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978-0-521-73520-9 - The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga

Margaret Clunies Ross

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
The Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*

The Old Norse-Icelandic saga is one of the most important European vernacular literary genres of the Middle Ages. This *Introduction* to the saga genre outlines its origins and development, its literary character, its material existence in manuscripts and printed editions, and its changing reception from the Middle Ages to the present time. Its multiple sub-genres – including family sagas, mythical-heroic sagas and sagas of knights – are described and discussed in detail, and the world of medieval Icelanders is powerfully evoked. The first general study of the Old Norse-Icelandic saga to be written in English for some decades, the *Introduction* is based on up-to-date scholarship and engages with current debates in the field. With suggestions for further reading, detailed information about the Icelandic literary canon, and a map of medieval Iceland, this book is aimed at students of medieval literature and assumes no prior knowledge of Scandinavian languages.

MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS is Emeritus Professor of English and Honorary Professor in the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Sydney. She has published widely on Old Norse-Icelandic literature and culture, especially Old Norse mythology, Icelandic sagas, Old Norse-Icelandic poetry (especially skaldic poetry) and poetic theory.

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A preface on practical issues

General aim of this book

The aim of this book is to offer an up-to-date analysis of the medieval Icelandic saga genre and to review major issues to do with its origins and development, its literary character and identity, its material existence in manuscripts and printed editions, and its changing reception from the Middle Ages to the present time. This book is about the saga genre in general but also about the various identifiable sub-genres that make it up. One of the book's themes is that many general books on the subject of the Icelandic saga are actually about only one sub-genre, the 'sagas of Icelanders' (*Íslendingasögur*) or family sagas, as they have sometimes been called in English. Some of the other sub-genres, like the 'sagas of ancient time' (*fornaldarsögur*) and 'sagas of knights' (*riddarasögur*) in particular, have been rather neglected during the twentieth century, for reasons that I shall try to explain. Although much of the discussion here perforce deals with sagas of Icelanders, because they have been the main subject of modern research and theorising, I have not confined myself to this sub-genre.

In the chapters that follow, I identify general characteristics of the saga genre as well as the characteristics that differentiate one sub-genre from others. I also propose that modern readers must be prepared to be flexible and non-judgemental about what I call in Chapter 6 the 'mixed modality' of much saga writing, which I argue reflects medieval attitudes rather better than a more compartmentalised distinction between 'classical' and 'post-classical', 'realistic' and 'fantastic' saga types that have been the anchor-points of much literary analysis and debate over the last one hundred years or so.

The book is written to be accessible to non-specialists like senior school students, undergraduate university students and the general reader. For that reason, I have tried as far as possible to make all the fundamental issues to do with the Icelandic saga as clear as I can, beginning with basic information, and always translating into English the titles of Old Norse-Icelandic texts, as well as giving translations of any passage from a medieval text that I quote.

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When giving bibliographical references I have tried to choose accessible works in English where possible, but, if the best reference is in a language other than English (as it often is), I have not refrained from giving it, believing that English-speaking students will not mind moving out of their linguistic comfort zones and also expecting that some non-English-speaking readers may find this book useful. Regretfully, it has only been possible to refer to internet resources, of which there are many, in general terms, as the links to electronic sites tend to change frequently and are likely to be outdated quickly. In addition, the introductory nature of the Cambridge Introductions series prevents me documenting my work in as much detail as is normal in academic writing, although the Guide to Further Reading points to some of the major primary and secondary sources I have used. At the same time as I have tried to make this book accessible to beginners, I hope that specialists, by which term I mean scholars of Icelandic and medievalists more generally, will find things to hold their attention here. As they will see, I have not held back from fairly direct discussion of some of the major controversies in saga research, and they may find this interesting and provocative.

The book is arranged in the following manner. The first chapter is a general introduction to medieval Icelandic society, and gives basic information about the settlement of the island, its economic, social and political character, and how the development of the saga genre may have come about. Chapter 2 looks at definitional questions to do with what a saga is (then and now), while Chapter 3 takes up the issue of the likely origins of the saga form, and some of the main theories of saga origins, as well as the relationship between oral traditions and the written saga form. Chapter 4 looks at the thorny issue of saga chronology and poses the questions of whether we can determine the likely age of individual sagas in comparison with others and whether we can determine when specific sub-genres of the saga began in comparison with other sub-genres.

