

CHAPTER 2

The Prehistory of the Kings' Sagas

For almost a hundred years now, that is to say for almost as long as saga research has existed as an autonomous field, there has been what might strike the outsider as an obsessive interest in the prehistory of the sagas, the period before the sagas actually reached parchment. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed a vigorous, albeit somewhat oblique, debate between the advocate of fully evolved oral sagas, Andreas Heusler, and the various representatives of the “Icelandic School,” notably Björn M. Ólsen, Sigurður Nordal, and Einar Ól. Sveinsson, who emphasized the creative and literary role of the saga authors.¹ A strong voice on the oral side of the debate was the Norwegian folklorist Knut Liestøl, whose book was translated into English and probably reached a larger audience than the Icelandic and Swiss contributions.² My own summary of the research became largely a critique of the Icelandic School.³ At the same time Lars Lönnroth was publishing his dissertation serially.⁴ Rather than considering the sagas in the context of the native Icelandic tradition, he explored possible European roots, but his emphasis remained literary in the tradition of the Icelandic School. More recently the indigenous Icelandic tradition has come to the fore again in Daniel Sävborg’s compendious book from 2007.⁵

The question of literary versus oral origins was quiescent for the last decades of the twentieth century, with the notable exception of Óskar Halldórsson’s small but transformative book on *Hrafnkels saga*.⁶ It was a counterthrust to Sigurður Nordal’s epoch-making monograph

on the same saga, which was translated into English and thus became the international voice of the Icelandic School.⁷ That voice became less audible in the wake of Óskar's book. In the meantime Else Mundal compiled an extensive anthology, in 1977, of many of the key contributions to the debate, and Carol Clover surveyed the field in 1985.⁸ As we saw in the last chapter, Clover also contributed a broadly conceived paper in 1986 suggesting that the sagas are in some sense conglomerates of shorter oral stories.⁹ I replied in 2002 with a paper that tried to assemble the evidence that there were long oral stories as well as short ones.¹⁰ But the field did not really move until the appearance of simultaneous books by Gísli Sigurðsson and Tommy Danielsson in 2002.¹¹ Gísli worked with saga variants that seem quite likely to be oral and therefore presuppose stories that we might refer to as oral sagas. Danielsson's approach was more panoramic, but it focuses once again on *Hrafnkels saga*. The combined effect of these books was to put oral sagas back in the center of the discussion.

It may be noted, however, that throughout this long-standing debate very little has been said about the kings' sagas. The only exception to this was Siegfried Beyschlag, who tried to show that the synoptic histories inherited their uniformity from oral tradition.¹² This thesis appears not to have gained adherents. We are therefore in the anomalous position of believing that there were full-blown stories about Saga Age Icelanders but no stories about Norwegian kings. Scholarly silence on this question has been as curious as it has been universal, and the silence was broken only in the last ten pages of Tommy Danielsson's second volume. The body of the book is devoted to a long series of specialized king's saga problems, but, almost as an afterthought, the author opens large horizons in the conclusion (pp. 385–95). Here he surveys the evidence that the Norwegian kings also lived on in memory and tradition. He reminds us of the prominent place occupied by the Norwegian kings in *Laxdæla saga* and other predominantly Icelandic sagas, then goes on to review the meetings of prominent Icelanders with Norwegian monarchs, particularly in the short, self-contained stories called *þættir*. These contacts could have served as the point of departure for the Icelandic interest in the kings and the growth of oral narrative.

Danielsson also reviews the named Icelandic bearers of royal tradition: Þorgeirr afráðskollr, Oddr Kolsson, and Hallr Þórarinnsson, all

of whom were among Ari Þorgilsson's sources at the beginning of the twelfth century. Included as well is the young Icelander who learned the story of Haraldr harðráði's early adventures from Halldórr Snorrason and performed it at Haraldr's court (see below). We do not know the exact form of such transmissions, but Danielsson takes due note of the comments made by Theodoricus and Saxo indicating that the Icelanders were well known for cultivating rich traditions, a reputation confirmed by the prologues in *Heimskringla* and by the *þættir* in *Morkinskinna*.¹³ This narrative material is generally assumed to have provided a rough basis for the written accounts later shaped by writers, but Danielsson asks whether this quite loose and general assumption is adequate and whether the underlying narrative could not have been in the form of fully developed storytelling (p. 392: "ett ytterst avancerat berättande"). Such stories do not surface in the early period because there would have been no reason for Ari or Sæmundr or the later synoptic historians to reproduce stories that everybody knew.

