

Tradurre: un viaggio nel tempo

Maria Grazia Cammarota

Translating Medieval Icelandic Sagas Re-bending the Bow of Án the Archer

Martina Ceolin
(University of Iceland, Reykjavík)

Abstract Within the framework of Translation Studies, much consideration has been given to the role recipients play in a translation process. However, a number of important questions arise in this regard when considering the translation of texts that are culturally and historically distant. In this contribution, I will explore the challenge of translating medieval Icelandic sagas, to demonstrate how crucial it is that translations of such texts be carried out not only with the supposed public in mind, but also by valorizing the cultural and historical specificities of the source-texts themselves. Examples will be drawn from my own recent experience of translating *Áns saga bogsveigis* into Italian (Saga of Án the Archer), an Old Icelandic *fornaldarsaga* (Legendary saga) written at the end of the fifteenth century.

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1 Reconsidering the Primacy of Target-Oriented Approaches in Translation

Since the emergence of Descriptive Translation Studies in the '70s and '80s, and especially with their development by Gideon Toury in the '90s, descriptivism and target-orientation have entered the mainstream of Translation Studies (cf. Holmes 2000; Toury 1980, 1995). This followed a shift in focus within the discipline, away from prescriptive, source-oriented frameworks and methods to approach translation towards more descriptive and target-oriented ones. It has involved examining translations as either products or processes, or the functions translations have within the recipient socio-cultural contexts (Munday 2016, 16-21, 174-81).

The ways in which the target-culture itself influences and constrains translation have been the focus of scholars operating within the 'cultural turn' in Translation Studies, which was forwarded primarily by André Lefe-

vere during the '80s and '90s (see, for example, Bassnett, Lefevere 1990; Lefevere 1992). According to this approach, there are concrete factors in hosting target-cultures that govern and impact the reception, acceptance, or rejection of literary texts, such as power, ideology and manipulation. Consequently, a translation is never a neutral product: it is understood as a process of 'rewriting' a text and, precisely, of the most recognisable type (Lefevere 1992, 9).

These views have been strengthened since the year 2000 through the shift known as the 'sociological turn' in Translation Studies. Scholars have put more accent on translators themselves as both members of a socio-cultural community with which they share specific values, norms and practices, and as agents of cultural negotiation operating in the same community (see, for example, Pym et al. 2006; Wolf, Fukari 2007). Such perspective underlines how translators are both influenced by and exert an influence on the socio-cultural environments in which they operate.

These descriptive, target-oriented approaches, among others, have provided a theoretical framework, research methodology, and techniques that are especially valuable for researchers of literary studies, comparative studies and literary translation studies. However, the same approaches need to be reconsidered when the translations in question are of texts that are culturally and chronologically distant, such as medieval texts. More precisely, the translation of medieval texts in contemporary times involves theoretical and methodological specificities and difficulties that cannot be properly dealt with by operating within a target-oriented framework only, while overlooking the importance of the source-texts themselves and their contexts.

Among the specific problems arising in the reading and interpreting of medieval works are not only the wide cultural and temporal gaps, but also the variability and the dynamism characterising both the contexts of production and transmission of such texts. Still, this offers both a challenge and an opportunity to translators. On the one hand, it requires considerable devotion on the part of the translator during the continuous negotiation process. On the other hand, it allows for multiple interpretive paths to be followed.

Considering these aspects, the translation of a medieval text in contemporary times should be understood as both a reconstruction and a rewriting process, consisting in the attentive recreation of a source-text and of its context into a linguistic and cultural target-context. Usually, such rewriting process starts already with the modern editing of a medieval text, as it is now a common practice to choose an edition of a medieval text as a source-text for its translation. In this way, editors play a crucial role in the processes of selection and re-functionalization of literary material from the past. On the one hand, such processes are target-oriented, determined by the norms proper to the society and culture at which the translation is aimed, thus being led by the dominant ideologies in the literary systems of the receiving cultures. On the other hand, the strategies and procedures

concerning the translation of such texts should be conceived on the basis of a number of textual and contextual variables as well, in order to respect the specificities characterising the source-texts themselves and their contexts. Due to the same specificities, there are clearly no definite strategies and procedures that can be adopted in the translation of medieval texts, but there are at least working principles that can be followed.

