THE ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH COMPANION TO THE MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC SAGAS

Edited by Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson

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GENRE

Massimiliano Bampi

The extensive corpus of the Old Norse-Icelandic sagas is without any doubt quite heterogeneous in many respects. In terms of subject matter, style, and fictional worlds, the sagas can indeed be said to give shape to a kaleidoscope of characters and places, both real and invented, set within a broad time frame. Despite this heterogeneity, however, scholars have sought to identify recurrent schemas and patterns within the corpus, and the question posed by the identification of such elements is whether they enable us to speak of different genres. The genre question has been a major matter of dispute in saga scholarship, especially over the last forty years, and as such demands further attention. As will be shown below, its relevance indeed goes far beyond what may at first appear mainly as a nominalistic modern preoccupation, for the definition of genre has a bearing on how we, as modern readers, approach the sagas and seek to interpret them as historically determined artistic works. But most importantly, genre is central to our understanding of not only how Icelanders constructed their own world views and relation to the past through the medium of literature, but also how changes in political, social, and economic structures permeated the literary system, influencing their use of different modes of narration to discuss topical issues or express hopes and preoccupations.

The aim of the present chapter is twofold. First, it will provide an overview of major critical and theoretical approaches to the definition of genre within the saga literature. Second, it will propose some ideas for future research that may contribute to a (re)definition of the notion of genre, one which can account for the historical development of genres within saga literature.

The Current Debate

Until now, much scholarly effort has been expended on discussing whether it is appropriate to categorize the surviving saga corpus using the taxonomy established by a number of studies during the twentieth century. The labels currently employed to describe the saga genres are largely a modern construct. Decades of discussing the adequacy of the classification system have resulted in formulating a division of the corpus of the sagas into the following (sub)groups:

Konungasögur[1] (kings' sagas): Narratives about Scandinavian kings and dynasties. They began being written already in the second half of the twelfth century and continued to be written throughout the thirteenth century.

Íslendingasögur (sagas of Icelanders): The events narrated in these texts are set in the time between the colonization of Iceland, which began in the 870s, and the conversion to Christianity around 1000, or shortly after that. *Íslendingasögur*, the most popular of the saga genres, are generally held to be marked by a certain degree of realism, although supernatural and fantastic elements (which abound in other genres, e.g., the *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas) and the *riddarasögur* (chivalric sagas) are also present.

Samtíðarsögur (contemporary sagas): These texts recount events that took place between 1117 and 1291. The protagonists are, on one hand, major chieftains who belonged to the Icelandic oligarchic families and, on the other, bishops who played a major role in the political struggles of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[2]

Fornaldarsögur (legendary sagas): This is a heterogeneous genre which encompasses a variety of texts marked by different styles. However, what binds them together as a genre is that these sagas recount events which took place before the colonization of Iceland and its later conversion to Christianity. The actions are thus set in the North (excluding Iceland) and in territories known to Scandinavians. On the grounds of their heterogeneity, the mythic-heroic sagas have sometimes been further divided into three subgenres: *Heldensagas* (heroic sagas), *Wikingersagas* (Viking sagas), and *Abenteuersagas* (adventure sagas).[3]

Þýddar riddarasögur (translated chivalric sagas): These comprise translations of chivalric works, mostly from Old French and Anglo-Norman sources, into Old Norse. Most translations were done at the instigation of King Hákon IV Hákonarson, who reigned over Norway from 1217 to 1263. The translated *riddarasögur* were largely circulated in Iceland at a later stage. Most extant copies of these originally Norwegian translations come from Iceland, where they were produced, especially in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Frumsamdar riddarasögur (indigenous (or Icelandic) chivalric sagas):[4] These texts were crafted in Iceland, partly following the model of the translated sagas of knights and the more adventurous of the *fornaldarsaga* texts (i.e., the *Abenteuersagas*). The settings are for the most part exotic and fantastic. The sagas enjoyed great popularity during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Heilagra manna sögur (hagiographic sagas): These sagas are both original and translated hagiographies. This is in all likelihood the oldest genre, as it is supposed to have begun to develop before the middle of the twelfth century.

As can be seen, the two major criteria employed to devise the above taxonomy are the subject matter treated in the saga and the sagas' internal chronology.

The most significant scholarly opinions about genre classification fall broadly into two major categories; on one side are those who accept the current taxonomy as a modern categorical convenience, and on the other are those who argue that our classification system is too rigid, providing a fundamentally misleading basis for the understanding of the highly various forms and structures of saga literature. In either case, the heuristic value of this classification is evidenced by the fact that all scholarly works on the sagas refer to it in order to define individual sagas or groups of them.

