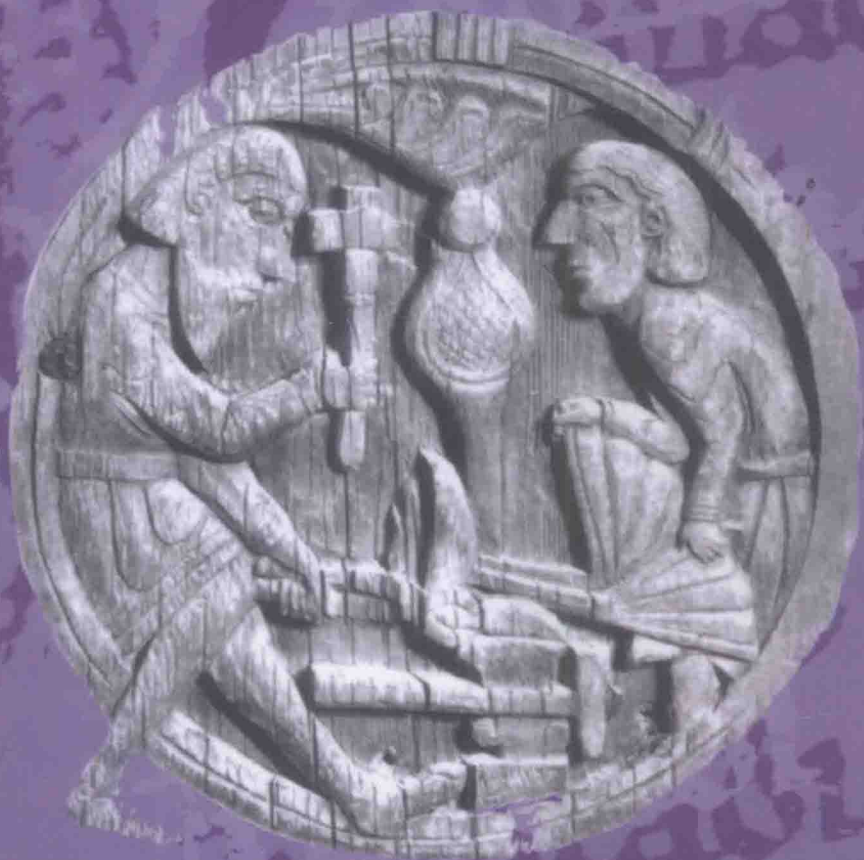


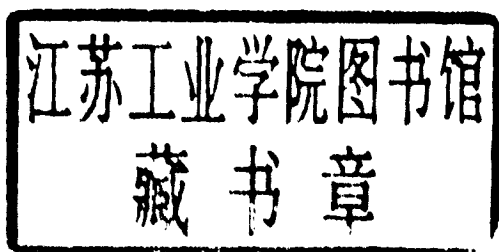
OLD ICELANDIC LITERATURE AND SOCIETY



Edited by
MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS

Old Icelandic Literature and Society

EDITED BY
MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521110259

© Cambridge University Press 2000

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2000
This digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Old Icelandic literature and society / edited by Margaret Clunies Ross.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in medieval literature, 42)

Includes index.

ISBN 0 521 63112 2 (hardback)

1. Old Norse literature – History and criticism. 2. Iceland – Civilization. I. Clunies Ross Margaret.

II. Series.

PT7113.053 2000

839'.609–dc21 00-05980 CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-63112-9 hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-11025-9 paperback

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE 42

Old Icelandic Literature and Society

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

General editor

Alastair Minnis, *University of York*

Editorial board

Patrick Boyde, *University of Cambridge*

John Burrow, *University of Bristol*

Rita Copeland, *University of Pennsylvania*

Alan Deyermond, *University of London*

Peter Dronke, *University of Cambridge*

Simon Gaunt, *King's College, London*

Nigel Palmer, *University of Oxford*

Winthrop Wetherbee, *Cornell University*

This series of critical books seeks to cover the whole area of literature written in the major medieval languages – the main European vernaculars, and medieval Latin and Greek – during the period c. 1100–1500. Its chief aim is to publish and stimulate fresh scholarship and criticism on medieval literature, special emphasis being placed on understanding major works of poetry, prose, and drama in relation to the contemporary culture and learning which fostered them.

