

King Arthur and the Kennedy Assassination

The Allure and Absence of Truth in the Icelandic Sagas

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ABSTRACT: Scholars and readers have long been interested in the historical validity of the saga literature. This study addresses how the notion that the sagas had historical value was rationalized throughout the 20th century and goes on to explore how some late 20th-century questions about historical validity, well-known in the humanities at large but rarely asked in saga studies, might cast some light on the possibilities and impossibilities of finding historical truths in the sagas.

RÉSUMÉ: Les chercheurs et les lecteurs se sont depuis longtemps intéressés à la validité historique du genre littéraire des sagas. Cette étude traite de la façon dont la notion selon laquelle les sagas ont une valeur historique a été rationalisée tout au long du XXe siècle, puis se penche sur la façon dont certaines questions de la fin du XXe siècle sur la validité historique, bien connu dans les sciences humaines en général, mais rarement abordées dans les études des sagas, pourraient mettre en lumière les probabilités et improbabilités de découvrir des vérités historiques dans les sagas.

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Desiring Truth

In a recent survey of early medieval England and Arthurian legend, Guy Halsall gave short shrift to those who wish to believe in a “real” King Arthur, stating that “our written evidence is absolutely incapable of proving that Arthur existed, and certainly of telling us anything reliable about him,” although he was careful to add that “its faults do not prove that he did not exist” (Halsall 86). The legends of King Arthur can be studied as such, but do not yield any proof that this figure existed as he is depicted in the legends. Contemporary sources provide three historical Arthurs but offer no indications that these are the basis of the Arthur of legend. The warlord Arthur first appears as a somewhat nebulous figure in 9th- and 10th-century sources and the explosion of Arthurian legend only begins with Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* in the 12th century. Thus, although King Arthur has been a celebrated cultural hero for centuries, there is no “historical” King Arthur behind the legends and he cannot be resurrected from textual sources.

Halsall’s study offers some revealing examples of a kind of modern pseudo-history fueled by the desperation to find the truth behind the legend (Halsall 137–54). The *horror vacui* generated by “dark ages” of history where no reliable contemporary sources can provide us with comfortable truths is clearly not significantly in retreat, and is often met with scholarly invention by both amateurs and scholars alike. Indeed, the King Arthur situation, wherein zealous scholars try to satisfy this need for “the truth behind the legend” by distilling “facts” from dubious and much younger sources, is far from unique. In this study, I will examine a similar aspect of certain 20th-century scholarly attitudes towards the Old Icelandic sagas of the Late Middle Ages as a much-needed source of “factual information” in many a general history, handbook, and encyclopedia.¹ In the past these sagas also served as sources of information about the Germanic and Scandinavian past (500–800) as well, although the information that Old Norse textual sources from the late Middle Ages provide about Attila the Hun and Rollo was sometimes regarded as fabulous or legendary as early as the late 19th century.²

However, as sources for the 9th and 10th centuries, the sagas have continued to be regarded as having historical value. The primary aim of the present study is to examine how this notion was rationalized throughout the 20th century and to explore if some late 20th-century questions about historical validity, well-known in the humanities at large but rarely asked in saga studies, might cast some light on the possibilities and impossibilities of finding historical truths in the sagas.³

Fighting the Long Defeat

Discovered by the humanist scholars of the 17th century and attracting great interest from the learned, leading to the great “manuscript war” between Denmark and Sweden and the first publications of sagas as “sources” for ancient Scandinavian history, kings’ sagas and sagas of Icelanders were treated as factual sources well into the 20th century, although skepticism increased during the empirical 19th century.⁴ It may be said to have culminated in the critical survey of the use of sagas as sources for the political history of Scandinavia in the late 10th and early 11th century by the Swedish historians and brothers Lauritz Weibull (1911) and Curt Weibull (1915), so critical in their respective approaches that each man sternly included the word “critical” in his title. The Weibull brothers’ criticism clearly called for a dramatic new re-evaluation of the sagas as historical sources.