This is not to say, however, that such classification does not pose problems. As is the case with all classificatory systems, the genre taxonomy under discussion here is a retrospective and external attempt at establishing order within a body of works composed long ago, using compositional criteria that modern scholars seek to reconstruct in a meaningful way. Additionally, most but not all of the above-mentioned labels used to define the genres are modern constructs. While the terms *konungasögur* and *riddarasögur* are attested in manuscripts from the Middle Ages,[5]

we do not find any occurrence of, for example, the terms *fornaldarsögur* or *Íslendingasögur* in medieval sources.[6] Furthermore, the objection has been raised that this taxonomy proves unsatisfactory when it comes to assigning a saga to a single genre, as a number of sagas (referred to as generic hybrids) have features that correspond to different genres under the current system of classification. The very fact that it has by some scholars been deemed necessary to divide the *fornaldarsögur* into three subgroups demonstrates the difficulty in classifying the extant sagas in accordance with this system. Moreover, Marianne E. Kalinke's notion of bridal-quest romance in medieval Iceland points to the existence of a repertoire of themes and stylemes which cross generic boundaries.[7] These are among the major weak points of saga classification revealed by the current debate.

This debate is rooted in previous reflections on the question of genre definition. In the early 1950s, Sigurður Nordal was the first 'to challenge seriously the prevailing system of Old Norse literary nomenclature', as Stephen A. Mitchell put it in his work *Heroic Sagas and Ballads*.[8] His approach to saga classification was based on the relationship between the alleged time of composition of the saga and the time the events of the saga are said to have taken place. In the system proposed by Sigurður Nordal, sagas were classified into three groups: *Oldtidssagaer*, *fortidssagaer*, and *samtidssagaer* – ancient sagas, past sagas, and contemporary sagas, respectively. This classification has not gained wide acceptance, and its influence on the genre debate remains rather limited.

In the 1960s, Lars Lönnroth produced two major works questioning the very nature of genre classification as understood in previous saga studies.[9] There Lönnroth argued for abandoning the standard system in favour of a close examination of the medieval usage. Making far-reaching, retrospective generalizations about concepts like mythic-heroic sagas and sagas of Icelanders – concepts that Lönnroth points out lack any counterpart in medieval usage – is, in his view, of little use.

In 1970, Kurt Schier published a volume on the entire saga production containing a full description of what was the standard view of genre at that time.[10] Notably, Schier makes a distinction between sagas in a narrow sense (*konungasögur*, *Íslendingasögur*, *fornaldarsögur*, *Sturlunga saga*, and *biskupasögur*) and in a broader sense (*riddarasögur*, *Märchensagas*, saints' lives, and historical and pseudo-historical translated literature). His work remains a valuable point of reference for any further addition to the discourse.

Another major and revealing stage in the discussion of Old Norse-Icelandic saga genres is the debate between Lönnroth, Theodore M. Andersson, and Joseph Harris in a 1975 issue of *Scandinavian Studies*. There, Lönnroth's somewhat mitigated scepticism (compared to his previous positions) towards genre studies in saga scholarship is matched by Harris's view that the modern search for boundaries between genres is positive overall – provided that scholars acknowledge their classification system is, as Mitchell puts it, a 'modern archival convenience'.[11] Andersson warns against investing too much energy in such discussion at all, as this runs the risk of moving away from the sagas themselves as the proper object of study.[12] In the wake of this debate, the discussion of genre has continued mostly in the form of individual contributions.[13] A number of groundbreaking studies take up the question by focusing on a single genre,[14] including Jürg Glauser's work on the *Märchensagas*,[15] Stephen Mitchell's investigation of the *fornaldarsögur* and their legacy,[16] Torfi H. Tulinius's analysis of the rise and development of the mythic-heroic sagas,[17] and Kalinke's aforementioned study on bridal-quest romances.[18]

The most recent debate on genre can be found in the 2006 issue of *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*.[19] Although specifically addressing the generic definition of the *fornaldarsögur*, it is sufficiently broad in scope to contain elements applicable to the issue of genre as a whole.

While the scholars involved largely agree that the weak points revealed in earlier discussion underscore the limits of the current classification, especially in the case of the *fornaldarsögur*, the definition of the sagas as a multimodal genre gains wide acceptance. Viewed against the broader discussion of genre chronology in the saga literature, such a definition becomes particularly significant; in contrast to earlier views, which treated saga genres evolutionarily and gave some genres (i.e., the *Íslendingasögur*) prominence over others, the consensus now holds that the genres developed at about the same time. Margaret Clunies Ross points out that understanding the saga as a modally mixed genre, the development of which is driven by the interactions of different subgroups (i.e., different genres or subgenres), contributes towards promoting a more inclusive appreciation of the sagas – one that assigns equal value to the otherwise often marginalized younger representatives of the traditional genres, especially of the sagas of Icelanders.[20] This critical position no doubt represents an important advancement in our understanding of the saga universe, to say nothing of its bearing on the genre discussion.