In the next section, I would like to explore the particular challenges that concern the translation of medieval Icelandic sagas, while hinting at the strategies and procedures that may be adopted as working principles, as their application will vary from saga to saga. The analysis will be guided by my own recent experience of translating *Áns saga bogsveigis* into Italian ('Saga of Án the Archer'), an Old Icelandic *foraldarsaga* ('Legendary Saga') written at the end of the fifteenth century.

2 Translating Medieval Icelandic Sagas: the Case of the *foraldarsögur*

The translation of medieval Icelandic sagas constitutes a challenging and interesting task for a number of reasons, including the range of complexities and specificities surrounding their individual traditions and their dynamism of transmission. Concerning the latter, for example, the situation is far more complex than is usually the case with other medieval texts, such as Old and Middle English ones. Indeed, "there are often numerous Icelandic manuscripts and recensions on parchment and paper, differing very significantly in completeness and contents, and interrelated in ways that are far from straightforward or obvious" (Kennedy 2007, 18). Moreover, it should be noted that early editions of these texts were often based on "what now appears to be far from the best available manuscript evidence, and the process of establishing a text has often taken a long time and [inevitably] involved controversy" (18). This is crucial considering the fact that, as hinted at above, it is a common practice nowadays to choose an edition of a medieval saga as a source-text for its translation. What is more, there is often a lack of revised or new editions, if they are available at all.

Despite these difficulties, medieval Icelandic sagas have been regarded as easier to appreciate by contemporary readers than most medieval texts, due to their relatively straightforward prose style and to their versatility. They can be read on multiple levels, such as the entertaining, the documentary, and the ideological levels. It is, however, difficult and inappropriate to generalise about the quality of these texts, as they are very diverse within the extant saga-corpus, especially from the perspective of genre. Indeed, the corpus has been conventionally subdivided into several different saga-genres, while each text both adheres to the same conventions and presents individualising elements. Moreover, saga-genre conventions

are often blended together within the single texts. In any case, it is exactly the originality of these works and the fact that they are consciously- and well-constructed narratives that best expresses their great artistic value. By some, they have been regarded as precursors of the novel.¹

Among the various saga genres that are customarily identified within the saga corpus, the *fornaldarsögur* (Legendary Sagas or Sagas of Icelandic Prehistory) are particularly challenging and interesting from the point of view of translation. They have a tendency towards instability that is rather clear, as exemplified by the many redactions in which they exist and by the diversity of the manuscript contexts in which they have been preserved.² At the same time, this is evidence of their popularity, which, although fluctuating over time, has been renewed since the '70s, when scholars started to reevaluate their fascinating complexity from both a literary and a historical standpoint.³

These sagas are characterised by being set in pre-historic times from an Icelandic point of view, thus they are set in an undetermined, mythical time preceding the colonisation of Iceland around AD 870. The action occurs mainly in Scandinavia, most notably in Norway, but not exclusively. They were written in Iceland from the 13th century on, though their story-material was already in circulation during the 12th century, especially in verse form (Tulinius 2002, 46-55). Scholars now agree on the fact that these texts “tell us more about the concerns of their thirteenth and fourteenth century composers and audiences in Iceland than they do about pre-ninth-century Scandinavia” (Tulinius 2002, 179-87). This assumption is based on the fact that, when specific information is mediated, even twisted or

1 Most notably by the Argentine author Jorge L. Borges (1951, 87): “En el siglo XII, los islandeses descubren la novela, el arte de Cervantes y de Flaubert, y ese descubrimiento es tan secreto y tan estéril para el resto del mundo, como su descubrimiento de América” (In the 12th century, Icelanders discover the novel, the art of Cervantes and of Flaubert, and that discovery is as secret and sterile to the rest of the world, as their discovery of America) (Author’s translation).