Some scholars, including Finnur Jónsson (1912), continued to insist that the sagas could still be used as factual sources, pointing to the skaldic poetry that appears within the sagas as contemporary and thus more likely to provide accurate factual information than the sagas themselves.⁵ To this day some scholars and others involved with the presentation of history, particularly in Iceland, will insist that, though not the best possible sources, the sagas can still be mined for factual information about the 9th and 10th centuries. In Iceland, for example, the legendary 9th-century settler Ingólfr Arnarson is often still spoken of as a “real” and “historical” figure,⁶ even though the formal characteristics of the 13th-century version of his legend that have much in common with other foundation myths were long ago identified by Sørensen.

Other historians clearly grew uneasy about the purported source value of the sagas and felt it necessary to rise to the challenge and adapt their approach to befit a more critical era. One of the first into the breach was the Norwegian historian Halvdan Koht (1914) who urged a new focus on the kings’ sagas as authorial works from the 12th and 13th centuries and emphasized their relationship with their time of composition. Koht suggested that the sagas should be categorized based not only on their alleged source value, the foundation for the popular classification of various sagas into king’s sagas, contemporary sagas, sagas of Icelanders, legendary sagas, etc., but also based on their historical philosophy and their “partistilling” [political stance]. For Koht, this meant a classification of the kings’ sagas into groups based on their respective reflections of either aristocratic, royal, or clerical points of view. These categories may now seem slightly banal, and have indeed been followed by several saga studies in which scholars refashioned the sagas as mere propaganda pieces, wholeheartedly hostile towards certain institutions or individuals whilst favoring others. Still, Koht’s study marks a dramatic shift in the concerns of saga scholars: hitherto concerned mostly with the “saga age,” the age of the events depicted in the sagas,

scholars now increasingly turned their focus towards the age during which the sagas were composed.

In the decades following Koht's study, a new approach in saga studies was developed, one in which the focus was increasingly on the saga authors rather than the heroic figures in the sagas, culminating in the event that heroic warriors were now replaced by heroic artists (Helgason 1998). This diminishing interest in the historical value of the sagas may have peaked with Sigurður Nordal's study of *Hrafnkels saga* (Nordal 1940) in which he shifted that particular saga from one absolute category, history (reality; truth), to what he regarded as its antithesis, fiction (art; literature). *Hrafnkels saga* was, in Sigurður Nordal's view, unhistorical and that made it fictitious. However, he dissented strongly from the hierarchy established by 19th-century scholars wherein fiction was inferior to history and argued that *Hrafnkels saga*, while not very historical (meaning accurate), was an important work of art, and perhaps all the more valuable for it.

Thus in the mid-20th century, the sagas had escaped the ignoble fate of becoming bad history and were instead transformed into fine art. And yet Sigurður Nordal and his contemporaries never completely abandoned the old ideas pertaining to the historical value of the sagas, exemplified in the *Íslenzk fornrit* editions published between 1933 and 1959.

Selecting Reality

In 1933, *Egils saga* appeared as volume 2, and yet the first volume to see the light of day, in the now standard *Íslenzk fornrit* series. While Einar Ólafur Sveinsson seems to have undertaken a considerable amount of work on this edition, Sigurður Nordal is the sole credited editor of the volume and also contributed an introduction where he, amongst his other concerns, discusses the saga's relationship with history, its relationship with other "sources," and, in great depth, the historical chronology of the sagas (Sigurður Nordal 1933, xxxvi–liii). The latter discussion is based mostly on the description of the battle of Vínheiði that appears in the saga and the actual Battle of Brunanburh in 937, mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