Defining Genre

Still, there remain major problems to address, the most relevant of which is that the very notion of genre has been largely left undefined in previous research. Most scholars have indeed expressed their own views on the question of generic distinctions as well as on the current taxonomy's adequacy (or inadequacy) in describing generic boundaries based on the implicit assumption that genre is a self-evident concept. The risk that is inherent in the lack of a shared definition of the object of study is quite obvious; it can indeed not be taken for granted that all scholars have the same definition in mind. Hence, I believe the discussion would greatly benefit from a collective effort to propose a definition of genre that provides a heuristic hypothesis upon which to build future research.

To this end, I think that the definition put forth by Hans Robert Jauss in his work on genres in the Middle Ages provides a good starting point. According to Jauss, genres 'are to be understood not as genera (classes) in the logical senses, but rather as groups or historical families. As such they cannot be deduced or defined, but only historically determined, delimited, and described'.[21] Three major aspects of Jauss's definition stand out. First, he adopts a descriptive stance, whereas genre theories tend, broadly speaking, to be more of a normative kind. Second, the historical dimension is brought to the fore in order to stress the fact that genres are not monolithic entities that remain static over time. Rather, they respond to changes that occur not only at the level of the literary system, but also with regard to society and its forms of organization. Third, the definition of genres as historical families foregrounds the role of heterogeneity as a constitutive aspect of genre formation and development. Like the children of one family, texts that represent a genre do not necessarily have to display all the features that characterize all other members of the same family.[22] Any text is thus to be understood as a 'unique constellation of features'.[23]

All three aspects of Jauss's definition, in my opinion, can contribute towards redefining the scope of the current debate on genre in saga literature. Rather than assessing sagas according to a normative notion of genre based on classical genre theory, as has often been the case in previous research,[24] the approach propounded by Jauss enables us to view the saga genres as intrinsically dynamic, as categories of literary expression that change over time and, as such, display a varying amount of variability in content and form. Thus, the fact that a saga displays generic features belonging to different repertoires – as is especially the case with many sagas written or copied in the late Middle Ages – should not be taken to mean that it does not really fit the genre to which it is customarily traced.

Approaching Heterogeneity

The question of heterogeneity intrinsic in the delineation of a genre's boundaries is also a central issue in saga scholarship and begets the question of how to define a set of core features which adopt a distinctive function. This issue has of course been central to earlier attempts to devise a taxonomy of saga literature, as was shown above. Thus far, the discussion on generic markers suggests that the temporal and geographical setting of the action play the foremost role in distinguishing one saga genre from another.[25] In particular, the chronotope,[26] a term borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin to refer to 'the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature',[27] appears to direct the selection of features fitting the construction of the particular fictional world of a narrative.

If the action is set in Iceland during the settlement age, for example, one expects a narrative that is rather realistic in tone and foregrounds the interaction of individuals and families against events leading to the establishment of the Alþing (General Assembly) and, after that, the conversion to Christianity. However, if the protagonist of the saga is a Swedish legendary hero from pre-Christian times, one expects a stronger presence of the fantastic and supernatural in their diverse forms as elements qualifying the action of the hero and the setting in which he operates. In the same vein, if the action is set in the chivalric world, other features are to be expected: a usually non-defined time frame and an abstract geographical setting describe a narrative universe in which characters move (in time and space) according to rules that resemble those governing the narrative domain of the European *Volksmärchen*.[28] At the level of the narrative formulation of a fictional world, the role of the audience is central to this kind of distinction. Each genre can indeed be said to be made of 'a set of textual signals and instructions activating different horizons of expectations in the audience',[29] and directing the interpretation of the story. The opening section of most sagas does, as a rule, contain all essential elements that make it possible for the audience to activate such *Erwartungshorizonte* (horizons of expectation).

Overall, what is common to most saga genres is an interest in the representation of the past. The historical continuum is split up into a number of segments which provide both the basis and the subject matter for the writing of sagas. Recent studies have pointed out that genres should thus also be understood as bearers of cultural memory. As such they articulate a polyhedral discourse on the past (and, more or less implicitly, on its relevance for the present) that is extremely relevant to our understanding of the function and meaning of saga writing.[30] The strategies employed in articulating such discourse appear to be different in the different genres into which the saga corpus can be divided, thus demanding further attention. If we aim to reach as complete an understanding of such generic distinctions as possible, a major task for future research in this field will be analyzing the semantics of the fictional worlds in the sagas along the lines drawn by recent studies.[31] While it is safe to assert that temporal and geographical settings appear to be the most important generic markers,[32] a closer look at texts that share the same setting reveals that homogeneity is not to be expected.[33] Hence, it is clear that other criteria must concord in order to distinguish sagas set in the same time frame – for example, the role played by the communicative intention linked to the writing and circulation of a given saga. The study of how various fictional worlds are constructed will also contribute towards defining a repertoire of primary and secondary features associated with saga genres.[34]

To this end, such investigation can be profitably used to integrate the notion of generic repertoire, developed by Alastair Fowler,[35] which Elizabeth Ashman Rowe has used to study saga genres.[36] If we assume that heterogeneity is a constitutive part of genre formation and development across time, as suggested by Jauss, we can approach the multimodality of sagas from

a different perspective. Heterogeneity is indeed not necessarily to be understood as proof of the non-existence of distinctive generic features, as has often been the case in previous research. Indeed, the constraints which appear to regulate the construction of various fictional worlds are unaltered by the tendency towards a variable degree of hybridity that the interplay of saga genres promotes. Furthermore, generic hybridity offers us a valuable insight into the nature of the process of contamination and cross-fertilization that has been acknowledged as characterizing the development of saga literature.