2 A notable example of a *fornaldarsaga* that exists in various redactions is *Örvar-Odds saga* (Saga of Arrow-Oddr). The story was reworked by copyists over time to such an extent that the younger MSS are thought to reflect new versions of the saga (Tulinius 2002, 159-64). An example of a *fornaldarsaga* that has been preserved in diverse MSS contexts is *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* (Saga of Þorsteinn, the Son of Víkingr). It is often found along with other *fornaldarsögur* in the MSS, but within the specific context of *Eggertsbók* (AM 556a-b 4to, end of 15th century) it appears alongside sagas that are of a different nature, the *Íslendingasögur* (Sagas of Early Icelanders). These sagas were written in the same period as the *fornaldarsögur*, but they relate deeds that concern Icelandic settlers and their descendants up to the early 11th century. The diversity of these contexts, however, is not surprising, given the heterogeneity of the text itself from a genre perspective.

3 Concerning the literary point of view, see, for example, the trilogy edited by Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen and Agneta Ney (2003; 2009; 2012). Concerning the historical point of view, see, for example, Helgi Þorláksson (2014) and Orning (2015).

created through the narrative medium, it is because such information is meaningful to the people devising the same representations, rather than constituting plain reports or fabrications (Innes 2000, 5; Gísli Sigurðsson 2013, 402). The *foraldarsögur* have been even regarded as one of the ‘privileged vehicles of ideology’, since the distancing of the events in time and space allowed the treatment of contemporary problems and complexities that might remain unspoken otherwise.⁴

Far from constituting a homogeneous collection of texts from a genre perspective, these sagas have been nevertheless grouped into two categories: the ‘heroic legends’ and the ‘adventure tales’.⁵ The heroic legends are supposed to originate from the Old Norse pagan and heroic tradition and are more tragic in tone, in that the death of the hero tends to be the predominant element in the narrative, and is often caused by a blood brother, a trusted friend or a kinsman. Conversely, the adventure tales are closer to folklore and continental *romance* and are characterised by an adventurous and comic mode. The hero usually undertakes a quest, or a series of quests, which allow him to prove himself superior to the rest of the cast. The bonds of kinship and friendship are properly observed, and the enemies or traitors are outsiders. In addition, they usually have a happy ending.

Áns saga bogsveigis (Saga of Án the Archer, henceforth *Áns saga*) falls within the latter group, the ‘adventure tales’. It is a late medieval *foraldarsaga* relating the deeds of Án *bogsveigir* (‘Bow-bender/Archer’) Bjarnarson (son of Björn) from Hrafnista (Ramsta), an island off the coast of central Norway. This saga constitutes an interesting case study from the perspective of translation, especially due to its complex literary tradition and manuscript transmission, which will be now briefly outlined, and for its narrative specificities, some of which will be delineated. The discussion will also include proposals concerning appropriate translation strategies and procedures that may be adopted in such cases.

3 *Áns saga bogsveigis*: Literary Tradition and MSS Transmission

The plot of *Áns saga* develops around the conflict running between Án from Hrafnista and King Ingjaldr of Naumudalr (Namdalen, central Norway) in the period just preceding the unification of Norway by King Haraldr *hárfagri* (Fairhair) in AD 872. Thus, it is set not long before the settlement of

4 Tulinius (2002, 40). Tulinius understands ideology as “the characteristic worldview” of a society or social group, namely “the aggregate of representations, values, and hierarchies of value that condition the relationship of the individual to the world in general and society in particular”.

5 Pálsson (1985, 138). Some other scholars have followed Helga Reutschel’s (1933) tripartite subdivision of the genre into ‘heroic legends’, ‘adventurous tales’, and ‘viking sagas’ (Hermann Pálsson includes the latter ones within his ‘adventure tales’ subgroup).

Iceland. Án is first introduced as descending from illustrious people from his homeplace, but he is himself a slow-developer, a rather unpromising boy who has never put himself to the test. The chance to do it comes as soon as he travels to King Ingjaldr's court with his brother Þórir, who has been at the King's service for a while. Án himself becomes a retainer of the King; however, sensing from the start that the King is malignant, Án deliberately fails to oblige him. Conflict between them ensues and escalates, though the two never confront each other directly. Under ambiguous circumstances, Án is even declared an outlaw, despite which he is able to prosper in his life by becoming the beloved leader of a community, by marrying a rich and wise woman, and by begetting a valiant son and distinguished descendants.