Recent titles in the series

- 32 Patricia E. Grieve *'Floire and Blancheflor' and the European Romance* o 521 43152 x
- 33 Huw Pryce (ed.) *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies* o 521 57039 5
- 34 Mary Carruthers *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* o 521 58232 6
- 35 Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance: The Verse Tradition from Chrétien to Froissart* o 521 41153 x
- 36 Siân Echard *Arthurian Narrative in the Latin Tradition* o 521 62126 7
- 37 Fiona Somerset *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England* o 521 62154 2
- 38 Florence Percival *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women* o 521 41655 8
- 39 Christopher Cannon *The Making of Chaucer's English: A Study of Words* o 521 59274 7
- 40 Rosalind Brown-Grant *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* o 521 64194 2
- 41 Richard Newhauser *The Early History of Greed: The Sin of Avarice in Early Medieval Thought and Literature* o 521 38522 9
- 42 Margaret Clunies Ross *Old Icelandic Literature and Society* o 521 63112 2

A complete list of titles in the series can be found at the end of the volume.

Contributors

GERALDINE BARNES teaches in the Department of English at the University of Sydney. She is the author of *Counsel and Strategy in Middle English Romance* (1993) and of a number of articles on the development of medieval romance in England, France and Scandinavia. She recently completed an extended study of the 'Vínland sagas' and their reception in nineteenth- and twentieth-century England and America and is currently engaged in an investigation of medieval crime fiction.

MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS is McCaughey Professor of English Language and Early English Literature and Director of the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Sydney. She is the author of numerous articles and book chapters on Old Icelandic literature, particularly poetry and myth, and of four books in this field: *Skáldskaparmál: Snorri Sturluson's ars poetica and Medieval Theories of Language* (1987); a two-volume study of Old Norse myth, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society* (1994 and 1998) and *The Norse Muse in Britain, 1750–1820* (1998). She is at present engaged (with others) in re-editing the corpus of Old Norse skaldic poetry, and in research on the contribution of Thomas Percy to Old Norse studies.

MARGARET CORMACK is Assistant Professor at the College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina. Her book, *The Saints in Iceland: their Veneration from the Conversion to 1400* (1994), is a survey of the cult of saints in Iceland during the period indicated. She is continuing work on this project, which will eventually extend to the Reformation. She

List of contributors

has published a number of articles on women in the Icelandic saints' lives, as well as a partial translation of the saga of Jón of Hólar. Future work includes further study of women as depicted in literature, and annotated translations of the saga of Jón of Hólar and the saga of Árni Þorláksson.

KARI ELLEN GADE is Professor of Germanic Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, and the author of *The Structure of Old Norse dróttkvætt Poetry* (1995). She has recently published, with Theodore M. Andersson, *Morkinskinna: the Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030–1157)*. Her research interests are in Old Norse language, literature, culture and history, together with Germanic philology and metrics.

JÜRGEN GLAUSER is Professor of Scandinavian Studies at the Universities of Basel and Zürich. Among his recent publications are *Isländische Märchensagas* (1998, edited with Gert Kreutzer) and *Verhandlungen mit dem New Historicism. Das Text-Kontext-Problem in der Literaturwissenschaft* (1999, edited with Annegret Heitmann). His research interests include late medieval and early modern Scandinavian literature, especially the history of popular literature, transmission and textuality.

IAN KIRBY was the first professor of English at the University of Iceland, and he is currently Head of the English Department and Professor of Medieval English at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland. His principal publications are *Biblical Quotation in Old Icelandic–Norwegian Religious Literature*, 2 vols. (1976–80), and *Bible Translation in Old Norse* (1986). In the field of Norse studies his current research relates to the generally accepted view that none of the North American runic inscriptions are genuinely medieval.