In particular, seeing how elements pertaining to different generic repertoires are combined, and, even more interestingly, analyzing the result of their combination in terms of structure and meaning, can tell a great deal about the function of each individual repertoire. For example, the combination of different chronotopes within the same narrative frame that characterizes generic hybrids, e.g., *Áns saga bogsveigis*, *Víglundar saga*, and *Samsons saga fagra*, to name but three, provided the saga writer with a broader palette of narrative options from which to choose so as to articulate a more nuanced, dialogic discourse in which different world views, associated with different chronotopes, could meet or clash. Thus, if we keep the temporal and the geographical setting as the sagas' major generic markers, we can explore how the representation of that particular segment of Nordic history changes in narrative terms as the literary system grows in complexity, with new genres providing a new set of stylemes and expressive options for shaping the fictional world most frequently associated with one genre.

The example provided by *Víglundar saga* is quite interesting. Instead of approaching the text as a bridal-quest romance with superficial features borrowed from the world of the sagas of Icelanders, as Marianne E. Kalinke has proposed,[37] I suggest analyzing it as a late *Íslendingasaga*, as signalled by a temporal and chronological setting. In such a reading, the 'contamination' of the bridal-quest narrative pattern is probably meant to give the saga writer a useful tool for describing the clash between different world views roughly corresponding to the two different fictional worlds that coexist within the same narrative frame. Thus, heterogeneity would in this case, as much as in many others, prove to be consciously used to articulate a more nuanced narrative, ideologically as well as artistically.[38]

Examining Extraliterary Factors

But what mechanisms govern this process of generic intermingling? This question can be profitably approached from a theoretical point of view, especially by using some of the core notions of Russian Formalism (Jury Tynjanov) and its subsequent refinements (polysystem theory). The basic idea underlying the systemic approach of Tynjanov is that genres are hierarchically organized within a system.[39] In short, some tend to occupy a central position while others tend to be more peripheral, the difference between the two positions being that central genres play a major role and are more influential than peripheral ones. The position occupied by a genre within the system does not depend solely on literary dynamics; later developments of Tynjanov's ideas further stress that these dynamics are the result of mostly extraliterary factors.

In addition to works by Jauss and Erich Köhler,[40] Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory is a major example of the further development of Tynjanov's ideas.[41] Central to this theory is the idea that literary fact heavily depends on interaction with other systems, especially the social. What causes the most influential genres to maintain a central position in the literary system is, in short, their relevance in the social context, especially in their role as ideological instruments for groups that constitute what Even-Zohar calls the dominant circles (i.e., elite groups). Writing on genre in Old French literature, Simon Gaunt points out, for example, that 'at different

moments in history different genres will arise in response to different tensions; synchronically, different genres may operate at the same historical moment to offer different solutions to the same set of tensions or to address different contradictions that are problematic in a society at a given moment'.[42] The tenets briefly described above can be fruitfully applied to our object of study in order to trace patterns in the development of both genres and the dynamics that regulate their interaction.

As I have argued elsewhere,[43] a look at movements within the system of genres in medieval Iceland may indeed help us explain the forms of contamination that involve most saga genres. Manuscript evidence indicates that the literary system of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is characterized by a prominence of genres such as the *riddarasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur* (especially the more fantastic *Abenteuersagas*), which come to exert an influence even on the younger *Íslendingasögur* (e.g., *Grettis saga* and *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*). This change in the centre of the system of saga genres, which determines which genres are most influential, is coeval with and related to a shift in ideology that occurred when Iceland became part of the territories of the Norwegian Crown and an Icelandic service aristocracy began to arise.