Án's connection with illustrious people from Hrafnista and his irreverence towards the King has induced some scholars to include the saga within a group of thematically similar *fornaldarsögur*, the *Hrafnistumannasögur* (Sagas of Men of Hrafnista), namely *Ketils saga hængs*, *Gríms saga loðinkinna* and *Órvar Odds saga* (Saga of Ketill Salmon/Trout, Saga of Grímr Shaggy-Cheek and Saga of Arrow-Oddr, respectively). In other words, *Áns saga* has often been considered as part of that specific tradition, although such assumption finds confirmation in some manuscript contexts but not in others.⁶

Thematic and structural parallels have also been established between *Áns saga* and sagas customarily belonging to other saga genres as well, notably the *Íslendingasögur* (Sagas of Early Icelanders). These sagas were written around the same time as the *fornaldarsögur* but concern Icelandic settlers and their descendants (i.e. post-870) up to the first decades of the 11th century. Among these texts, *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* (Saga of Egill Son of Skalla-Grímr) and the *útilegumannasögur* (Outlaw-sagas, that is, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, respectively: Saga of Grettir Son of Ásmundr, Saga of Gísli Son of Súrr and Saga of Hörður and the Islet-Dwellers) have provided the strongest parallels.⁷ Further parallels have been established between *Áns saga* and *Heimskringla*, a collection of sagas about Norwegian kings

6 For example, AM 343a 4to (c. 1450-75, North of Iceland), the codex preserving the main redaction of *Áns saga*, preserves the other three *Hrafnistumannasögur* as well; whereas *Sögubók* (AM 471 4to), dating to the same period but to a different environment (North-West of Iceland), preserves the three *Hrafnistumannasögur*, but does not include the saga of Án. It has been hypothesised that *Áns saga* was deliberately excluded from that codex because the saga's allusion to an imminent political unification of Norway was incompatible with the ethos of the other three *Hrafnistumannasögur*, pleading "the aristocracy's need for room to manoeuvre towards the king", thus the need for aristocrats to become more independent (Orning 2010, 14).

7 See Righter-Gould (1978) as concerns the parallels between *Áns saga* and *Egils saga*, and Hughes (1976) as regards the parallels between *Áns saga* and the 'Outlaw-sagas'.

compiled around 1220-1230 by the renowned Icelandic poet, historian and politician Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241). A similar narrative core appears also in *Gesta Danorum*, a comprehensive work of Danish history compiled by the 12th-century author Saxo Grammaticus (see Hughes 1976). Therefore, “there are several incidents scattered in various works, the earliest extant dating from the 12th-13th century, which provide points of contact with *Áns saga*”, although they should be “considered more as ‘genetic’, that is, as belonging to the same family/tradition, rather than ‘filial’, where a direct and demonstrable relation is evident” (Hughes 1976, 201-2).

In any case, *Áns saga* seems to have been composed somewhat later, probably around 1350-1375, while the oldest and best extant codex preserving it, AM 343a 4to, dates from the following century, precisely to c. 1450-75.⁸ The codex was produced at a church-farm in Möðruvellir in Eyjafjörður (North of Iceland), where the production of texts at the time was qualitatively eclectic.⁹ Interestingly, there is also some historical evidence of a particular irreverence towards Scandinavian kings and their representatives in that area, which may have given rise to the version of the saga we know from AM 343a 4to (see Ceolin 2017, 90-2). The saga exists in about sixty paper manuscripts of later date as well, testifying to its popularity, while the ‘only serviceable’ edition was published by the Danish scholar Carl Christian Rafn in 1829-1830, who based his text on AM 343a 4to.¹⁰ Rafn’s text was then modernised and re-edited by Guðni Jónsson in 1954, and it is on Guðni’s edition that I have based my translation of the saga.

The tradition and transmission of the saga, however, are not that straightforward. There exist also two other prose versions of the story of Án, both based on manuscripts now lost. One appears in Erik Julius Björn-er’s *Nordiska Kämpa Dater* (1737), along with both a Latin and a Swedish translation of the text. The other version is preserved in four paper manu-

8 Besides containing the four *Hrafnistumannasögur*, AM 343a 4to preserves five other *fornaldarsögur*, five *riddarasögur* and one moral fable (in this order: *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns*, *Samsons saga fagra*, *Egils saga einhenda og Ásmundar berserkjabana*, *Flóres saga konungs og sona hans*, *Vilhjálmss saga sjóðs*, *Yngvars saga víðförla*, *Ketils saga hængs*, *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, *Örvar-Odds saga*, *Áns saga bogsveigis*, *Sálus saga og Nikanórs*, *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar*, *Bósa saga*, *Vilmundar saga víðutan* and *Perus saga meistara*). URL <http://handrit.is/is/manuscript/view/is/AM04-0343> (2017-12-06).