PREBEN MEULENGRACHT SØRENSEN was, until recently, Professor of Old Norse Literature at the University of Oslo, after having held previous appointments at the University of Aarhus. He is the author of many works on Old Icelandic literature, including *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society* (1983, first published in Danish in 1980), *Saga and Society* (1993, first published in Danish in 1977), and *Fortælling og ære: Studier i islændingesagaerne* (1993).

List of contributors

GUÐRÚN NORDAL is a specialist in Medieval Icelandic and Editor at the Stofnun Árna Magnússonar in Reykjavík, Iceland. She holds a D. Phil. from the University of Oxford and was the Halldór Laxness Lecturer at University College London from 1990 to 1993. Her first book, *Ethics and Action in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (1998), has recently appeared and she has another manuscript, *Tools of Literacy: the Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the 12th and 13th Centuries*, in press.

JUDY QUINN is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Sydney and will shortly take up a Lectureship in Anglo-Saxon Norse and Celtic at the University of Cambridge. She has translated *Eyrbyggja saga* into English and has published articles on Old Icelandic poetics and the female prophetic voice in medieval Scandinavian verse and sagas. Her current project is an electronic edition of the eddic poem *Völuspá*.

GÍSLI SIGURÐSSON studied at the University of Iceland, University College, Dublin, and the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, at the last-named of which he served as a Visiting Associate Professor in 1988. Since 1990 he has been a research lecturer in the Folklore Department of the Árni Magnússon Institute, Iceland, and now teaches in the Department of Folklore at the University of Iceland. His research interests include American-Icelandic, and Icelandic folklore in Iceland and Canada. He has published books on the Gaelic influence in Iceland (1988) and the poetry of the Elder Edda (1998), in addition to a variety of articles.

STEPHEN TRANTER studied Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at the University of Cambridge and subsequently spent eight years in secondary school-teaching in England before taking his Ph.D. in North Germanic Philology and his Habilitation in Norse and Celtic at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau. He is now Professor of Medieval English language and literature at the Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena. He has published *Sturlunga Saga: the Role of the Creative Compiler* (1987) and *Clavis Metrica: Háttatal, Háttalykill and the Irish Metrical Tracts* (1997). His main research interest is the history and development of metrical forms.

List of contributors

TORFI H. TULINIUS is an Associate Professor of French Literature at the University of Iceland. He publishes on French contemporary literature and Icelandic medieval literature. His main interest is in the nature and history of novelistic discourse, and his major publication, *La 'Matière du Nord': Sagas légendaires et fiction dans l'Islande médiévale* (1995), is soon to be published in English.

DIANA WHALEY studied in Durham, Reykjavík and Oxford, and moved to the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in 1978, where she now holds a personal Readership in Medieval Studies, teaching medieval English and Icelandic language and literature and researching in Old Icelandic literature and English place-names. She was President of the Viking Society for Northern Research in 1996–97. She has published articles and books on a wide range of medieval subjects, including *Heimskringla: an Introduction* (1991) and *The Poetry of Arnórr jarlaskáld* (1998).