The fact that the translated *riddarasögur* are attested almost exclusively in Icelandic copies from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (as well as in post-medieval manuscripts) bears indisputable witness to the interest aroused in Iceland by royal ideology and the representation of courtly life. The influence of courtly ideology and its literary manifestations becomes visible in many ways. It is noteworthy, for example, that one of the most important *Íslendingasögur*, *Laxdæla saga*, shows features which are clearly borrowed from courtly romance.[44] It is also noteworthy that the courtly world view which the *riddarasögur* bring into the Old Norse literary domain finds its way even into the heroic *fornaldarsögur* that relate ancient legendary material. Thus, we find courtly traits in such works as *Vǫlsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*.[45] These traits may derive from literary trends of the time from which the extant copies originate (i.e., late medieval and early modern manuscripts).[46]

However, as was discussed above, in order to explain how this reorganization of the hierarchical structure of the literary system was made possible we must take the social system into consideration. Indeed, if we also understand saga genres as bearers of ideology and mirrors of social preoccupations, and if we assume that the promotion of saga writing is largely connected with elite groups – or people aspiring to be a part of such groups – in medieval Iceland, we can approach the issue of genre development against the backdrop of broader, non-literary phenomena.[47] Even-Zohar argues, for example, that the hierarchies of the social system are isomorphic with those of the literary system.[48] If so, one hypothesis future researchers may try to test is whether changes within the hierarchy of saga genres reflect movements in the social arena, with new groups trying to become influential – partly by means of literary production – and others seeking to maintain their central role.[49] Key to this kind of reasoning is the relationship of individuals to the past, that is, the time prior to the annexation of Iceland to Norway.

It is indeed noteworthy that what distinguishes the Icelandic *riddarasögur*, the new and most popular genre of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, is first and foremost that they are not constructed around a genealogical principle, while almost all other saga genres are. Consequently, unlike other genres, they are not directly related to the history of the Icelandic community. The social composition of the new elite groups after 1262–1264 reveals that such groups had a different kind of relation to the recent past.[50] On one side were those who descended from traditional *goðar* (chieftains') families, and on the other, the new rich, those who had risen to prominence thanks to the *skreið* (dried fish) trade but were without any ties to power before 1262–1264.[51] In addition, it must be borne in mind that the *Íslendingasögur* did not die out as a

genre when the *riddarasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur* became increasingly more influential. Older sagas continued to be copied, and new ones were composed, mainly under the influence of the most popular genres. It is noteworthy, for example, that especially in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the *Íslendingasögur* tended to appear in compilation manuscripts alongside texts attributable to other genres (mostly *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*).[52] A different relationship to the past on the part of different layers of the patronage might have prompted the composition (or copying) of saga genres that were essentially different in this respect.[53]

Concluding Remarks

To answer all the questions raised above, it will be necessary to start from the manuscript evidence we have, mapping the distribution and interaction of genres in codices and miscellanies and tracing them, whenever possible, to the social milieus in which they are likely to have been used. How much does, for example, the transmission of sagas in compilation manuscripts contribute towards promoting generic intermingling and generic hybridity? Any discussion of genre distinctions cannot lose sight of the materiality of textual transmission, as research in other fields related to literary textual production in the Middle Ages has demonstrated.[54] Theory can however prove useful in providing an overarching frame in which to analyse phenomena and pose questions that lead us to view a problem or set of problems from a different perspective, thus blazing a new trail.

It will no doubt be necessary to continue working on all topics upon which this chapter has briefly touched, and to this end I believe the theoretical approaches mentioned here are worth exploring. Hopefully, future research in the field of saga genres will try to establish, based on the texts and beyond preconceptions, whether – and to what extent – these approaches can help advance our knowledge of the modalities of saga construction as well as the world views they mirror.

Notes

1 The singular for *sögur* is *saga*.

2 Kurt Schier, *Sagaliteratur*. Stuttgart, Metzler, 1970, 5–6, 67–69. In his overview of the saga literature, Schier mentions a subgenre within the *samtíðarsögur* called *byskupasögur* (bishops' sagas, also spelled *biskupasögur*) which includes the lives of a number of Icelandic bishops from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. In her recent work on the Icelandic sagas, Margaret Clunies Ross lists the *biskupasögur* among the texts making up the genre of the *samtíðarsögur*, *The Cambridge Introduction to The Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 35–36. On the *biskupasögur* as a genre, see in particular Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 'Eru biskupasögur til?' *Skáldskaparmál* 2 (1992), 207–20.

3 On the three subgenres see Schier, *Sagaliteratur*, 72–77.

4 The terms *Märchensagas* and *lygisögur* (lying sagas) have also been used to describe this genre of saga literature. See, for example, Schier, *Sagaliteratur*, 105–11, and Matthew Driscoll, 'Late Prose Fiction (*lygisögur*).' *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk, Oxford, Blackwell, 2005, 190–204.

5 Manuscript evidence, however, suggests that Icelanders were in fact aware of generic distinctions. A good number of manuscripts indeed seem to have been compiled so as to gather texts belonging to one or related genres. Among many such miscellanies, one can name AM 152 fol. (preserving mostly *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*) and *Möðruvallabók* (containing only *Íslendingasögur*). On genre and codicological evidence, see Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991, 21–22. On AM 152 fol., see Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Ideology and Identity in Late Medieval Northwest Iceland: A Study of AM 152 fol.' *Gripla* 25 (2014), 87–128.

