if you can, it'll be the best that will happen. I bet that what you've got out of this case is that you can call him an outlaw. But I bet that he'll exercise the same reign of terror over most people as he has always done, except that in your case you'll be kept down even lower.'

'I don't care about that', says Sár.

'You're a brave man,' says Þorgeirr, 'and I think that my brother Þorkell won't want to let you down. He'll stand by you now until things are over between you and Hrafnkell, and then you can live in peace. You must be expecting us of all people to be obliged to stand by you, given that we've played a big part in things up to now. We'll now ride with you to the Eastern Fjords – is there a little-used route?'

Sár replied, 'I'm going to go back the same way I came from the east. '

Sár was pleased about this.

Þorgeirr chose his body of men, and had forty accompany him. Sár also had forty men. The company was well equipped with weapons and horses. After that, they all follow the same route, until they reach Jökulsdalr just before dawn; they cross over the river by the bridge, and by then it was the morning when the court of confiscation was to be set up. Then Þorgeirr asks how they could get to Aðalból without being noticed. Sár said that he knew how to do this. He immediately turns off the path, and rides up on to the ridge and on along the shoulder of land between Hrafnkelsdalr and Jökulsdalr,

continuing until they come out below the top of the mountain beneath which stands the farm at Aðalból. Grassy clefts ran up on to the heath, and there was a steep slope down to the valley, and the farm stood down below.

Then Sár dismounts, and said, 'We'll set our horses loose, with twenty men to mind them, and we remaining sixty men will descend on the farm, and I expect that there won't be many people up and about.'

Now they did just this and the place has been called Hrossageilar – Horse-gullies – ever since. The assault on the farm was a quick one. Getting up time had been and gone. People hadn't got up. They drove a log against the door and burst in. Hrafnkell was lying down in his bed. They take him away, and all the members of his household who were capable of using weapons. The women and children were herded into one of the outbuildings. A storehouse stood in the home meadow. Between there and the wall of the farmhouse there was a pole for hanging washing on. They lead Hrafnkell and his men to it. He made many offers on behalf of himself and his men. But when that didn't work, he begged for the lives of his men – 'because they haven't done you any wrong, though it's no dishonour if you kill me. I'm not going to beg for my life to be spared. It's humiliation I do beg to be spared. There's no honour for you in that.'

Porkell said, 'We've heard that you haven't shown much mercy to your enemies, and it's only right that you should have a taste of your own medicine today.'

Then they seize Hrafnkell and his men and tied their hands behind their backs. After that, they broke into the storehouse, and took ropes down from some hooks; they then take out their knives, and make holes in the men's heels, and thread the ropes through, and throw them up over the pole, and in this way hoist the eight of them up together.

Then Þorgeirr said, 'Now it's come to this for you, Hrafnkell, and fittingly so, and you must have thought it unlikely that you would suffer such shame at the hands of any man, as you suffer now. And Porkell – what do you want to do now: stay here beside Hrafnkell, and watch over things, or do you want to go with Sár out of the farmyard to a protected place an arrow shot away from the farm and set up the court of confiscation on some stony hillock where there is neither arable land nor pasture?'

(At the time, this had to be done when the sun was due south.)

Porkell said, 'I'll stay here beside Hrafnkell. It seems less hard work to me.'

Then Þorgeirr and Sár set off and instituted the court of confiscation; they go back after that and took Hrafnkell and his men down, and laid them out in the meadow, and the blood had dripped down into their eyes.

Then Þorgeirr said to Sár that he should do what he wanted with Hrafnkell – 'because it looks to me as if he'd be easy to deal with now'.

Sárr replies, ‘Hrafnkell, I’m giving you two options. You can be taken away from the farm, together with any men of yours that I choose, and be killed. But given that you have so many dependants to look after, I will offer you the possibility of looking after them. And if you choose your life, then you’ll have to leave Aðalból with all your men, and keep only those valuables that I spare you, and that will be hardly anything, and I will take over your residence, and all your authority. Neither you nor your heirs must ever make a claim. You are forbidden to come any nearer than the west side of Fljótsdalr Moor, and now you can shake hands with me, if you are prepared to accept this deal.’

Hrafnkell said, ‘To many people, a quick death might seem better than such humiliations, but it will be the same for me as for many others, that I’m going to choose life, if the opportunity is offered. I’m doing this mostly for the sake of my sons, because they won’t get very far in life if I die and leave them.’