9 Sanders (2000, 47-8) has pointed out that Margrét Vigfúsdóttir, the owner of the Möðruvellir church-farm from 1446 to 1486, that is, when AM 343a is supposed to have been written, promoted literary production of all sorts, namely not only of *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur* (as evidenced by AM 343a 4to itself and by AM 579 4to), but also of *Íslendingasögur* (AM 445c II 4to and AM 162 A₇ fol, the latter being a fragment of *Egils saga*), *konungasögur* (AM 81a fol and AM 243a fol), legal and ecclesiastical treatises (*Jónsbók* (AM 132 4to) and *Teiknibókin* (AM 673a III 4to), respectively) and numerous diplomas.

10 URL <http://fasn.l.ku.dk/bibl/bibl.aspx?sid=asb&view=manuscript> (2017-12-06); Hughes 2005, 290.

scripts dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹¹ These two additional versions were both based on *rímur* (metrical romances) about the story of Án, namely *Áns rímur bogsvæigis*, which survive in three vellum manuscripts and five paper ones. The oldest and best codex preserving these *rímur* is *Kollsbók (Guelf 42.7 Aug 4to)*, an Icelandic vellum dating to 1475-1500, thus being slightly younger than the oldest codex preserving *Áns saga*, AM 343a 4to (c. 1450-75). Ólafur Halldórsson (1973, 74) has dated the composition of these *rímur* back to the early fifteenth century, while arguing that they were based on an earlier version of the saga that was more complete than the one found in AM 343a 4to. In other words, the oldest extant manuscript of *Áns saga* conveys a version of the story of Án that is supposed to be younger than the version conveyed by the oldest extant manuscript of *Áns rímur*, despite the latter manuscript was written a few decades later than the former. In any case, the prose version of the story of Án as it is preserved in *Áns saga* and the *rímur* composed around the same story are similar, especially in the wording, and there is no doubt that either the *rímur* are based on the saga or vice versa. At the same time, they are also quite dissimilar, especially in the concluding sections, where the *rímur* are often more detailed on certain aspects.¹²

4 Strategies and Procedures

The complexities surrounding the context of production and transmission of *Áns saga* that have just been described were clearly taken into consideration when translating the text. The translation process itself started with choosing an edition on which to base the translation. As previously mentioned, Guðni Jónsson's text (1954) was the final choice. Next, among the primary strategies that I considered, was the identification of a readership. In my case I imagined the readership to be heterogeneous, being constituted of both specialists and non-specialists. Therefore, on the one hand, the translation has been target-oriented, modelled on the supposed contemporary readership, while I have tried to reproduce a readable and enjoyable text. On the other hand, the translation has been source-oriented, in that I have tried to respect and closely transpose, or at least signal, the alterity of the source-text and of its late medieval Icelandic context as well. For instance, I have often employed strategies such as the 'estranging'/'foreignizing' method, rather than the 'domesticating' one,

¹¹ Namely, Lbs 2118 4to, Lbs 3636 8vo, ÍB 205 8vo and ÍB 152 8vo (see Halldórsson 1973, 57-60).

¹² Such as the viking exploits of Án's son Þórir *háleggur* ('Long-leg'). See Halldórsson 1973, 74-82 and Hughes 1976, 197, 206-7.

thus making the reader aware of the cultural and temporal distance by “sending [her/him] abroad”, rather than opting for “bringing the author back home”, as Lawrence Venuti would have it (1995, 20).

As to the procedures, namely the specific techniques used at given moments within the translation process, they have been identified mostly *ad hoc*, depending on the specific needs concerning all linguistic levels, notably the lexical and the syntactic ones. I will now briefly outline some of these procedures.

4.1 Lexicon

Concerning the lexical level, it is worth mentioning the treatment in translation of Icelandic names, including personal names, epithets and nicknames, place names and *realia*, namely those terms and concepts in a source-language that lack any straightforward equivalents in a target-language.