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

- 1 Robin Kirkpatrick *Dante's Inferno: Difficulty and Dead Poetry*
o 521 30757 o
- 2 Jeremy Tambling *Dante and Difference: Writing in the 'Commedia'*
o 521 34242 o
- 3 Simon Gaunt *Troubadours and Irony* o 521 35439 o
- 4 Wendy Scase *'Piers Plowman' and the New Anticlericalism* o 521 36017 x
- 5 Joseph Duggan *The 'Cantar De Mio Cid': Poetic Creation in its Economic and Social Contexts* o 521 36194 x
- 6 Roderick Beaton *The Medieval Greek Romance* o 521 33335 o
- 7 Kathryn Kerby-Fulton *Reformist Apocalypticism and 'Piers Plowman'*
o 521 34298 8
- 8 Alison Morgan *Dante & the Medieval Other World* o 521 36069 2
- 9 Eckehard Simon (ed.) *The Theatre of Medieval Europe: New Research in Early Drama* o 521 38514 8
- 10 Mary Carruthers *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* o 521 38282 3 (HB) o 521 42930 (PB)
- 11 Rita Copeland *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* o 521 38517 2 (HB)
o 521 48365 4 (PB)
- 12 Donald Maddox *The Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes: Once and Future Fictions* o 521 39450 3
- 13 Nicholas Watson *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority*
o 521 39017 6
- 14 Steven F. Kruger *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* o 521 41069 x
- 15 Barbara Nolan *Chaucer and the Tradition of the 'Roman Antique'*
o 521 39169 5
- 16 Sylvia Huot, *The 'Romance of the Rose' and its Medieval Readers: Interpretations, Reception, Manuscript Transmission* o 521 41713 9
- 17 Carol M. Meale (ed.) *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150–1500*
o 521 40018 x
- 18 Henry Ansgar Kelly *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy from Aristotle to the Middle Ages* o 521 43184 o
- 19 Martin Irvine *The Making of Textual Culture: Grammatica and Literary Theory, 350–1100* o 521 41447 4
- 20 Larry Scanlon *Narrative, Authority and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* o 521 43210 3
- 21 Erik Kooper *Medieval Dutch Literature in its European Context*
o 521 40222 o

- 22 Steven Botterill *Dante and the Mystical Tradition: Bernard of Clairvaux in the 'Commedia'* o 521 43454 8
- 23 Peter Biller and Anne Hudson (eds.) *Heresy and Literacy, 1000–1530*
o 521 41979 4 (HB) o 521 57576 1 (PB)
- 24 Christopher Baswell *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring the 'Aeneid' from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer* o 521 46294 o
- 25 James Simpson *Sciences and Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille's 'Anticlaudianus' and John Gower's 'Confessio Amantis'* o 521 47181 8
- 26 Joyce Coleman *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* o 521 55391 1
- 27 Suzanne Reynolds *Medieval Reading: Grammar, Rhetoric and the Classical Text* o 521 47257 1
- 28 Charlotte Brewer *Editing 'Piers Plowman': The Evolution of the Text*
o 521 34250 3
- 29 Walter Haug *Vernacular Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: The German Tradition in its European Context* o 521 34197 3
- 30 Sarah Spence *Texts and the Self in the Twelfth Century* o 521 57279 7
- 31 Edwin Craun *Lies, Slander and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature: Pastoral Rhetoric and the Deviant Speaker* o 521 49690 x
- 32 Patricia E. Grieve *'Floire and Blancheflor' and the European Romance*
o 521 43162 x
- 33 Huw Pryce (ed.) *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies* o 521 57039 5
- 34 Mary Carruthers *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* o 521 58232 6
- 35 Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance: The Verse Tradition from Chrétien to Froissart* o 521 41153 x
- 36 Siân Echard *Arthurian Narrative in the Latin Tradition* o 521 62126 7
- 37 Fiona Somerset *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England* o 521 62154 2
- 38 Florence Percival *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women* o 521 41655 8
- 39 Christopher Cannon *The Making of Chaucer's English: A Study of Words*
o 521 59274 7
- 40 Rosalind Brown-Grant *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* o 521 64194 2
- 41 Richard Newhauser *The Early History of Greed: The Sin of Avarice in Early Medieval Thought and Literature* o 521 38522 9
- 42 Margaret Clunies Ross *Old Icelandic Literature and Society* o 521 63112 2

Contents

	<i>List of contributors</i>	<i>page</i> ix
	Introduction MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS	I
I	Social institutions and belief systems of medieval Iceland (c. 870–1400) and their relations to literary production PREBEN MEULENGRACHT SØRENSEN <i>translated by Margaret Clunies Ross</i>	8
2	From orality to literacy in medieval Iceland JUDY QUINN	30
3	Poetry and its changing importance in medieval Icelandic culture KARI ELLEN GADE	61
4	Óláfr Þórðarson hvítaskáld and oral poetry in the west of Iceland c. 1250: the evidence of references to poetry in <i>The Third Grammatical Treatise</i> GÍSLI SIGURÐSSON	96
5	The conservation and reinterpretation of myth in medieval Icelandic writings MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS	116
6	Medieval Icelandic <i>artes poeticae</i> STEPHEN TRANTER	140