Then Hrafnkell is untied, and he gave Sárr the right to dictate the terms.

Sárr decided how much of the money to allot to Hrafnkell, and it was really very little. Hrafnkell kept his spear, but no other weapons. That day, Hrafnkell moved himself and all his household away from Aðalból.

Porgeirr said to Sárr, ‘I can’t understand why you’re doing this. You’ll be the one who regrets it most, sparing his life.’

Sárr said what would be, would be.

Now Hrafnkell moved his farm east over Fljótsdalr Moor, and across Fljótsdalr to east of Lagarfljót. At the head of the lake stood a little farm called Lokhillla. Hrafnkell bought this property on credit, because he had no more ready money than what he needed to buy farming things. People talked a lot about this, how his pride had taken a fall, and many now called to mind the old saying about pride having a short life. There was a good deal of forested land, and it was extensive, but poor with regard to buildings, and because of that, he bought the land cheaply. But Hrafnkell didn’t bother much about the cost and he cleared the forested land because there was so much of it, and raised up an imposing farm which has been called Hrafnkelsstaðir – Hrafnkell’s Steads – ever since. It has always been known for being a good farm. Hrafnkell lived there in straitened circumstances at first. He had good supplies from fishing. Hrafnkell set to and worked hard while the farm was being built. Hrafnkell kept calves and kids through the first winter, and he did so well that nearly everything that had been put at risk survived. One might almost have said that every animal grew two heads. That same summer, there were great catches in Lagarfljót. Such things helped people in the district to keep households going, and conditions held up well every summer.

Sárr set up house in Aðalból after Hrafnkell, and then he holds a grand feast, and invites all those who had owed allegiance to Hrafnkell. Sárr

offered to be their chieftain in Hrafnkell's place. People went along with this, but there were mixed feelings about it.

The Þjóstarssons advised him to be kind and generous and helpful to his own men, and a support to anyone who needed him. 'They don't deserve to be called men, if they don't stand by you whenever you need them. And we give you this advice, because we want everything to go well with you, because we think you are a brave person. Take care now, and watch out for yourself, because it's not easy to be on your guard against the wicked.'

The Þjóstarssons had Freyfaxi and his herd sent for, and they said that they wanted see these remarkable animals there'd been such stories about. Then the horses were brought home.

Porgeirr said, 'These horses look to me as if they might be useful for farm work. It's my advice, that they be put to useful work, for as long as they are able, until the time when old age gets to them. But in my opinion, this stallion seems no better than other stallions – in fact, worse, because so much trouble has come about because of him. The fitting thing is that whoever he belongs to should have him back.'

Now they lead the stallion down through the fields. Lower down, there's a cliff by the river, with a deep pool in front of it. Now they lead the stallion out on to the cliff. The Þjóstarssons pulled a bag on to the stallion's head; they take long sticks and drive the stallion forward, having tied a stone round its neck; in this way they killed it. That place has been called Freyfaxahamarr – Freyfaxi's Cliff – ever since. A bit further on stand the temples which Hrafnkell had owned. Porkell wanted to go there. He had all the idols stripped. After that, he orders the temples to be set alight, and everything to be burnt.

Next the visitors get ready to leave. **Sámr** chooses valuable gifts for both brothers, and they declare their undying friendship for each other, and part as firm friends. Now they take the direct route to the Western Fjords, and return home to Þorskafjörðr with great credit. And **Sámr** settled Þorbjörn down at Leikskalar. He was to farm there. And **Sámr**'s wife went to live with him at the farm at Aðalból, and **Sámr** lives there for a while.

Over in Fljótsdalr, in the east, Hrafnkell heard that the Þjóstarssons had killed Freyfaxi, and burnt the temple.

Then Hrafnkell replies, 'I think that believing in the gods is stupid' – and he said that he would never again believe in the gods, and he was true to his word, in that he never made any sacrifices after that.

Hrafnkell settled down in Hrafnkelsstaðir and piled up wealth. He quickly came to be very much respected in the area. Everyone wanted to sit or stand just as he wished.

It was at that time, that the majority of ships came from Norway to Iceland. While Hrafnkell was there, people settled the greatest part of the land in the district. No one was able to settle freely unless Hrafnkell gave his permission.

