

EIRIK THE RED AND OTHER ICELANDIC SAGAS



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Eirik the Red
and other
Icelandic Sagas



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GWYN JONES

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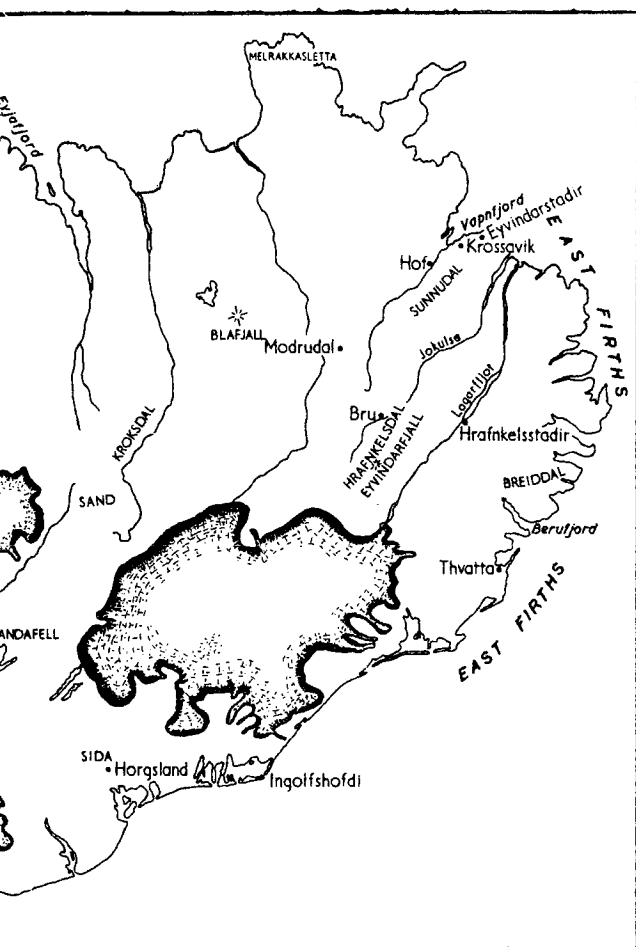
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INTRODUCTION

THE word *saga* means 'a saw', 'something said', something recorded in words, and hence by easy extension a prose story or narrative. Specifically it is the term used to describe, or rather distinguish, the prose narratives of medieval Iceland. These were of many kinds, but closest to our present purpose are the *Íslendingasögur* or Sagas of Icelanders, which relate the lives and feuds of individuals and families during the so-called Saga Age, A.D. 930–1030. They were first written down during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The Family Sagas, as they are also called, are the very heart-strand of the native literature of medieval Iceland; they are also part of the heroic literature of the Germanic peoples. 'Þú ert Grettir, þjóðin mín !' cries the poet: 'You are Grettir, O my people!'—and no people has ever more closely identified itself with, or owed more to, its written records than the Icelanders; yet the tales that tell of the star-crossed outlaws Grettir and Gisli, of Gunnar of Hlidarendi and Burnt-Njal, and the men and women of Laxardal, stand ranked in their prose kind alongside *Beowulf* and *Maldon*, the story of the Nibelungs, Waltharius, and the Eddic lays of Helgi and Sigrun. This twofold significance, native and Germanic, reinforcing their high literary merit and strong human interest, has made the Sagas of Icelanders a priceless legacy of medieval European literature.

Iceland was discovered by the continental Norsemen about the year 860, and permanent settlement began in earnest with Ingolf Arnarson at Reykjavik

some fourteen years later. The first settlers found a few Irish priests at Papey in the south-east, but otherwise inherited a land so empty and remote that, as *Egils Saga* tells us, 'all living creatures were then at their ease in the hunting-grounds, for men were unknown to them'. By 930 the coastal fringe and habitable valleys (together hardly one-sixth of this formidable fire- and ice-tormented island) were filled with chieftains from western Norway, in flight from the conquering Harald Fairhair,¹ and with men of Norse or mixed Norse and Celtic blood from earlier Norse settlements in Ireland and the Western Isles. The precise degree of Celtic influence upon the subsequent course of Icelandic literature has yet to be defined; but the quality of the settlers was demonstrably high, and among them was a notable percentage of well-born lordly men, restless of constraint, vigorous, and self-reliant, the inheritors, sustainers, and transmitters of a strong and distinctive culture. No country was ever happier in its founding families.