Sigurður Nordal's introduction includes a chronology of the life and times of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, the eponymous hero of the saga, from his birth around 910 to his death around 990. The inner chronology of the saga does not quite work (which is the case for most of the sagas) so it is adjusted to accord properly with known facts from older and more reliable sources (which nevertheless do not mention Egill) such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Thus every reader of this edition of *Egils saga* is informed that Egill went to York to meet King Eiríkr and composed the poem *Höfuðlausn* in the year 948: "Þó að sögunni kunni að skjátlást þar um einstök atriði, er sjálfur atburðurinn studdur órengjandi heimildum" [Though

the saga may be wrong in some of the details, the event itself is verified by irrefutable sources] (Nordal 1933, xlvi). The reader is thus left with little doubt that Egill was an actual historical person. That does not merely mean that there existed a man with the name Egill Skalla-Grímsson in the 10th century but also that we can believe in the Egill presented in *Egils saga* as a representation of that living Egill, apart from, of course, a few exaggerations and idiosyncrasies such as his precocious ability to versify at the age of three, which Sigurður Nordal attributes to the boasting of an old man (1933, xii).

Thus began the influential *Íslenzk fornrit* tradition wherein the introductions to each volume in the series should include a discussion of fact and fiction in a given saga and an attempt to distinguish between the historical and real part of the text, on the one hand, and the invented and fictional part, on the other. Nowhere was this task undertaken in a more orderly fashion than in Björn Sigfússon's introduction to *Ljósvetninga saga* (xix–xli) in which his chapter “genealogies and historical knowledge” is followed by the chapter “fiction,” which he describes as things “sem getur ekki stuðzt við söguleg rök” [that cannot stand as historical evidence]. Björn also exemplifies the logical method used to distinguish between the two when he states that the most reliable part of any saga must be the genealogies (xxx).

Sigurður Nordal and his colleagues admired art but did not like certain aspects of the fictional such as the fantastical or paranormal, or what they considered exaggerated or unrealistic. Thus they imagined the sagas as something betwixt and between history and fiction or, in Sigurður Nordal's mind, a union of critical historical thought and a fine sense of art and entertainment (see e.g. Sigurður Nordal 1933, lxiii). He described this perfect harmony of art and science as gradually tending towards historical fiction during the course of the 13th century before it was ruined in the 14th century, unwinding with the production of either dull annals or exaggerated romances, clearly inferior to the work of Snorri Sturluson, the master of the harmonious sagas.

However, this invented category, that bears a close resemblance to contemporary historical fiction, is determined by a modern distinction between the two forms as imagined opposites. Thus the insistence on the literary value of the sagas was entwined with a consequent and ever-growing rejection of the sagas as historiography (see Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1988, 324), which was founded on a supposed equivalence between history and truth. The *Íslenzk fornrit* editors and most other Old Norse scholars of the period tended to demonstrate a lack of understanding of history as a literary genre, and the debate over the historicity of the sagas was hemmed in by the false opposition between the real and the artistic.

In 1974, Sveinbjörn Rafnsson controversially stated in his doctoral dissertation on *Landnámabók*, conventionally regarded as a work of history rather than one of art, that it had no value as an accurate source describing the settlement

of Iceland (see also Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1976, 232). This sparked strong reactions from various critics, including Jakob Benediktsson (1974, 213) who had edited the text a few years earlier in the *Íslenzk fornrit* series and who felt that Sveinbjörn Rafnsson was too dismissive of the source value of the text when it came to personal history. According to Jakob Benediktsson, denying the source value of *Landnámabók* amounted to dismissing it as a “work of history.” In his own introduction to the work (1968, cxxxiv), Jakob Benediktsson had followed the tradition of distinguishing between the “historical parts” of the text (genealogies and place names) and the “fictional parts” (such as the accounts of trolls and paranormal activity). Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, on the other hand, refused to divide the text into the historical and the fictional.

The main difference between the two scholars lay, on the one hand, in their respective beliefs regarding the sagas’ applicability, as Sveinbjörn Rafnsson felt that *Landnámabók* was an important source to many questions concerning the Icelandic society in which it was composed, and other scholars have indeed since followed in his footsteps and used the sagas to analyze systems rather than sources for information about individuals (see e.g. Byock). On the other hand, the difference lies in their respective attitudes towards picking and choosing. For Sveinbjörn Rafnsson there is no such thing as partial source validity, and *Landnámabók* is simply too young to be an accurate source about the settlement, no matter how credible some of the information that it provides may seem. He also objected to the practice of 20th-century scholars to use their own judgment to decide what is likely factual and what is improbable and then equating the likely factual with truth.