At about the same time as these stories were circulating, domestic Icelandic sagas would have been evolving on the basis of legal disputes and feud stories, as Danielsson argues in his first volume. A likely venue for the exchange of such stories would have been the Icelandic thingmeetings, just as the young Icelandic storyteller in *Morkinskinna* learned the story of Haraldr harðráði at thingmeetings over a series of summers. The evolution of royal stories is perhaps less easy to grasp than the evolution of native stories, but Danielsson suggests several possibilities. There could have been a tradition of comparing kings, or the kings could have been of ongoing and central importance to the Icelanders, or there could have been a concretization of royal stories analogous to the *þættir*. The kings' sagas could also have been modeled on the agonistic patterns of the evolving Icelandic sagas. In turn, the growth of the kings' sagas into large books could have paved the way for the large Icelandic sagas such as *Laxdœla saga* and *Njáls saga*.

The central issue in this argument is the existence of fully developed kings' sagas in oral tradition. This is indeed a new perspective on the kings' sagas, and we may ask ourselves why it has not been aired before. One reason is surely that the very idea of an oral saga fell out of favor in Icelandic circles throughout the twentieth century. A leading project of the Icelandic School was to diminish our faith in the existence of full oral sagas about early Iceland, and it was only

to be expected that the generations engaged in this project would not contradict themselves by advocating oral kings' sagas. On the contrary, they focused on the development of the sagas as a purely literary enterprise, perhaps ultimately based on scattered oral traditions but carried out exclusively with quill and ink. Naturally the same assumption would have carried over to the kings' sagas.

But an analogy with the native Icelandic sagas is not the only justification for believing in the piecemeal literary composition of the kings' sagas. Our information about the latter begins in fact almost a century earlier than the information on the native sagas and gives every appearance of suggesting a gradual literary evolution from smaller written denominations to larger denominations. The process began with Sæmundr and Ari early in the twelfth century and culminated in the Norwegian synoptics at the end of the century, Theodoricus's *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium*, *Historia Norwegiae*, and *Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sǫgum*. That this was a literary sequence is supported by what seems to be a growing consensus that there is a continuity between the early epitomes and the later ones. Despite Theodoricus's protestations that he based himself not on "visa" but on "audita," it seems likely that he also used written sources and that these sources are most likely to have been Sæmundr and Ari.¹⁴

The picture that emerges from the twelfth century is therefore a puzzling together of information, including oral sources, but collected by writers who converted what they could learn into little digests and summaries, not stories. This picture is reinforced by the shape of the first full-length kings' sagas, Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and the *Oldest Saga of Saint Olaf* largely represented by the *Legendary Saga*. To be sure, these are full-blown biographical stories, but they are quite awkwardly composed.¹⁵ They do not suggest authors recording flowing narratives but rather writers who are trying to fit and join scraps of tradition. That might lead us to believe that writers in the twelfth century began by condensing the main points provided by the oral transmissions and ended by trying to expand these early indications somewhat artificially into real books, an entirely literary project. The tacit assumption might then go on to stipulate that when the master narratives appear, largely in *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*, they again perfect the form of the older written narratives using strictly literary methods.

How does Tommy Danielsson's suggestion of ready-made, full-fledged oral narratives about the kings comport with this picture of writers struggling to achieve a literary form for the royal biographies from scattered traditions? If the first biographers were faced with the simple task of setting down well articulated oral stories in writing, why did they perform the task so poorly? Perhaps an analogy will help us out of this dilemma. Since the publication of Gísli Sigurðsson's and Tommy Danielsson's books no one seems any longer to have difficulty with the idea that there were fully developed sagas about early Iceland, but we must remind ourselves that these sagas also had an awkward beginning.

The question of which *Íslendingasögur* came first is of course a subject of dispute, and I can only offer my own view. I think that *all* the skald sagas, including *Gunnlaugs saga*, were early, and to that group of four I would add *Fóstbræðra saga*, *Víga-Glúms saga*, and *Reykðæla saga*.¹⁶ What these sagas have in common is that they are not gracefully composed, unlike the great sagas of the next generation, *Egils saga*, *Gísla saga*, and *Laxdæla saga*. The early sagas are in some cases quite short and in other cases rather mechanically constructed around skaldic stanzas. They are not ranked among the saga masterpieces.