Limitations were at once imposed upon that culture. The visual arts had flourished in both Ireland and Scandinavia, but in Iceland there was no stone to hew, no wood to carve, no metal to mould; architecture and illumination were in the nature of things beyond their reach; and there is little evidence that they were a musical people. Their artistic expression

¹ Harald's long reign covered roughly the last quarter of the ninth century and the first third of the tenth, and thus coincided with the *Landnámatal*, or Period of Settlement. He was the first to subjugate the petty kings and lordlings of Norway and make the kingdom one. His victories in Norway, especially that at Hafrsfjord (c. 885), and his later punitive expedition to the Western Isles were thought by the saga-writers and historians to be the main cause of the colonization of Iceland.

must be in words, and by a singular stroke of fortune many of these words could be preserved. The long dark winters provided all the time in the world, the need to kill off most of their cattle ensured a large supply of week-old calves' skins for vellum, and the coming of Christianity in the year 1000 provided a practicable alphabet and a conventional format. Beginning on the estates of the wealthy chieftains and bishops, and in the monasteries south and north, but spreading later among the farmers over the whole island, transcription took place on an unprecedented scale. There still exist some 700 Icelandic manuscripts or fragments of manuscript on vellum, and these, in Sigurður Nordal's words, are 'like the poor wreckage from a proud fleet', which on a cautious estimate must have been ten times as numerous.

The substance of some of them is known to all. There are those precious repositories which contain the Eddic poems (for the mere fact of migration seems to have made the Icelanders jealous guardians of Scandinavian heroic and mythological poetry); there are the undisputed works of Snorri Sturluson, the prose Edda, and *Heimskringla* or 'The Lives of the Kings of Norway'; there are the family sagas and *þættir* or short interpolated stories, roughly 120 of them, with all the skaldic verses they preserve; and there are the *Fornaldarsögur*, or tales of times and heroes past, of which *Völsunga Saga* is the most famous exemplar. Less familiar, but still blessed with English readers, are such foundations of Icelandic history as *Landnámabók*, the 'Book of the Settlements'; the *Libellus Islandorum* of Ari the Learned, 'the Father of Icelandic history' and the first man, according to Snorri, to write scholarly

works in his native Icelandic; the Bishops' Sagas, and that dramatic sequence of twelfth- and thirteenth-century history whose title is *Sturlunga Saga*. But there is an immense literature besides, much of it hardly to be discerned in the shadow of these works of native, national impulse. The Icelanders were earnest translators and adaptors of foreign works. They rendered into their own tongue histories from Sallust to Geoffrey of Monmouth; there exist voluminous collections of story and lore concerning Our Lady, the Saints (including Thomas à Becket), and the Apostles; there is a full homiletic literature in Icelandic; and the treasures of southern Romance were ransacked for 'sagas' of Gawain and Owain, Flores and Blanchiflor. The general impression is one of intense and unending activity, a broad, strong river of words—creative, informative, derivative—flowing from eager and acquisitive minds to the haven of the vellums.

The sagas, then, are written literature. For various reasons the point is worth emphasizing. Conditions in medieval Iceland, it is true, were remarkably favourable for the development of story-telling and oral tradition, and we hear a good deal about the practice of reciting stories before kings abroad and at entertainments, marriages, and assemblies at home. But the sagas, as we have them, are written. It is certain that oral tales, oral tradition, form no inconsiderable part of the raw material of the saga-writers; but it is no longer possible to regard the Icelandic saga as the mere transcription of an oral tale or tales. In Björn M. Ólsen's famous and decisive words: 'The more closely we read our sagas and conduct research into them, the clearer it becomes that they are works of art, that an artist's

quill inscribed them on vellum, and that behind him was no unified oral tradition enshrining a completely shaped saga, but only a mass of separate oral tales which the author must bring together, and from which he selected the material to make his integrated whole.' Further, we grow increasingly aware of the importance of written sources, both native and foreign, historical, legendary, homiletic, and exemplary, for the sagas. Thus the ultimate source of information about unipeds in *Eirik the Red* is as remote as Isidore of Seville, and Thorstein's dream in *Gunnlaug Wormtongue* and the episode in *The Vapnfjford Men* whereby Spike-Helgi wins his nickname both derive from *Trójumanna Saga*, the Icelandic Tale of Troy. On the other hand, considerable portions of some sagas are in exact accord with *Landnámabók* and Ari's *Libellus Islandorum*, and can often be shown to have been based on these sure historical foundations.