And everyone had to promise their support to him. He promised them his backing. He took control of all the land east of Lagarfljót. This Assembly district soon became much more extensive and populous than the one he'd had previously. It stretched up along Skriðudalr, and all the way along Lagarfljót. A change in his character had suddenly come about. He was now much more popular than before. He behaved in the same way with regard to helpfulness and generosity, but as a person he was much more popular, and easy going, and less extreme in every respect. Sár and Hrafnkell often met one another at gatherings, and they never mentioned what had happened between them. This went on for six years.

Sár was popular with his supporters, because he was easy to deal with, quiet, and good with help, and he bore in mind what the brothers had advised him. Sár loved to show off his finery.

The story goes, that an ocean-going ship came into Reyðarfjörðr, and its captain was Eyvindr Bjarnason. He had been abroad for seven years. Eyvindr had turned out to be an impressive person, and had become quite a hero. He's quickly told what had gone on, and responded as if it didn't concern him. He was a person who kept himself to himself.

And the moment Sár hears the news, he rides to the ship. The brothers are delighted to be reunited. Sár invites him to come west. And Eyvindr is very pleased, and tells Sár to ride home ahead, and send horses to meet the cargo. He berths his ship and does the necessary. Sár does as they agreed: he goes home and orders horses to be sent to meet Eyvindr. And when he has got his cargo ready, he prepares for the journey to Hrafnkelsdalr; he travels up along Reyðarfjörðr. There were five of them. The sixth was Eyvindr's servant boy. He was Icelandic by birth, and related to him. Eyvindr had rescued the boy from poverty and taken him abroad with him, and he treated him no differently from himself. What Eyvindr had done was much talked about, and it was the general opinion that he was one of the few.

They ride up Þórisdalr Moor, and drove sixteen loaded horses before them. There were two of Sár's household servants, and three sailors. They were all in brightly coloured clothes, and carried beautiful shields with them. They ride across Skriðudalr, and over the shoulder into Fljótsdalr, to a place called Bulungarvellir, and down to Gilsáeyri. The river runs east into the lake between Hallormsstaðir and Hrafnkelsstaðir. They ride up along Lagarfljót below the level ground at Hrafnkelsstaðir, and on round the head of the lake, and over the Jökull River at Skáva ð. It was then halfway between getting-up time and breakfast time.

There was a woman by the lake, and she was doing her washing. She sees people travelling. The serving woman sweeps together the washing, and dashes home. She throws it down beside a pile of logs, and rushes inside.

Hrafnkell hadn't yet got up, and some of his friends were lying in the hall, but the labourers had gone to work. This was during haymaking.

The woman started to speak the moment she entered: 'The old saying that an ageing man gets more like an old woman is true. Any honour earned early in life diminishes if someone shamefully lets it slide, and doesn't have the guts to take due vengeance when the time comes, and such things are great scandals when they concern someone who was brave once. Now it's quite different with people who are brought up at home, and seem to you to be insignificant creatures compared with yourself, and when they are grown up they travel from country to country, and wherever they go they are considered to be very important indeed, and then they come back home and they think that they're grander than chieftains. Eyvindr Bjarnason rode here over the river at Skjáva ð with a shield so fine that it shone. Such an impressive person would be an ideal target for revenge.'

The woman goes on and on about it.

Hrafnkell gets up and answers her: 'There might well be some truth in all this – though you're not saying it with good intentions. It'll be a good thing to give you a bit more work to do. Go quickly south to Viðivellir and fetch Sighvatr and Snorri, the sons of Hallsteinn. Tell them to come back to me straightaway, and to bring any men they have who are able to use weapons.'

He sends another servant woman over to Hrólfsstaðir to fetch Þórðr and Halli, the sons of Hrólfr, and any weapon-bearing men they had there.

These two were fine men, and altogether impressive. Hrafnkell also sent for his servants. There were eighteen of them altogether. They were armed to the teeth, and they ride across the river, where the others had ridden previously.

By this time, Eyvindr and his men had got up on to the moor. Eyvindr rides west until he reached the middle of the moor – a place called Bersagötur. It's grassless bog-land there, and it's like riding through pure mud, and the horses were constantly up to their knees in it, or the middle of their legs, and sometimes belly-deep; underneath it's as hard as rock. There's a big stretch of lava to the west, and when they reach the lava field, the boy looks back and spoke to Eyvindr: 'People are riding after us,' he says, 'no fewer than eighteen. There's a big man on horseback, dressed in dark-coloured clothes, and he looks to me like Hrafnkell the chieftain. But it's a long time now since I've seen him.'