Accordingly we find both among the sagas about early Iceland and the kings' sagas a prefatory period of experimental and rather problematical composition before the perfected form emerges. There can now be little doubt that the domestic Icelandic sagas were drawn from oral tradition. It therefore seems clear that the transposition from oral stories to written stories was by no means straightforward. It required practice. By analogy we can suppose that oral kings' sagas would have been no easier than the *Íslendingasögur* to convert smoothly into written sagas at the first attempt. That means that the awkward first biographies of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson do not exclude the possibility that there existed full oral sagas about these and other kings. It was only a question of learning to recast these oral prototypes into written sagas.

Nor should we forget that there were stories intermediate between the domestic sagas and the kings' sagas, to wit the *þættir*, in which equal space is given to the Norwegian kings and the Icelandic adventurers. The *þættir* are very much at the center of Tommy Danielsson's

discussion and are at least one secure key to the operations of oral transmission, inasmuch as they can hardly be explained by any other conveyance. They provide information on the kings and their attitudes, character, and politics, as well as on their contacts with Icelanders. The warrant that they were circulated in the earliest period of saga writing (1200 to 1220) is the preservation of thirteen examples in *Morkinskinna*.¹⁷ Their focus is the Icelandic experience of the outside world, and they must therefore have been handed down in Iceland, perhaps in the families of those who experienced them. The dual focus on kings and Icelanders assures us that at least some memory of the kings would have stayed alive in Iceland.

As Tommy Danielsson points out, they also illustrate the general Icelandic preoccupation with Norwegian kings. In the early twelfth century, both Sæmundr and Ari directed their attention to the neighboring kings in Norway. If their books had been preserved, the task of understanding Icelandic thinking about the Norwegian kings would perhaps have been facilitated, but even the bare existence of these books tells us something. The kings seem to have been Sæmundr's sole preoccupation, and though we may be apt to think of Ari's "konunga ævi" as a supplement to his *Íslendingabók*, simply because we have one and not the other, the situation may have been reversed. Perhaps the "konunga ævi" were the primary undertaking, and perhaps we should consider *Íslendingabók* as the supplement. In either case the Norwegian kings were a dominant factor when the Icelanders first began to write.

We are not told much about the interaction between the Norwegian kings and Iceland under the early kings down to 995, but after the advent of the conversion kings the interaction becomes charged. Óláfr Tryggvason appears to have been an energetic proselytizer well beyond the shores of Norway, and that may perhaps understate the case. He was credited with the conversion of five lands, and texts such as Ari's *Íslendingabók*, Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, *Kristni saga*, and *Laxdæla saga* lead us to believe that he exerted strong pressure on the Icelanders to convert.¹⁸ Whether or not Óláfr's efforts at proselytizing were really so effective, later writers thought they were, and they must have believed that Óláfr applied pressure on the Icelanders to convert. In their minds this was the point at which Norway becomes a real, not to say a menacing, factor in the political life of Iceland.

The threat materializes palpably under Óláfr Haraldsson, who, according to *Heimskringla*, not only tries to cajole the Icelanders into making him a gift of the island Grímsey, but later holds distinguished Icelanders hostage to increase his leverage.¹⁹ Subsequently Haraldr harðráði is said to have been a great friend of the Icelanders, but given his record of deceitfulness and his aggressive foreign policy, we would like to know what motivated his friendship.²⁰ Adam of Bremen states that Haraldr extended his rule as far as Iceland.²¹ This corresponds to nothing in the indigenous sources, but we may well wonder where Haraldr's contemporary Adam may have gotten the idea. Could it signal that Haraldr indeed had designs on Iceland? In the twelfth century the Norwegian kings were sufficiently preoccupied with other matters that they did not pose much of a threat, but the very fact that the Icelanders had such a clear memory of Norwegian aspirations under two proselytizing rulers indicates that they must have had a watchful eye on Norway. Add to this that, whatever the actual history of immigration to Iceland may have been, the Icelanders clearly thought of themselves as kin to the Norwegians by lineage and culture.²² The national umbilical cord seems not to have been severed, and Norway remained much more than just a horizon.