The third main source of material for the saga-writers consisted of poems and verses, whose highly disciplined form in general kept them from corruption. Often a single verse meant an anecdote or story, and in *Gunnlaug Wormtongue* a succession of verses means a saga. But we must remember here too that the saga-writer aimed to master as well as use his sources, and he would be an innocent reader who assumed that every verse in every saga was authentic and of the tenth century. Thus the dream-verses of *Gunnlaug Wormtongue*, whoever composed them, were not composed by Gunnlaug and Hrafn, who at the time were dead; and in his prose our author is silent about such apparently important verse-matter as that Thorstein married Helga to Hrafn for his money's sake.

It follows that the sagas cannot be regarded as strict historical documents. At times their material is historical, precisely and exactly; more often it is a reworking of history (if we allow that to include both oral and written sources), with an eye at once to entertainment and instruction; at times it is a more or less complete departure from history as we find it recorded in reliable sources. There are, of course, obvious non-historical sagas, fictitious sagas, *lygisögur*, which need not be taken into account at all here. One of the most striking features of recent saga scholarship has been the dispassionate assessment of their historicity; many cherished beliefs have been ruthlessly overthrown, and many a fond prejudice painfully discarded. Thus, *Hrafnkel the Priest of Frey*, long celebrated as a record of fact, has been shown to be quite unhistorical—to be, in fact, a brilliantly realistic novella, the work of a creative writer. *Hen-Thorir* now appears a work in which the author has allowed himself both historical freedom and geographical licence. *Gunnlaug Wormtongue* is an elaborate and romantic reworking of an old story, and its author has clearly been much influenced by southern chivalric and courtly patterns of behaviour. In brief, we no longer assume the truth of a saga. Rather we must ask ourselves the question: Is this history, though freely and perhaps not impartially presented, or is it a work of the imagination based upon oral and written sources? We get one kind of answer for the sagas of *Hrafnkel* and *Gunnlaug*, quite another for that of *Eirik the Red*. For there, the more hostilely the records are sifted and probed, the more securely the voyages of *Eirik*, *Leif*, and *Karlsefni* are seen to belong to European and American history. And with each answer nothing of lasting value is lost.

The sagas, we have said, are part of the heroic literature of Germania. They are the prose (and sometimes homespun) counterparts of Germanic heroic poetry. This is because the Icelandic conception of character and action was heroic. The men and women of the sagas had a comparatively uncomplicated view of human destiny, and of the part they were called upon to play in face of it. They had, it is not too much to say, an aesthetic appreciation of conduct. There was a right way to act: the consequences might be dreadful, hateful; but the conduct was more important than its consequences. In *Burnt-Njal's Saga* Flosi burns Njal and his sons (and incidentally an old woman and child) alive, not because he wants to; he loathes the task, but fate has put him in a position where it is the only thing he can do. So he does it. In part, this is the familiar tragic dilemma of the Germanic hero: he has a choice not between right and wrong, but between wrongs, and cannot renegue. In part, it is a saga reading of character and destiny: to see one's fate and embrace it, with this curious aesthetic appreciation of what one is doing—it was this that made one a saga personage, a person worthy to be told about. The principal characters of *The Vapnþjford Men* carry out their deadly manœuvres like partners in a ballet: that arrogant, unhappy, and hell-bent Brodd-Helgi slaughtered like the doomed ox he was by the unforgiving, supple, and far-sighted Geitir; then Bjarni, for all his noble instincts (amply revealed at the end of the saga and in *Thorstein Staff-Struck*), brought inexorably, almost like a sleep-walker, to his bitter vengeance; and Geitir's son Thorkel stalking and snaring his prey in turn. Even Skald-Hrafn's betrayal of Gunnlaug when he brought him