Personal names revealed a number of drawbacks, due to, for example, letters characterising the Old Icelandic alphabet which do not have correspondent graphs in Italian, such as <ð> and <þ>, or due to unfamiliar consonant clusters and the usage of diacritics, such as the acute accent. Concerning the acute accent itself, for example, I have tried to preserve it, while also transposing the name in question in the respective nominative singular form. For example, I have preserved the masculine name Óláfr as such, not normalising it as Olaf, as many translators have done, thus levelling both the Old Icelandic acute accents and the nominative singular masculine inflection *-r*. Where the personal names had a clear meaning, such as Björn meaning ‘Bear’ or Úlfr meaning ‘Wolf’, I have not translated them, as the actual meaning was not generally significant within the narrative.

Connected to this, are the problems arising when characters are referred to with the typical patronymics, which consist in a compound of the father’s name in the genitive form plus the suffix *-son* (‘son’) or *-dóttir* (‘daughter’). An example is Bjarnarson, where Bjarnar is the genitive form of Björn, thus meaning ‘of Björn’, and therefore Bjarnarson stands for ‘son of Björn’ (It. ‘figlio di Björn’). In principle, I decided to loosen such patronymics, notably because it is often the case, as the example above illustrates, that the name of the father becomes obscure when declined in the genitive case in order to form the patronymic in question. In other words, the declined form may be difficult to detect or infer, or even be misleading, for those who do not know Old or Modern Icelandic (Even-Zohar 1999, 211; Kennedy 2007, 39).

I have translated all epithets and nicknames, as their meaning is often significant, in that they identify and qualify specific characteristics of the person in question. For example, in the case of Björn *inn sterki*, I translated

the attribute *inn sterki* as ‘the Strong’ (It. ‘il Forte’), since not doing so would clearly represent a loss of both information and characterisation. The meaning of nicknames, however, was not always clear, as in the case of King Öundur *uppsjá*, where *uppsjá* is an obscure *hapax*. Thus, I have maintained it as such within the Italian text, while providing an explanatory footnote with the hypothesised meaning of ‘the Ruthless’ (It. ‘lo Spietato’).

Place names have been approached in various ways by translators. Some believe they should not be translated, others that they should be translated if possible, in order to give the narrative “a clearer local colour” (Even-Zohar 1999, 210-1). In practice, some other scholars have hyper-translated them, while repeating in translation part of the term in question (tautology). For example, *Vatnsdalr* (lit. ‘valley of water’), has been translated as ‘valley Vatnsdal’, thus unnecessarily repeating the component ‘valley’. In principle, I have opted for translating these terms, while often, however, reaching compromises, such as in the case of *Naumdælafylki* (lit. ‘district of the valley of the Naumr’ – Naumr being the name of a river, Nw. Namsen), which I have translated as ‘district of Naumudalr’ (It. ‘distretto del Naumudalr’). This is because the meaning of Naumudalr was in itself not important within the narrative, but it was more important that the place name, by designating a specific area, should be recognizable throughout the narrative.

As with any language, there were also terms and concepts lacking any straightforward equivalents in the target-language (*realia*), such as those referring to typical objects and institutions, or to specific traditions and motifs. In such cases, expansion may have been required, in the form of periphrases, for example, or I have maintained the name in the original form but provided a footnote for clarification. For example, I transposed the term *skáli* as such, since it designates a specific dwelling common to all the North-Atlantic area during the Viking Age, and I did the same with the term *jól*, indicating the typical Old Scandinavian thirteen-day long pagan festival tied to the winter solstice that was later substituted by the Christian Christmas. In both such cases and in others, I have also provided explanatory footnotes.

4.2 Syntax and Morpho-Syntax

Old Icelandic syntax is typically incisive, as it is characterised by the ample use of parataxis. In principle, I have tried to preserve this feature, while often adjusting the punctuation, which is nevertheless most often the result of editorial amendments, the manuscripts themselves lacking punctuation marks or preserving very few of them. At times I have opted for subordination as well, such as in the case of *Björn er bóndi nefndr. Hann bjó í Hrafnistu; hún liggir fyrir Naumudölum* (ch. 1, lit. ‘Björn is the name of a farmer. He lived on Hrafnista; she lies off the coast of Naumudalr’),

which I have translated as “Björn was the name of a farmer. He lived on Hrafnista, an island which lies off the coast of Naumudalr” (It. “Björn era il nome di un contadino. Viveva a Hrafnista, un’isola che giace al largo del Naumudalr”).