No recent scholar has professed a belief in Egill Skalla-Grímsson versifying at the age of three—apparently the analogy of young Mozart fails to convince when juxtaposed with the grim unintelligibility of skaldic poetry. However, Jón Helgason elegantly summarized this kind of critical stance when discussing scholars who believed in the account of Egill Skalla-Grímsson’s visit to King Eiríkr Blood-Axe in York. Jón Helgason argued that since the whole story is based on the premise that magic drew Egill to York, the scholars could either believe the whole story, including then the magic of Queen Gunnhildr, who famously changes shapes to disturb Egill in composing the poem that eventually saves his neck, or dismiss it in its entirety. In Jón Helgason’s mind, scholars cannot simply pick and choose which events to believe in, as if it is possible that “ef galdur er tekinn úr galdrasögu, verði afgangurinn sönn saga” [if magic is removed from a tale of magic, then what remains is a true story] (1969, 156).

Although this criticism has continued to be ignored by many scholars, scholarship appears to be rapidly moving away from the picking and choosing or *Íslenzk fornrit* method, and 13th-century historiography is no longer regarded to be as reliable as it once was when it comes to the history of the 9th, 10th, or 11th centuries. Scholars will consequently have to study these sources as texts

and as historiography instead of focusing on and attempting to recover a lost “reality” that may lie behind them.

I Was There, but What Happened?

But what, then, happens to the representation of the real in the sagas? Many scholars now seem to agree that in this context dated terms such as history, literature, reality, fiction, and truth must either be abandoned or provided with a new sense (see e.g. Hermann and Mitchell 263). Throughout the 20th century it was, however, rare for scholars to consider the sagas as history using modern (or post-modern) concepts of the genre.

One such attempt was made by Keld Gall Jørgensen (267–68) who sought to highlight the subjectivity of all truth, whether historical or fictional. He was inspired by the recent emphasis on the literary value of history demonstrated by those analysts of historical discourse who regarded history first and foremost as narrative. Hayden White, for example, inspired by post-structuralism and noting the gap between the philosophical discourse on reality and the work of traditional historians that tended to ignore this discourse in their fieldwork, took a firm stance against 19th-century empiricism. White referred to history as “the discourse of the real,” meaning that he regarded history not as reality but a representation of it, usually taking on the form of a narrative. Thus history is separated from both events and “reality” and is diagnosed as a part of language (which is also part of reality but a different part).

The medievalist Gabrielle Spiegel works in the same vein, although she identifies her influences not as Barthes, Lacan, and White but rather Foucault, Geertz, and Turner. In Spiegel’s estimation history is essentially a part of language and not reality, and thus the opposition between history and literature is meaningless. As such, scholars would be well served to focus more on historiography itself and its narrative devices and less on any supposed inherent reality. Both White and Spiegel emphasize that any study of history as a kind of discourse has to take into account the essential nature of this discourse as being something different from overt fiction. The above-mentioned framework set out by Sigurður Nordal where we can imagine a singular form that constitutes a mystical union of history and fiction may not be helpful here since all history is narrative and there is really no separation between history and literature.

If the sagas are regarded as historical texts that may or may not represent reality accurately but are still much governed by the laws of narrative, any discussion of their art will not lead to a negation of their intrinsic nature as works of history. There is thus little sense in dividing the sagas into perceived historical and fictional parts. They purport to be historical but those sagas relating events from the distant past have little source value when it comes to factual information

about bygone events. Their source value lies more in what they reveal about their anonymous authors and about the time and place in which they were written. Yet, this is not where their overt engagement lies, and scholars who attempt to regard these narratives about the past as allegories of the 13th- or 14th-century present, as has often been fashionable in recent decades, may be taking too little note of a genuine engagement with the imagined past.⁷