water to drink was well done, because it was what he had to do. We know the name of Bjarni Grimolfsson not so much because he sailed to America as because he gave up his place in a boat to a man more concerned to live than he. Certain death was the price of his gesture, but the name of the survivor was not worth remembrance. He was merely the occasion of Bjarni's moment of destiny. Death, it is true, was not to be sought, but it was not to be avoided either, if by avoidance a man lessened his own stature. For that reason, and not for false pride or folly, Eyvind Bjarnason would not ride away to safety from the pursuing Hrafnkel. Hrafnkel, an altogether tougher exponent of the heroic ideal, could bide his time because he knew his time would come. He knows both himself and the old proverb: 'A slave takes vengeance at once, a coward never.' The Saga Age in Iceland was a last flowering of the Germanic Heroic Age; it was wedded to the blood-feud, and the sagas mirror it in every detail. That is why, for all their realism and sobriety, the family sagas are heroic literature.

The sagas of the present volume have been chosen for their excellence and variety from among the shorter Icelandic sagas. There is a general critical agreement that *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða* stands first among these, by virtue of its construction, style, narrative strength, characterization, and persuasive realism. Not that it has ever rivalled *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* in the affection or number of its foreign readers; all the world loves a lover—especially a foredoomed one—and during the nineteenth century at least the classical virtues were less admired than the romantic. *Hænsna-Póris Saga* is an admirable example of one kind of historical fiction, in

which everything leads to or follows from one central incident, the burning of Blund-Ketil (though according to Ari the Learned it was not Blund-Ketil but his son Thorkel who was burned to death); while *Vapnfirðinga Saga* supplies in reasonably short space an example of a saga covering a family feud through two generations. *Þorsteins Þáttr Stangarhöggs* is an admirable little tale in itself, homely and vivid, and skilful in its use of native and knightly convention; it is also a sequel or tailpiece to *Vapnfirðinga Saga*. *Eiríks Saga Rauða* (sometimes called *Þorfinns Saga Karlsefnis*) with its account of the Greenland and American voyages, and such extras as the Little Sibyl, has a most eloquent claim on our attention. *Þiðranda Þáttr Siðu-Hallssonar* serves to represent the many legends of the early Church; and *Auðunar Þáttr Vestfirzka*, so seeming-simple, is the best of all Icelandic *þættir* and one of the most flawless short stories ever written. Finally, *Hrólfs Saga Kraka*, which probably approximates closer to popular notions of a saga than any family saga can hope to do, has been translated as representative of the heroic sagas, the Sagas of Times Past, a genre neglected not so much by choice as for lack of opportunity by the English reader. It is deservedly among the best-esteemed of its episodic, savage, and legend- and folklore-laden kind.

The history of the first Icelandic Republic, from 860 to 1264, with its literary aftermath for another seventy years, consider it how we will, is a remarkable record of human endeavour. We end in admiration and wonder that a people so small (never more than 70,000 in number during the creative centuries), inhabiting an island so stern and remote, in conditions so apparently daunting, could bring forth

from its scanty soil so rich and continuous a harvest of poetry, history, and saga. *Inopiam ingenio pensant*. Saxo's adage of seven and a half centuries ago carries less than a full freight of truth, yet what lover of Iceland and the sagas ever found himself disposed to contradict it? 'They make good their impoverishment with the imagination.' What the Normans gave to statecraft and war, their northern brothers gave to the blood-feud and literature, and their greatest victories are on the vellums.

GWYN JONES

*University College of South Wales
and Monmouthshire, Cardiff*

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

THE sagas in this volume have been newly translated in their entirety, except that I have omitted from *Thidrandi* one of the dreariest short sermons yet penned against the Devil, and from various of the Family Sagas genealogical information of neither use nor interest (it seems to me) to the general reader. I began by aiming at a consistent convention for the spelling of proper names, but the forms Authun, Bothvar, and Athils (rather than Audun, Bodvar, and Adils) seemed so established for English readers, that in their two sagas I have followed common usage. I am happy to acknowledge an obligation to two friends: my colleague Dr. Desmond Slay was generous enough to put at my disposal, in advance of its publication in the *Editiones Arnamagnæanæ*, his researches into the text and interpretation of *Hrólfs Saga Kraka*; while the scholarship of Mr. Hermann Pálsson has resolved some notorious difficulties in *Vapnfirðinga Saga* and *Eiríks Saga Rauða*. Whatever errors remain are entirely my own.

G. J.

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