The same passage is also relevant when considering the continuous tense-switches between simple present and simple past, that are a distinctive feature of saga narrative. Various hypotheses have been made as to the significance of these switches.¹³ The lack of agreement on the matter is reflected in the many different ways in which the switches have been treated in translation. Some translators maintained the alternation, which often resulted in a strenuous read. Such an option is not even available in Italian, where there are constraints such as the *consecutio temporum* and the fact that there should be one consistent time of narration, usually the ‘remote past’ (It. ‘passato remoto’). Similarly, for example, I have rendered *en um várit bjóst at fara á konungs fund. Án biðr að fara með honum, en Þórir neitar því þverliga. En er hann fór út til skips...* (ch. 2, lit. ‘and in the spring he made ready to go to meet the King. Án asks to go with him, but Þórir flatly refuses him. But when he went out to his ship...’) in the ‘passato remoto’: “and in the spring he made ready to go to meet the King. Án asked to go with him, but Þórir flatly refused him. But when he went out to his ship...” (It. “In primavera si preparò per andare a fare visita al re. Án chiese di poter partire con lui, ma Þórir rifiutò seccamente. Tuttavia, quando uscì per andare alla nave...”).

Noteworthy is also the fact that sometimes it has been necessary to re-order the constituents of a sentence. This is notable in the many cases of discontinuous constituents, such as the verbal phrase *leggja loforð til* (grant permission to) in *hvárt er hann leggi þar nokkut loforð til eða ekki* (ch. 2, lit. ‘whether he would grant there some permission to or not’), which I have rendered as “had he granted it to him or not” (It. “che glielo avesse concesso o meno”). Connected to this is the fact that Old Icelandic, being an inflectional language, is characterised by a relatively free word order, as exemplified by the impersonal sentence *ef við góðan dreng ætti um* (ch. 7, lit. ‘if with a good man one was dealing’), where the basic word order would be *ef ætti um við góðan dreng*, lit. ‘if one was dealing with a good man’ (It., with a slightly different meaning: ‘se si fosse trattato di un uomo buono’).

¹³ According to some scholars, tense-switching served the purpose to give immediacy to the narrative, or to “maintain the stylistic impression of an orally based discourse” (Clunies Ross 2010, 27). Other scholars have maintained that it served to distinguish, respectively, the action in foreground from the action in background; that the present-tense verbs would have made the spectator participate ‘directly’ in the action, while the past would have imparted the events to people’s memories (Schmitt 2012, 21). Additionally, it has been pointed out that they may be a “carry-over from medieval Latin translations” (Kunz 1998, 77).

4.3 Style

From the point of view of stylistics, I have tried to preserve characteristic traits of Old Icelandic, such as the ample use of the passive voice and of negations. This latter trait is particularly notable in the use of litotes, figures of speech consisting of an understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by negating its opposite. For example, I have transposed *hann var þá ekki minni en Þórir, bróðir hans* as “at that age he was no smaller than Þórir, his brother” (ch. 1, It. ‘a quell’età non era più basso di suo fratello Þórir’).

Stylistically remarkable, though clearly difficult to transpose, have also been wordplay and sayings or proverbs. Concerning wordplay, in some cases it has been possible to reproduce it, but not in others. For example, in several occasions the author plays with the name of the protagonist Án, and I have sometimes been able to reproduce such wordplay in Italian. For example, in the case of *hér er mikit um ánagang* (ch. 4, lit. ‘here’s a great coming and going of Áns’) – the wordplay being between the name of Án and *umgangr* (‘coming and going’) – I have been able to recreate the effect of the source-text by combining the name Án with the Italian term ‘andirivieni’ (‘coming and going’), thus proposing ‘Ándirivieni’. Conversely, in some other cases it has not been possible to reproduce the wordplay, such as when the author plays with Án as a personal name and the preposition *án*, meaning ‘without’. For example, after one of Án’s antagonists, Ketill, has falsely declared to a farmer hosting him that he is Án the Archer, the farmer replies: *Án mættum vér hafa verit þinna skota hér* (ch. 4, lit. ‘We could have done without your shots here’, rendered by Hughes (2005) as: “Your shots have been Án-welcome to us here”), which I have rendered literally as “Avremmo potuto fare a meno dei tuoi tiri qui”, thus losing the slight play.