Contents

7	A useful past: historical writing in medieval Iceland	161
	DIANA WHALEY	
8	Sagas of Icelanders (<i>Íslendinga sögur</i>) and <i>þattir</i> as the literary representation of a new social space	203
	JÜRGEN GLAUSER	
	<i>translated by John Clifton-Everest</i>	
9	The contemporary sagas and their social context	221
	GUÐRÚN NORDAL	
10	The <i>Matter of the North</i> : fiction and uncertain identities in thirteenth-century Iceland	242
	TORFI H. TULINIUS	
11	Romance in Iceland	266
	GERALDINE BARNES	
12	The Bible and biblical interpretation in medieval Iceland	287
	IAN KIRBY	
13	Sagas of saints	302
	MARGARET CORMACK	
	<i>Index</i>	326

Introduction

MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS

The aim of this collection of essays is to explore the complex relationship between the development of a new society and a new polity on the island of Iceland during the Middle Ages, and the literature, in the broadest sense, that Icelanders produced in that period. The period we consider stretches from about 870, the beginning of the settlement of Iceland, to about 1400. We ask why and how a materially poor, remote part of medieval European society was able to produce such a rich and diverse literature. We pose these questions, which others have posed before us, within a predominantly social framework, and come up with some new ways of understanding Old Icelandic literature that allow us to make sense of what was, by modern standards, a truly extraordinary suite of explicatory and propagandist mechanisms developed by a small group of people to justify and explain themselves to themselves and to others, in an age well before the existence of such communicative tools as newspapers, mass media and international telecommunications.

We examine what is likely to have motivated Icelanders to preserve and modify the oral traditions that they brought with them when they emigrated in the late ninth century from mainland Scandinavia, especially Norway, and from the Viking colonies in and around the British Isles. We analyse what led to their becoming recognized specialists in poetry, myth and historiography, both of their own society and of others', especially those of Norway and the rest of Scandinavia. We investigate the new literary forms they developed within which to express their perceptions of themselves as members of their own society and in their relationship to the wider world, a relationship that was

contemporary but also extended back through time to include both traditional and Christian history. The new literary genres the Icelanders developed included the various kinds of the *saga* – a new written form with oral roots, as its name suggests – and one that incorporates Norse poetic traditions within a prose base to create a prosimetric medium able to express that combination of the traditional and the exotic, the oral and the written, and the pagan and the Christian, that forged such a distinctive and copious medieval vernacular literature in Iceland.

Although not all contributors to this volume see eye to eye on every point, there is a remarkable congruence about their main conclusions, and many of their major themes overlap, even when they are writing about different literary genres. The book as a whole provides strong testimony of the power of literature in medieval Iceland to affect social life, to alter social and individual consciousness, to promote a national image for a diversity of reasons, and to advance the specific, personal interests of individuals and family groups both inside and outside the country. Equally, and in complex ways, the newly developed Icelandic society itself placed pressure on its component parts to explain and rationalize the past in textual form: to account for the process of emigration and settlement; to justify the establishment of an egalitarian society – at least to begin with – at a time when Europe was ruled by kings and aristocrats, to interpret a pagan society's conversion to Christianity about the year 1000, and, finally, to textualize the loss of independence from outside political domination by writing the narrative of Iceland's capitulation to Norway in 1262–64 as a history whose finer details were determined by rival Icelandic factions acting out their own agendas – though manipulated from Norway – as recorded in Icelandic, and not Norwegian, sagas.