Eyvindr replies, 'What's that got to go with us? I don't know any reason why we should be afraid of Hrafnkell out riding. I haven't done anything to him. He must be going west to the valley because he has a meeting with friends of his.'

The boy replies, 'I have a feeling that he's aiming to meet you.'

‘I’m not aware’, says Eyvindr, ‘that anything has come up between himself and my brother *Sárr* since they reached a settlement.’

The boy replies, ‘What I want you to do is to ride away west to the valley. Then you’ll be safe. I know what Hrafnkell is like: he won’t do anything to us, if he can’t get his hands on you. Taking care of you is taking care of everything – then the prey won’t be in the trap, and whatever happens to us will be all right.’

Eyvindr said that he wasn’t going to beat a hasty retreat – ‘because I don’t know who these men are. Many people would find it ridiculous of me to run away with no good reason.’

Now they ride west off the rocky ground. Ahead of them lies another bog, called Oxamýrr. It’s very grassy. There are swampy patches, so that it’s almost impossible to get across it. It was for this reason that old Hallfreðr had made the higher path, even though it took longer.

Eyvindr rides west on to the bog. They soon sank deeply into it. It slowed them down considerably. The others, who were unencumbered, went much faster. Now Hrafnkell and his men make their way on to the bog. Eyvindr and his men have just ridden off it. Then they see Hrafnkell and both of his sons. They begged Eyvindr to ride away there and then. ‘We’ve crossed all the hard bits now. You can get to Aðalból while the bog is between you.’

Eyvindr says, ‘I’m not going to run away from people I haven’t wronged.’

They ride up on to the shoulder. There are some small fells rising above the shoulder. On the outer side of one fell, there’s one particular grassy hillock, badly worn away. It had steep banks all round it. Eyvindr rides to the hillock. He dismounts there, and waits for them.

Eyvindr says, ‘Now we’ll soon find out what they want.’

After that, they went up on top of the hillock, and they dig up some stones.

Then Hrafnkell veers off the path and turns south towards the hillock. He did not say a word to Eyvindr, and at once launched an attack. Eyvindr defended himself stoutly and bravely. Eyvindr’s servant boy didn’t think he was strong enough to fight, and took his horse and rides west over the shoulder to Aðalból, and tells *Sárr* what’s going on.

Sárr reacted quickly and sent for men. There were twenty of them altogether. The group was well equipped. *Sárr* rides east on to the moor, to where the attack had taken place.

Their dealings had been concluded. Hrafnkell was riding east away from what had happened.

Eyvindr and all his men had been killed.

The first thing *Sárr* did was to look for any sign of life in his brother. It was well and truly done: they were all dead, five of them. Twelve of Hrafnkell’s men had also been killed, but six were riding away.

Sámr didn't stop there for long – he ordered men to ride after them at once. And they do ride after them, and their horses were tired.

Then Sámr said, 'We might be able to catch them, because they have tired horses, while ours are all fresh – it will be a close thing whether we catch them or not before they come down off the moor.'

By then, Hrafnkell had come east over Oxamýrr.

Now both groups of men ride on until Sámr reaches the edge of the moor. He could then see that Hrafnkell had ridden further down the hillside. Sámr realizes that he's going to get away down into his own district.

Then he said, 'We'll turn back at this point, because it will be easy for Hrafnkell to get more men.'

Sámr turns back without more ado and comes to where Eyvindr was lying; he sets to and raises a burial mound over him and his companions. These places are called Eyvindartorfa and Eyvindarfjöll and Eyvindardalr.

Sámr then goes home to Aðalból with all the cargo. And when he gets home, he summons his supporters to come to him the next morning before breakfast. He means to ride east over the moor. 'There's no knowing how our journey will turn out.'

That evening, when Sámr goes to bed, a large number of men had already arrived.

Hrafnkell rode home and announced the news. He has some food, and then he gathers men together, seventy in all, and rides with them west over the moor, and takes them by surprise at Aðalból, seizing Sámr in his bed and taking him outside.

Then Hrafnkell said, 'Your situation has taken a turn which must have seemed unlikely to you a short time ago – that your life is now in my hands. I won't be a worse fellow to you than you were to me. I'm going to give you two options: to be killed, or else that I'll be the one to divide things up between us.'

Sámr said that he'd rather save his life, but said that both options seemed harsh to him.