6 For example, as is widely known, the term *fornaldarsögur* was coined by Carl Christian Rafn in an 1829–1830 work entitled *Fornaldar sögur Nordrlanda*, an edition of a corpus of sagas narrating events that took place mainly in the Nordic countries before the settlement of Iceland.

7 Marianne E. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1990.

8 Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, 9. Here Mitchell is referring to Sigurður Nordal, 'Sagalitteraturen.' *Litteraturhistoria B: Litteraturhistorie: Norge og Island*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Stockholm, Bonnier, 1953, 180–273, at 180–82.

9 Lars Lönnroth, 'Tesen om de två kulturerna: Kritiska studier i den isländska sagaskrivningens sociala förutsättningar.' *Islandica* 15, 3 (1964), 3–97; Lönnroth, *European Sources of Saga-Writing: An Essay Based on Previous Studies*. Stockholm, Thule-Seelig, 1965.

10 Schier, *Sagaliteratur*, 5–6.

11 Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, 12. For the articles of Lönnroth and Harris see Lars Lönnroth, 'The Concept of Genre in Saga Literature.' *Scandinavian Studies* 47 (1975), 419–26; Joseph Harris, 'Genre in the Saga Literature: A Squib.' *Scandinavian Studies* 47 (1975), 427–36. In his discussion of the genre issue, Harris distinguishes between ethnic genres (genre labels used by the people that produced that specific kind of literature) and analytic genres (categories devised to study a specific body of texts), thus arguing for the overall adequacy of the current taxonomy.

12 Theodore M. Andersson, 'Splitting the Saga.' *Scandinavian Studies* 47 (1975), 437–41.

13 See, for example, Fulvio Ferrari, 'La *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* e la questione dei generi.' *Studi nordici* 1 (1994), 11–23; Lars Lönnroth, 'Fornaldarsagans genremässiga metamorfoser: Mellan Edda-myt och riddarroman.' *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi, handlingar från ett symposium i Uppsala 31.8–2.9 2001*, eds. Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen, and Agneta Ney, Uppsala, Uppsala Universitet, 2003, 37–46; Phil Cardew, 'The Question of Genre in the Late *Íslendinga sögur*: A Case Study of *Þorskfirðinga saga*.' *Sagas, Saints, and Settlements*, eds. Gareth Williams and Paul Bibire, Leiden, Brill, 2004, 13–28; Marianne E. Kalinke, 'Scribe, Redactor, Author: The Emergence and Evolution of Icelandic Romance.' *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 8 (2012), 171–98.

14 A major exception is represented by Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*. Vol. 2, *The Reception of Norse Myths in Medieval Iceland*. Odense, Odense University Press, 1998. This seminal volume on the reception of Norse myths in medieval Iceland provides a broader perspective on the saga genres, see esp. 44–58, 76–85.

15 Jürg Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas: Studien zur Prosaliteratur im spätmittelalterlichen Island*. Basel, Helbing und Lichtenhahn, 1983.

16 Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*.

17 Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, trans. Randi C. Eldevik. Odense, Odense University Press, 2002. Originally published as *La 'Matière du Nord': Sagas légendaires et fiction dans la littérature islandaise en prose du XIIIe siècle*. Paris, Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1995.

18 Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest*. In addition to these studies, one should mention Martin Arnold, *The Post-Classical Icelandic Family Sagas*. Lewiston, The Edward Mellen Press, 2003 and Geraldine Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur: Writing Romance in Late Mediaeval Iceland*. Odense, Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2014.

19 Judy Quinn, Marianne E. Kalinke, Margaret Clunies Ross, Carl Phelpstead, Torfi H. Tulinius, Gottskálk Jensson, Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen, Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, Stephen A. Mitchell, Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, Ralph O'Connor, and Matthew Driscoll, 'Interrogating Genre in the Fornaldarsögur: Round-Table Discussion.' *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2 (2006), 275–96.

20 Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction*, 70.

21 Hans Robert Jauss, *Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature*, quoted in David Duff, *Modern Genre Theory*. London, Routledge, 2014, 131.

22 Writing on genres in Old Russian literature, Norman W. Ingham points out: 'The bundle of traits common to most of these subsets (features of content and manner as well as form) might be said to be the basis for describing the family, but it will not constitute a necessary and sufficient definition applicable to every instance', Ingham, 'Genre-theory and Old Russian literature.' *The Slavic and East European Journal* 31, 2 (1987), 234–45, at 236.

23 Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, 14–15.

24 'Hence, although we can often articulate properties that belong more to one kind of saga than to others, we cannot differentiate them in a water-tight fashion, as classical genre theory requires', Margaret Clunies Ross, quoted in Quinn et al., *Interrogating Genre*, 277.