It is now easier to understand the nature of the symbiotic relationship between the distinctive society of medieval Icelandic and the unique character of Old Icelandic literature since the bubble of romantic nationalism has been burst in the later twentieth century. Not only in Iceland itself but also in Europe and other Western intellectual traditions since the beginnings of the rediscovery of medieval Scandinavian culture in the seventeenth century, Old Icelandic literature has been evaluated against a set of changing ideals inspired by modern nationalisms so that it has been difficult to understand it in the context

Introduction

of the society for which it was originally created. The various contributors to the present volume explore contemporary social and intellectual pressures – to the extent that they can be rediscovered – upon medieval Icelandic authors and compilers to produce texts of particular kinds and create new textual genres. They assess the impact of the new textual world of Christian-Latin writings upon medieval Icelandic literary production and show how the vernacular tradition responded to the expanded horizons of Christian culture. They also chart some of the ways in which new literary forms were put to the use of the Church in medieval Iceland.

Many of the chapters in the book accord a significantly greater importance than has been the custom in Old Icelandic studies to the fourteenth century as an age of textual production, in which a majority of the extant medieval manuscript compilations were commissioned by local magnates and religious houses seeking to consolidate their status and power bases through the patronage of literature. From being regarded as an age of literary decadence after the fall of the Icelandic free state, the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are becoming recognized as a period when Iceland's textual history was reshaped and as an age in which new literary modes, that also had their roots in the past, took off and flourished. The literature of fantasy and romance, in the form of *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*, can now be appreciated as appropriate socio-political textual vehicles for late medieval Icelanders rather than as the decadent products of a frustrated society deprived of political independence and sapped of pride in a literary tradition in which realism was always the dominant and superior literary mode.

The thirteen chapters in this volume have been arranged in two broad groupings, introduced by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen's overview of the nature of medieval Icelandic society and its social, political and legal institutions in relation to its literary production, which intersects at some point with every other chapter, though with some more than with others. It offers a succinct and incisive summary of the subject of this book and can be read initially and returned to with profit after having read other, more specialized chapters.

The first grouping of chapters, 2–6, focusses on one of the most important and distinctive aspects of medieval Icelandic literary culture, poetry, though these chapters also deal with a variety of textual

traditions, for which poetry was often a medium. There is no doubt that Old Norse poetry was, in pre-literate times, extremely highly developed as an elite, courtly art, especially in royal and aristocratic circles in ninth- and tenth-century Norway. Poets were greatly esteemed and poetry was the vehicle for a good deal of traditional culture, excepting the law and genealogical information of various kinds.

The first grouping of chapters begins with Judy Quinn's overview of the likely character of early Norse oral literature and her assessment of the changes that were involved in transforming that oral culture to the literate textual traditions that have survived to us from medieval Iceland (chapter 2). We then continue with Kari Gade's chapter on poetry, which begins by describing the two major kinds of Old Norse poetry (chapter 3), eddic and skaldic, and their traditional social roles before the development of written texts. Her chapter then traces the developments of skaldic verse in the medieval period and the various ways in which literate writers, particularly historians, used skaldic verse in their texts, and, in some cases, in their lives. Gísli Sigurðsson (chapter 4) next puts a number of the insights offered by Gade's chapter to the test of practical application, with his prosopographical analysis of the knowledge of a single, mid-thirteenth-century Icelandic poet and scholar, Óláfr Þórðarson, as revealed through the poetic quotations in his *Third Grammatical Treatise*. This chapter moves us from poetic practice to poetic and mythological theory.

My own chapter on the conservation and interpretation of pre-Christian myth follows closely on the poetry chapters, for poetry was the traditional vehicle for myth. However, the latter part of chapter 5 addresses the question of the conditions under which Christian Icelanders of the thirteenth century were able to recuperate and assimilate the corpus of Norse myth and it concludes with an appraisal of the mythological dimension of the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson (c. 1225). Snorri's *Edda* is a unique work, incorporating both mythology and poetics. Chapter 6 contains Stephen Tranter's evaluation of a group of learned vernacular treatises on Norse poetics, including parts of Snorri's *Edda*, which assert the high status of Old Norse poetry by claiming indigenous poetics as of equal sophistication to classical poetic and rhetorical traditions.

The second grouping, of chapters, 7–13, is united by its focus upon