If the emphasis is placed upon subjectivity, as Jørgensen does, instead of an absolute truth that is in any case beyond human experience, it becomes evident that no “reality” can be gathered from historical sources like the sagas. Indeed all history must represent the point of view of an author or authors, no matter how objective they intend or pretend to be. In the case of the sagas of Icelanders, an added complication consists in their distance from the events they purport to depict. However, even when there are several contemporary accounts and a great deal of data, it does not necessarily follow that “reality” can be gathered from the available sources, even when there is less distance between the event and its accounts. Thus Jørgensen’s approach does not only mean that we must doubt the source value of the sagas on account of their temporal distance from the reality they purport to relate, but that we must call into question the perceived objectivity of any kind of historical truth, even when the situation is quite different, with a wealth of data and a closer proximity to the reported events.

If we take, for example, a relatively straightforward modern event such as the Kennedy assassination, this problematic relationship between truth and data becomes equally evident. This was a public event with many observers and an abundance of contemporary data, and yet considerable ambiguity remains. Of the 104 earwitnesses in Dealey Plaza, for example, who are on record having stated an opinion as to the direction from which the shots were fired, 54 thought that all of the shots came from the direction of the Texas School Book Depository, 33 from the grassy knoll or the triple underpass, nine from a location entirely distinct from the knoll or the Depository, five heard shots fired from two locations, and three from a direction consistent with both the knoll and the Depository (McAdams).

Human experience is limited. Five people may sit in the same room but will only experience the same reality up to some point. Human cognition immediately steps in and begins framing reality, using thought and language and that strange attribute called memory, which is our way of making sense of the world from within the recesses of the mind. Human memory is essentially highly selective and thus the transformation from event to narrative will always be framed by the devices of memory. First the event takes place, but then it is experienced and after that interpreted and then memorized and transformed into internal language before it is ever actually expressed, often presumably orally before writing is ever employed.

When history is written, even more framing takes place. After hearing and remembering, our subjective experience of the event is made into a narrative using human language, and each of these actions inevitably transforms the reality of the event, first within the reality of the mind and eventually into that of a given narrative. In the end, even the matter of the number and direction of shots, as discrete a fact as is possible, becomes a highly controversial point. Most events related in a saga, or other narratives, are more complicated than determining who shot whom and with added complication comes the added significance of the point of view of both sources and their authors.

In the case of the Kennedy assassination a commission (The President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy, unofficially known as the Warren Commission) was appointed to establish "truth" and, after interviewing more than 500 people, handed in an 889 page report on the event. This process certainly established a truth, but not a truth that was convincing to all. Yet the commission had the opportunities and the capacity to establish a "truth" that far exceed those available to any medieval historiographer. Of course, as any conspiracy theorist will proclaim, the commission may also have had its own agenda, but that must in some way, to varying degrees, be true about every historiographer.⁸

The uncertainty shrouding this recent modern event is indeed enlightening in that it shows that any discussion of the quest for the truth behind the sagas has to take account of the very subjectivity of historical truths, even in the most favourable of circumstances. When faced with the utter ambiguity of truth, the attempts made by the editors of the *Íslenzk fornrit* series and other 20th-century scholars to separate fact from fiction in the sagas thus seem even more desperate. How can they possibly hope to achieve this with the limited knowledge at hand? What the Warren commission really presented was the result of an investigation, a version of events that may or may not be accurate and that will continue to convince some but certainly not all. Even less can medieval historians be relied upon to bring us "the truth," and perhaps this was something of which they were themselves well aware. They may have been doing their best on this front, but, when narrating a past that was already over 300 years old, there were certainly limitations as to what their best could possibly be. Though possibly more disinterested than the Warren commission was, it would have been hard to keep their own subjectivity from exercising an influence on the text. As Nietzsche somewhat pessimistically declared half a century before the first volume in the *Íslenzk fornrit* series appeared in print, history always stands in the service of the unhistorical. It thus seems that we cannot entirely deny subjectivity in any historical narrative regardless of how far removed it is from the events that it relates.