25 'Both chronology and geography can be seen to act as consistent generic markers of sub-generic identity in the literary world of the medieval saga', Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction*, 72. Clunies Ross uses the term subgenre to refer to what are in this chapter called genres, as she is more inclined to understand the saga as one single genre. On the importance of geography in genre distinctions, see Torfi H. Tulinius, 'Landafræði og flokkun fornsagna.' *Skáldskaparmál* 1 (1990), 142–55.

26 On the application of the notion of chronotope in saga studies, see Carl Phelpstead, 'Adventure-Time in *Yngvars saga víðförla*.' *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed: Studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, eds. Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson, and Annette Lassen, Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2009, 331–46, esp. 340–44.

27 M. M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics.' *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981, 84–85.

28 On the connections between the temporal and geographical setting of a saga and the construction of fictional worlds, see Fulvio Ferrari, 'Gli islandesi inventori del romanzo? Sviluppo e generi della saga islandese.' *Germanistica.net*, July 20, 2011, http://www.germanistica.net/2011/07/20/gli-islandesi-e-il-romanzo.

29 Fulvio Ferrari, 'Possible Worlds of Sagas: The Intermingling of Different Fictional Universes in the Development of the *Fornaldarsögur* as a Genre.' *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, eds. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, and Ármann Jakobsson, Reykjavík, University of Iceland Press, 2012, 271–89, 271.

30 Pernille Hermann, 'Saga Literature, Cultural Memory, and Storage.' *Scandinavian Studies* 85 (2013), 332–54.

31 See esp. Ferrari's study, 'Possible Worlds'.

32 'The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic generic significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinction, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time', Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time,' 85.

33 Various attempts have indeed been made, for example, to identify what distinguishes *Ynglinga saga*, which ranks among the *konungasögur*, from the legendary sagas, especially those that relate legendary or mythic material. See esp. Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, '*Ynglinga saga* mellom fornaldersaga og kongesaga.' *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed: Studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, eds. Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson, and Annette Lassen, Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2009, 49–60 and Else Mundal, '*Ynglingasaga* og genreproblematikken.' *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed: Studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, eds. Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson, and Annette Lassen, Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2009, 61–66.

34 Previous studies include Theodore M. Andersson's, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1967 (a volume in which he seeks to reconstruct a narrative pattern that is common to all *Íslendingasögur*) and Peter Hallberg's, 'Some Aspects of the Fornaldarsögur as a Corpus.' *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 97 (1982), 1–35.

35 Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982.

36 See especially Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, 'Generic Hybrids: Norwegian "Family" Sagas and Icelandic "Mythic-Heroic" Sagas.' *Scandinavian Studies* 65 (1993), 539–54. As Rowe points out, the generic features identified by Fowler 'consist of a distinctive representational aspect . . ., a common external structure, and specific elements from the generic repertoire,' Rowe, *Generic Hybrids*, 540.

37 Marianne E. Kalinke, '*Víglundar saga*: An Icelandic Bridal-Quest Romance.' *Skáldskaparmál* 3 (1994), 119–43.

38 Rowe, 'Generic Hybrids'.

39 Jury Tynjanov, 'The Literary Fact.' *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. David Duff, New York, Routledge, 2014, 29–49.

40 Jauss, *Theory of Genre*; Erich Köhler, 'Gattungssystem und Gesellschaftssystem.' *Zum mittelalterlichen Literaturbegriff*, ed. B. Haupt, Darmstadt, Wissenschatfliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985, 111–29.

41 For a brief presentation of the polysystem theory, see Mark Shuttleworth, 'Polysystem Theory.' *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, ed. Mona Baker, London, Routledge, 1998, 176–79.

42 Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, 7.

43 Massimiliano Bampi, 'The Development of the *Fornaldarsögur* as a Genre: A Polysystemic Approach.' *Legendary Sagas: Origins and Developments*, eds. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, and Ármann Jakobsson, Reykjavík, Iceland University Press, 2012, 185–99, and Bampi, 'Literary Activity and Power Struggle: Some Observations on the Medieval Icelandic Polysystem after the *Sturlungaöld*.' *Textual Production and*

Status Contests in Rising and Unstable Societies, eds. Massimiliano Bampi and Marina Buzzoni, Venice, Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2013, 59–70.

44 See e.g., Susanne Kramarz-Bein, 'Modernität der *Laxdœla saga.' Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. Heiko Uecker, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1994, 421–42.

45 Stefanie Würth, 'The Rhetoric of *Völsunga saga.' Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi, handlingar från ett symposium i Uppsala 31.8–2.9 2001*, eds. Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen, and Agneta Ney, Uppsala, Uppsala Universitet, 2003, 101–11; Ármann Jakobsson, 'Le Roi Chevalier: The Royal Ideology and Genre of *Hrólfs saga kraka.' Scandinavian Studies* 71 (1999), 139–66.

46 For example, the oldest extant manuscript of *Völsunga saga*, NKS 1824 b 4to, dates from between 1380 and 1420, the period in which the reception of courtly literature and its representation of the world became visible, especially through the major role played by the Icelandic *riddarasögur*, as seen above.