As to the translation of sayings or proverbs, I have opted for substituting the ones in the source-text with Italian correspondents, when available. Otherwise, I have substituted close versions of them, such as in the case of *sjón er sögu ríkari* (ch. 4, lit. ‘sight is richer than tale’), referring to the event in the story that, by simply seeing poor mutilated Ívarr one could tell what had happened to him, which I have rendered as: It. “bastava vederlo per credere...” (lit. ‘it was sufficient to see him to believe...’, from the Italian idiom ‘vedere per credere’, Eng. ‘seeing is believing’).

4.4 Metrics

The few poetic sections that are present in the narrative as *lausavísur* (lit. ‘loose verses’) have been the most challenging to translate. These are occasional single-stanza poems that enrich the prose by suggesting emotion and psychological depth, but which sometimes seem more incidental. In

the *fornaldarsögur* such verse forms are not usually as complex as they may be elsewhere. For example, in the *Íslendingasögur* they often appear in the many intricate forms of the *dróttkvætt* syllabic and alliterative metre (*dróttkvætt* meaning ‘courtly metre’). Conversely, in the *fornaldarsögur* they are usually in the more linear ‘eddic metres’, notably in the *fornyrðislag* (old story metre or epic metre). In the saga of *Án* they appear in the *málhátttr* (speech metre), because each half-line (hemistich) usually presents five syllables instead of four as in *fornyrðislag*. In any case, it has been impossible to reproduce, even remotely, the accent scheme and the alliteration patterns that are connected to such metre. Thus, I have opted for rendering the verses loosely by exploiting the possibility of using Italian loose-verse. The loss, however, has been counterbalanced by attempts to respect as far as possible the structure of the verses and of the whole stanzas, and marked stylistic aspects such as the strong rhythm and the few *kenningar*. The *kenningar* are complex figures of speech similar to metaphors, which I have tried to reproduce for the effect of imagery, while also providing explanatory footnotes.

In some occasions, respecting the structure of a given stanza has not been possible, and a reformulation of some of the verses, or parts of them, has been necessary, as in the following two cases:

Skeldi mér, sem skyldi-t,
skelkinn maðr við belki;
(ch. 4, lit. ‘Flung me, as he shouldn’t have,
a factious fellow at the partition’)

It.: “Mi lanciò sul basso muro (‘Flung me at the partition’)
un uomo beffardo, che non avrebbe dovuto (‘a factious fellow, as he
shouldn’t have’)”

Meyjar spurðu,
er mik fundu,
hvíthaddaðar:
(ch. 5, lit. ‘Maids enquired,
when they found me,
fair-haired’)

It.: “Chiesero delle fanciulle
dai capelli chiari (‘Fair-haired maids enquired’)
quando mi incontrarono (‘when they found me’)”

5 Concluding Remarks

The brief analysis offered here has emphasised that culturally and temporally distant texts, such as medieval texts, and present specific theoretical and methodological issues in translation that can be overcome, at least partly, by combining basic strategies and ad hoc procedures. In order to produce a text that is both readable and appealing to the modern reader, the target-audience and culture should be considered as an overall strategy before and during the translation process itself. Yet the specificities of the source-text in question should not be levelled to fulfil this aim. On the contrary, they should be preserved as far as possible, or at least signalled, for example with explicative footnotes. Therefore, the translator of a medieval text should strike a good balance between the ‘acceptability’ of the target-text on the part of the target-culture and the ‘adequacy’ in preserving the cultural and historical specificities, thus the alterity, of the source-text (Toury 1995, 56-7). Clearly, no translation is ever fully adequate or acceptable, while every translation is ultimately a wager – especially the translation of particularly ‘distant’ texts – involving bending and re-bending words to resemble the original shape of the story.

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