If we try to bring this insight to settlement-age Iceland and bridge the gap between saga studies and the humanities at large, it may still be possible to believe

that individuals called Ingólfr and Skalla-Grímr, for example, lived there during the late 9th century, but all the facts presented about them in the late medieval sources are indeed the subjective image of a much younger age, a distillation of experience, memory, interpretation, and narrative. These images are presumably a part of a long narrative tradition that has transformed reality into a new reality above whatever could have been found in a contemporary account. Skalla-Grímr may have had a son called Egill, but the colourful character from the saga cannot be anything but a mixture of what happened, what people experienced and remembered, and a long and volatile tradition about this character, which was then amplified by the art of the anonymous 13th-century author or authors.⁹ It is hard to say precisely what part of the Egill Skalla-Grímsson we can see in the saga comes from the author and what was drawn from tradition, but one thing is certain: a single “truth” cannot possibly be distilled from these sources. Modern readers can believe in the existence of an Egill, but then they have to decide which Egill. We never know whether this factual Egill, if he existed at all, was somewhat like the character from the saga or quite different. Believing in Egill, like believing in God, turns out to be no simple matter.

The Impossible Dream

The most fascinating lesson to be drawn from the uneasy relationship that the study of Old Norse texts has had with notions of truth, history, and fiction is how fascinated humans, scholars, and amateurs alike are by what is considered real, accurate, and truthful. They want the books that they read to be real, and they want to imagine a reality behind the late medieval depiction of settlement and saga-age Iceland. Thus critical historians have always faced an uphill task. All they have to offer is uncertainty and doubt, so much more uncomfortable and less reassuring than legends that can be believed in and regarded as “truth.”

The idea of fiction pursued by the *Íslenzk fornrit* editors (and by some modern scholars) may perhaps have been somewhat naïve as well. The frequent references to a reality behind the text and the idea that a saga character is not fictional if he or she is based on the reality of a 10th-century human is often juxtaposed with the idea of fiction that is simply invented by an author out of the blue. However, what is today called fiction is no less based on reality than that which is called history. The rules are different but the writers or compilers of both are composing texts that refer in some way to a reality. This applies also to the medieval saga authors and it thus seems meaningless to categorize the matter in their texts as either exclusively fictional, on the one hand, or real, on the other. The biography of a saga character such as Egill Skalla-Grímsson is neither real nor fictional. It is history as it was done in 13th-century Iceland, based on tradition with a great deal of creative input by the historiographer. Trying to find “reality” in such a

mixture of the traditional and the novel, with no contemporary or even slightly older sources at hand to validate more than a tiny fragment of the information provided, is a nearly impossible task. What we instead have is both tradition and legend, and an interesting historical text.

A quarter of a century ago Sveinbjörn Rafnsson referred to the settlement age of Iceland as desk fiction made into a view of history (1988, 319), and indeed the same can be said of the saga age of Iceland. Like King Arthur, it is essentially legendary, a carefully constructed 13th- and 14th-century vision of 9th-, 10th-, and 11th-century Iceland. Just as no truth behind the legends can be wrested from the textual sources of 6th-century Britain, we must likewise accept Ingólfr and Egill and all the saga heroes of Iceland as textual representations of human beings that had possibly lived during the 9th, 10th, and 11th centuries. The point is not whether these people existed, though, since we do not have them in the sagas in any case: we have characters and representations.

When it comes to the customs, ideologies, and social realities of the Icelandic society of the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries, the sagas have served as a mine of information in recent years. When it comes to certain individuals, they yield a great deal of traditional matter some of which may seem more plausible than the rest, but plausibility is more a matter of belief than a useful marker to discover what is real. This may not prove a great loss for textual criticism, as there remain compelling legends of interesting characters from a 13th-century saga whose words and actions can still be analyzed and studied.