47 On saga genres as bearers of ideology see Axel Kristinsson, 'Lords and Literature: The Icelandic Sagas as Political and Social Instruments.' *Scandinavian Journal of History* 28, 1 (2003), 1–17.

48 'If we assume that the literary system . . . is isomorphic with, say, the social system, its hierarchies can only be conceived of as intersecting with those of the latter. . . . The literary polysystem, like any other socio-cultural system, is conceived of as simultaneously autonomous and heteronomous with all other co-systems', Itamar Even-Zohar, 'Polysystem Theory.' *Poetics Today* 11, 1 (1990), 9–26, at 23.

49 This aspect has already started drawing some scholarly attention, see e.g., Henric Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom: Sexualitet, homosocialitet och aristokratisk identitet på det senmedeltida Island*. Göteborg, Göteborg universitet, 2009 and Hans Jacob Orning, 'Feuds and conflict resolution in fact and fiction in late medieval Iceland.' *Legislation and State Formation: Norway and its Neighbours in the Middle Ages*, ed. Steinar Imsen, Trondheim, Akademika Publishing, 2013, 229–62. See also Hans Jacob Orning's chapter in the present volume.

50 See Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'The Icelandic Aristocracy After the Fall of the Free State.' *Scandinavian Journal of History* 20 (1995), 153–66.

51 On these aspects see Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas*, 61–78, 219–33; Geraldine Barnes, 'Romance.' *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 266–86, esp. 276–83.

52 See Emily Lethbridge, '"Hvorki glansar gull á mér / né glæstir stafir í línum". Some Observations on *Íslendingasögur* Manuscripts and the Case of *Njáls Saga.' Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 129 (2014), 55–89, esp. 73–75.

53 Margaret Clunies Ross is among those who have foregrounded the importance of the 'family based-nexus between the past and the present' for understanding the *fornaldarsögur* as a genre, see '*Fornaldarsögur* as Fantastic Ethnographies.' *Fornaldarsagaerne. Myter og virkelighed: Studier i de oldislandske* fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda, eds. Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson, and Annette Lassen, Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2009, 317–30, at 320. A number of powerful Icelandic families did indeed proclaim connections with 'either kings or important men in the Scandinavian homelands', Clunies Ross, '*Fornaldarsögur* as Fantastic Ethnographies,' 320, as shown most recently by Sverrir Jakobsson, *Við og veröldin: Heimsmynd Íslendinga 1100–1400*. Reykjavík, Háskólaútgáfan, 2005, 256–60.

54 See, for example, Keith Busby, *Codex and Context: Old French Verse Narrative in Manuscripts*. 2 vols. Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2002, esp. 463–84 and Simon Gaunt, 'Genres in Motion: Rereading the *Grundriss* 40 Years On.' *Medioevo romanzo* 37, 1 (2013), 24–43.

2

DATING AND ORIGINS

Chris Callow

In my opinion, the discussion must be kept alive as long as we do not know anything for certain – i.e., probably forever.[1]

Introduction

As seen in the above quotation, by one of its most recent, significant contributors, some scholars are very attached to the saga origins debate. In few fields would scholars set out their self-justification in quite such stark terms, especially while hinting at the hopelessness of achieving a definitive answer to their question. In this instance, the major question actually comprises several fascinating, interrelated ones, which anyone who has read one or more of the *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders) may have pondered. How did the *Íslendingasögur* come into being? Who wrote them, or at least wrote them *down*? When were they committed to writing? Was there an oral storytelling tradition in Iceland which existed alongside the written one and, if so, what was that tradition like? Moreover, those familiar with multiple sagas and/or *Landnámabók* (*The Book of Settlements*) may be intrigued by similarities and overlaps between the first and any subsequent texts they read. Are the shared characters and plots the result of skilled authorial borrowings, the product of lost oral traditions, or both? The fact that manuscripts containing sagas seldom mention authors or scribes adds to the mystery of the whole process of saga genesis. Nor are there obvious precursors to the sagas, experiments in literary form, or even rough drafts. We can also throw into the mix the fact that Scandinavian courts and scribes interacted with their peers in other parts of Europe, that other kinds of sagas and compilations of sagas were being produced in Iceland at the same time, and that the issue of genre was complicated in medieval Scandinavia.[2]

Given all this, it is perhaps easier to see not only why definitive answers in the saga origins debate are hard to come by, but also why all scholars have an opinion on the matter – whether or not they make their views explicit. The balance of views expressed on these matters has probably shifted in the last fifty years against a background of changing scholarly fashions beyond the study of medieval Iceland and its literary culture. Views on other literary genres produced in medieval Iceland have shifted as well; the literary qualities of the drier *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary sagas) and *konungasögur* (kings' sagas) have been explored and, for all the continued interest in *Íslendingasögur*, narratives assigned to other genres, such as the