We can be in no doubt that information on Norway was plentiful in Iceland, but the question to be dealt with is not one of information but of literary form. The Icelanders could of course have known a great deal about Norway without ever casting anything in narrative form. That they did think in terms of literary form is sufficiently demonstrated by the *þættir* with their identifiable morphology,²³ but the oral existence of short *þættir* may not justify the assumption of longer sagas. Even so, the evidence for oral kings' sagas is rather better than the evidence for oral sagas about the early Icelanders. This evidence resides largely in the *útferðarsaga* of Haraldr harðráði that Halldórr Snorrason teaches to a young Iclander, who in turn recites it at Haraldr's court.²⁴ Tommy Danielsson refers to this recital in both of his volumes, but it may lend itself to further exploitation. At the very least the episode suggests that such stories were formally composed with enough detail so that they had to be learned, that they were formally recited to a large group, and that they were long enough to be presented for two weeks. They were formal stories, not just random accounts.

Not only that, but the story of Haraldr's adventures in the Mediterranean, as they are told in *Morkinskinna* and by extension in *Heimskringla*, constituted a highly dramatic story of intrigue in the Byzantine court, military prowess and ingenuity, and the accumulation of fabulous wealth, a thirteenth-century counterpart to *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The oral version that held the attention of King Haraldr's court for two weeks must have shared some of these qualities; it too must have been a rousing tale of daring and high romance.

I have indicated that there seems to be a tacit assumption that the evolution of the kings' sagas from notes and summaries in the twelfth century to epic canvases in the thirteenth century was a strictly literary process. That is to say, people simply learned to write better and better and more fully as time went on. At the same time, we have evidence that there were full-blown, dramatic tales in oral form. The awkward formulations in the twelfth-century epitomes and the first attempts at biography teach us that the ostensibly simple option of transcribing oral stories was not adopted. The first efforts at duplicating what may have been rather good oral stories fell short and converted good stories into not very successful books. The art of capturing good stories on parchment was a gradual process, learned slowly and a little painfully. It seems to have combined a knowledge of stories with a faltering acquisition of writing skills.

Vésteinn Ólason has recently used the word "imitation" to describe this process and refers to Preben Meulengracht Sørensen's earlier use of the same term: "The narrative style and technique of the sagas shows every sign of being an imitation, conscious or unconscious, of oral narrative."²⁵ "Imitation" may well be as close as we can get to a resolution of this problem. Vésteinn uses it with reference to the *Íslendingasögur*, but, following Tommy Danielsson, I have no difficulty in extending the usage to the kings' sagas as well. Indeed, it seems to me that the kings' sagas reveal the nature of the imitation more clearly and more fully by making the stages in the development more palpable. The first stage was to skim the high points by way of a summation. The second stage was to add detail in order to approximate at least the length of the oral sagas. The third stage was then to imitate the narrative style as well as the narrative dimensions of the oral stories.

The progress from brief summary of the main points in the oral transmission to a fuller recapitulation in the first biographies and finally to a recreation of the dramatic story line is clearer in the kings' sagas than in the *Íslendingasögur*, but the same line can also be detected, though more tentatively, in the latter. The famous summary of *Hoensa-Póris saga* found in Ari's *Íslendingabók* is analogous to the epitomes on the Norwegian kings and represents the first stage in the narrative development. The second stage is more difficult to match because the differences in the quality of composition among the early *Íslendingasögur* are less pronounced than in the kings' sagas. We can nonetheless make it plausible that the earliest *Íslendingasögur* were less well assembled than the later masterpieces. If we were to choose one *Íslendingasaga* to illustrate the original defects of composition, it might be *Kormáks saga*, a saga that does not so much tell the story as it extracts the main moments of the biography from a large collection of stanzas. Dialogue and drama are largely missing.

There is also a good match in the chronology of these developments. If *Egils saga* was written as early as the 1220s, we might infer that the third stage in the *Íslendingasögur* was reached in the same time frame as the culmination of the kings' sagas in *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*. These were the high points in both genres and they represent a level seldom attained again.

It may therefore be reasonable to suppose that there was not only a significant similarity between *Íslendingasögur* and kings' sagas at the literary stage in the thirteenth century but also that there must have been a real similarity at the oral stage as well. To imagine that the king's saga masterpieces (*Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*) acquired their art by imitating written *Íslendingasögur* is not practicable because the early *Íslendingasögur* were not well put together and cannot have stood model for *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*. Both types are more likely to have acquired their narrative art from an increasingly skillful imitation of oral storytelling. Their affinity to this narrative tradition explains the much-praised uniqueness of the *Íslendingasögur*, but it also explains why the best, though less frequently praised, kings' sagas are the most readable chronicles of the Middle Ages.