Hrafnkell said that he could expect that, 'because it's our turn to pay you in kind, and I would have been twice as good to you, if you'd given me reason to. You shall leave Aðalból and go to Leikskalar, and farm down there. You can keep the valuables that belonged to Eyvindr. But you'll take no other goods away from here except for those you brought with you. You can take all that away. I'll reclaim my chieftaincy, and with it my livestock and farmstead. I can see that there's been a big increase in my wealth, and you're not going to have the benefit of it. There'll be no compensation forthcoming for your brother Eyvindr, because you prosecuted the case for that other relative of yours so fiercely, and anyway, you've had quite enough compensation for

Einarr, your cousin, because you've been enjoying power and wealth for six years. In my opinion, the killing of Eyvindr and his men does not weigh more heavily than the injury done to me and my men. You sent me into exile, but I'll content myself with letting you stay at Leikskalar, and that'll do, as long as you can keep your pride under control. You'll be my subordinate as long as we both live. It might also be worth bearing in mind, that you'll come off worse, if there's any more trouble between us.'

Now **Sárr** leaves for Leikskalar with all his household, and he stays farming there.

At Aðalból, Hrafnkell and his men take over the farm. He sets up his son Þórir at Hrafnkelsstaðir. He is now chieftain over the whole district. **Þjórn** stayed with his father, because he was younger.

Sárr spent this winter at Leikskalar. He was silent, and kept himself to himself. Many people reckoned that he wasn't happy about his lot.

And later that winter, when the days were getting longer, **Sárr** and another man, with three horses between them, travelled over the bridge, and from there over Möðrudalsheiðr, and on over the Jökull River up in the fells, on to Mývatn and from there over Fljótsheiðr and Ljósavatnsskarð, and he didn't stop until he arrived west in Þorskafjörðr. He is warmly welcomed there. Þorkell had just come back from his travels. He'd been abroad for four years.

Sárr stayed there for a week, and relaxed. Then he tells them what had gone on between himself and Hrafnkell, and asks the brothers for help and support again, as before.

It was Þorgeirr who had more to say on behalf of the brothers this time; he said they lived a long way off, 'and there's some distance between us. We thought we'd set you up rather well before we left you, so that you could easily have held on to things. But it's turned out just as I expected when you spared Hrafnkell's life, that you'd be the one to regret it most. We urged you to kill Hrafnkell, but you thought you knew better. The difference in intellectual ability between the two of you is plain to see: he left you in peace until he was able to kill someone he thought was more impressive than you. We can't involve ourselves in this lucklessness of yours. And we are not so eager to take on Hrafnkell that we're willing to risk our good name all the time. But we will invite you to come here with all your family, under our protection, if you think that it would be less upsetting here than being Hrafnkell's neighbours.'

Sárr says this isn't what he wants; he says he wants to go back home and he asked them to exchange horses with him. That was done at once. The brothers wanted to give **Sárr** fine presents, but he wouldn't accept anything, and accused them of being mean-spirited.

Sárr rode home without more ado, and lived there until he was old. He never got the better of Hrafnkell as long as he lived.

And Hrafnkell stayed on his farm, and maintained his good name. He died of an illness, and his burial mound is in Hrafnkelsdalr, just beyond Aðalból. Many valuables, all his war-gear, and his fine spear were placed in the burial mound with him.

His sons took over his authority. Þórir lived at Hrafnkelsstaðir, and Þjórn at Aðalból. The two shared the chieftaincy, and were regarded as great men.

And that's the end of the story of Hrafnkell.

Glossary

Æsir: the collective name for the Norse gods.

Alþing (literally, ‘general assembly’): the national Assembly in Iceland (the modern form of the word is *Alþingi*); it had legislative and judicial functions (as well as social ones), and met annually at Þingvellir (‘Assembly plains’).

berserk (*berserkr*, literally, probably ‘bear-shirt’): warrior supposed to have been driven by a battle-frenzy.

drápa, pl. *drápur*: a long formal poem in skaldic metre, reconstructed by modern editors from individual stanzas and some longer sequences quoted in Old Norse-Icelandic prose.

dróttkvætt (literally, ‘court-measure’): the metre of skaldic poetry (see p. 64).

Eddaic verse: alliterative, stanzaic, narrative poetry, on mythological or heroic subjects, mostly found in a thirteenth-century manuscript, the Codex Regius, but of uncertain date and unknown authorship.

family saga: naturalistic prose narrative about the first settlers in Iceland and their descendants, centring on the period AD 870–1030.

fornaldarsaga, pl. *fornaldarsögur* (literally, ‘old-time saga’): legendary heroic saga, marked by evident fictionality and popular romance motifs.

goði, pl. *goðar*: Icelandic chieftain, with a religious function in pagan times.