NOTES

1. There is reason to believe that saga writing in Iceland began in the 12th century, and indeed most of the sagas (in particular the majority of the sagas of Icelanders, the legendary sagas and the indigenous romance sagas) are extant only in 14th- and 15th-century manuscripts and thus, although many have older roots, it is fair to speak of them as late medieval sources. When assessing their historical validity, it is at least safe to say that when it comes to the 9th, 10th, and 11th centuries, the sagas are fairly distant from the events they describe, and a long historical tradition between the events and the extant textual witnesses has to be assumed.
2. Historians used to treat many of the early medieval figures found in Old Norse texts as “historical” well into the 20th century although by then it had become commonplace to consider the “pre-historical” period as stretching into the 9th century and “history” beginning with the time of King Harold Fairhair. For example, while Birger Nerman (1925) did not think that the Old Norse textual sources had as much source value as the much older *Beowulf* and regarded the former as garbled to a degree, he nevertheless posited “a reality” behind the sagas (“bakom berättelserna ligger någon verklighet”) (Nerman 156). In such a case, the distance between the historical events and the later legends is so vast that the younger legends can have no value when it comes to facts, although they demonstrate the vitality of some of the legendary figures based on actual 5th- and 6th-century people.

3. The aim here is to engage with saga scholarship of the 20th century on its own terms, and the recent and ever-growing 21st-century scholarship based on the concept of *cultural memory* as popularized by Assmann (1992) will not be taken into account. Scholars have embraced this concept as an important opportunity to depart from the issues presented here. However, given that the concepts addressed in the present discussion (history, truth, reality, fiction) still have currency in the debate, they will be addressed in their own terms without using Assmann's vocabulary.
4. The belief in the source value of the sagas was in this period framed by the "book prose vs. free prose" debate (see e.g. Andersson 1964).
5. While the skaldic poetry contained within the sagas was purportedly composed during the 9th, 10th, and 11th centuries, it is actually only preserved within 13th-, 14th-, and 15th-century sources such as kings' sagas, sagas of Icelanders, and Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, and thus cannot really be regarded as independent source material. Of course, there is every reason to believe that some of the skaldic poetry in the sagas is older than the sagas themselves, but it still cannot be considered an independent source of factual information (see e.g. Ghosh). Throughout the 20th century, scholars continued to doubt that much of the poetry in the sagas was "genuine" as Finnur Jónsson had earlier claimed, and sometimes the poetry was attributed to the anonymous saga authors instead.
6. See e.g. Gunnar Karlsson (12–14) for a review of Icelandic history by a progressive historian. He mentions that *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók* "are not to be taken as reliable documents," but does not express any doubt over Ingólfr's existence and the basic outline of his story, rather only over its precise chronology. In various regional histories, tourist handbooks, regional museums, exhibitions, and historical centres, Ingólfr and the other 9th- and 10th-century Icelanders are presented more or less without any reservations as historical rather than legendary figures (see e.g. Þorláksson 324–25).
7. The studies taking this approach are too numerous to list. One of the more detailed and prominent among them is Þórhallur Vilmundarson's introduction to *Harðar saga* in the *Íslensk fornrit* series in which he argues that the saga was inspired by the story of Sturla Sighvatsson (1199–1238) upon whose life the depiction of the eponymous Hördur himself is posited to be based.
8. It is certainly not the case that all those who produce accounts of history are equally biased and that there is no significant difference between a historiographer who vigorously pursues an agenda and one who aspires to tell the unbiased truth. However, the kind of objectivity that was the ideal of the late 19th and early 20th centuries may have been nothing more than an impossible dream.
9. My use of the word "tradition" is partially influenced by the oral-formulaic enterprise that produced influential saga studies from the 1960s onwards. It can be argued that oral theory pays more attention to the "historicity" of the sagas and thus counters the Icelandic schools' emphasis on "fictionality." I would, however, argue that while it is important to distinguish between authorially-invented and traditional material it does not follow that the latter is synonymous with historical "truth," and in its most sophisticated form, oral theory distinguishes between the terms "traditional" and "historical" (see e.g. Andersson 2002, 410).

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