Gylfaginning (literally, ‘the fooling of Gylfi’): the first of three sections in the *Prose Edda* (q.v.), consisting of mythological stories concerning creation, apocalypse and various adventures of the gods, presented as a dialogue between King Gylfi and the Æsir (q.v.).

Heimskringla (literally, ‘circle of the world’): a thirteenth-century collection of historical sagas – biographies of the rulers of Norway chronologically arranged from legendary times to AD 1177 – ascribed to Snorri Sturluson.

heroic verse: poetry set in the heroic age (approximately AD 300–700) and/or exemplifying such martial ethics as loyalty, courage and vengeance.

Íslendingasaga (literally, ‘saga of Icelanders’): Icelandic term for family saga (q.v.).

kenning: cryptic poetic circumlocution consisting of two or more nouns linked by the genitive, as in ‘tree of battle’, in which the base word (‘tree’) has only an oblique, metaphorical or even paradoxical relation to the referent of the kenning (‘warrior’); the base word’s determinant (‘battle’) directs the reader or listener (with luck) to how the base word relates to the referent.

Landnámabók (literally, ‘book of land-takings’): collection of information about the first Icelandic settlers and their settlements, surviving largely in post-medieval copies, but generally held to be historically reliable.

lausavísur (literally, ‘loose verses’): single stanzas of skaldic verse incorporated into saga narrative either as the dialogue of the characters, or to substantiate what is stated in the prose.

Lawrock: the place at which the law was publicly recited at the *Alþing* (q.v.).

Poetic Edda: the anthology of heroic and mythological poems in the thirteenth-century Codex Regius manuscript.

Prose Edda: three-part treatise on Old Norse-Icelandic poetry by the thirteenth-century Icelandic scholar Snorri Sturluson.

Ragnarök (literally, ‘the doom of the gods’): the Norse apocalypse.

riddarasaga, pl. *riddarasögur* (literally, ‘saga of knights’): saga of courtly romance, usually translated from a continental source.

runes: characters of the Germanic alphabet known as the *futhork* (after its first six letters) designed to be inscribed on a hard surface such as stone or wood (see p. 5).

saga, pl. *sögur*: Old Norse-Icelandic prose narrative about the past.

skald (*skáld* in Icelandic): Old Norse-Icelandic poet.

skaldic verse: poetry in *dróttkvætt* metre (q.v.), incorporated into prose narratives as individual stanzas or longer sequences and ascribed to a named poet or speaker and (often) a specific historical context.

skaldsaga (literally, ‘poet-saga’): one of a subset of sagas featuring a poet-hero, quoting his verses, and having a love-triangle theme.

Skáldskaparmál (literally, ‘the art of poetic diction’): the second part of the *Prose Edda* (q.v.), an explanation of the form, function and meaning of kennings (q.v.), and relating many mythological and heroic narratives to which kennings apparently allude.

Snorri’s Edda: the *Prose Edda* (q.v.).

þáttr, plu. *þættir* (literally, a ‘strand’, of rope or yarn): a short prose narrative with one story line or thread.

viking: as a noun, strictly a Scandinavian pirate from the period AD 700–1050; more loosely, as an adjective, applied to anything Scandinavian in this period, such as art or violence.

Notes

CHAPTER 2: THE SAGA

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- 2 Colin Kidd, ‘Teutonist ethnology and Scottish nationalist inhibition, 1780–1880’, *Scottish Historical Review* 74 (1995), pp. 45–68 (p. 49).
- 3 Ursula Dronke, ‘The scope of the *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*’, in *Úr Dölum til Dala: Guðbrandur Vigfússon Centenary Essays*, eds Rory McTurk and Andrew Wawn, Leeds Texts and Monographs New Series 11 (1989), pp. 93–111 (p. 93).
- 4 Henry Goddard Leach, *A Pageant of Old Scandinavia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946), p.13.
- 5 Knut Liestøl, *The Origin of the Icelandic Family Sagas*, trans. A. G. Jayne (Oslo, 1930), p. 253.
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- 2 *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, ed. David Daiches (Edinburgh, 1962), p. xiii.
- 3 See, for example, Berthold Schoene, *The Making of Orcadia: Narrative Identity in the Prose Work of George Mackay Brown* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 129.

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