Chapters 5–7 deal with the literary character of the Icelandic saga. Chapter 5 suggests a way of using a historically and geographically articulated set of criteria to classify and describe the various sub-genres of the saga. It also indicates that such a perspective offers an integrated view of the genre as a whole. Chapter 6 looks at saga mode, style and point of view, again offering a means of understanding the varied representations of ‘reality’ across and within saga sub-genres. Chapter 7 analyses the structural elements of the saga genre, an issue on which a great deal has been written during the twentieth century, and proposes a number of deep structural patterns that bear the major themes of Icelandic saga writing.

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Chapters 8 and 9 offer a historical perspective on the copying and transmission of Icelandic sagas down to the present time. Chapter 8 addresses the question of how the medieval sagas have come down to modern times, in what material form, and where they can now be accessed. In addition, it discusses how editions of sagas are made, what kinds of editions there are, and what editors do to the raw material they edit. Many of these issues, though well known to specialists, are, in my experience, completely foreign territory to students (and probably to the general reader), who may be unaware of the power an editor has to place his or her interpretation on a text at all levels from orthography to the choice of base manuscript for a saga text. Chapter 9 gives a brief overview of the reception of the medieval Icelandic saga and its various sub-genres from the end of the Middle Ages to the present day, both in Iceland and outside it, and suggests the ideological forces that have influenced the changing popularity of different saga sub-genres over the period from the seventeenth century to the present. It also looks at the importance of translations in making Icelandic sagas known to a wide audience outside Iceland.

Spelling conventions used in this book

This book uses Icelandic spellings of all Icelandic text, whether continuous prose or single words and phrases. The special characters used to write Icelandic are preserved here, not transliterated to an approximate English spelling. The special characters used are: the consonants þ (upper case Þ) and ð, pronounced as the first sound in English ‘thin’ and ‘this’ respectively and often spelled th or d in English transliteration; the ligatures æ and œ, approximating to the vowel sounds in English ‘bat’ and French ‘peu’; the vowels y, as in German *kühl*, o, as in English ‘pot’, and ø, similar in sound to œ, but shorter; and long forms of the various vowels (pronounced in Modern Icelandic as diphthongs) which are represented by an acute accent mark over the letter, like á and ó.

All Icelandic words taken from texts that are known to have existed in the Middle Ages are normalised to a ‘classical’, first half of the thirteenth century standard Icelandic orthography, as used by the *Íslenzk fornrit* (ÍF) series of editions of saga texts. This applies to personal names mentioned in sagas or other medieval works and to place names which no longer exist. Place names still in use are given a Modern Icelandic spelling (except in the Icelandic titles of sagas), unless they are Norwegian, when the Old Norse form of the name is given with the Modern Norwegian one in brackets after it. Similarly, technical

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terms whose use cannot be attested from medieval sources are given in a Modern Icelandic spelling; for example, the spelling *fornaldarsögur* ‘sagas of ancient time’ is chosen rather than *fornaldarsögur*, because the compound is unattested in medieval records, but *lygisögur* ‘lying sagas’ is so spelled because the term appears in medieval texts.

In the Guide to Further Reading and in the Notes the names of Icelandic authors are given in the form first name last name, following the usual Icelandic convention, e.g. Bjarni Einarsson, Sigurður Nordal. Non-Icelandic authors are alphabetised by surname in the usual way.

Map of Iceland

The map of Iceland which forms the frontispiece to this volume is not overburdened with names, as it has seemed to me unnecessary to give many names in an introductory book. Although the modern capital of Iceland, Reykjavík, appears on the map, this is only for purposes of orientation; in the Middle Ages there were no towns in Iceland, and Reykjavík was no more important than other coastal locations from where ships could be launched. The map indicates the major regions of the island, the four Quarters, the site of the annual assembly place (*Þingvellir*), where the Alþingi or General Assembly was held every summer, and some important farm and monastery names, locations where literary activity is likely to have taken place.

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Abbreviations

Below is a list of all non-standard abbreviations used in this book.

AM	designates a manuscript from the collection of Árni Magnússon, now in either Reykjavík or Copenhagen (see Chapter 8)
CVC	= <i>An Icelandic-English Dictionary</i> . Initiated by Richard Cleasby, subsequently revised, enlarged and completed by Gudbrand Vigfusson, M. A. 2nd edn with supplement by Sir William Craigie. Oxford: Clarendon. 1957.
fol	folio (refers to size of manuscript page, 28+ cm. high)
Fritzner	= Fritzner, Johann. <i>Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog</i> . 3 vols. Kristiania (Oslo): den norske forlagsforening. 1883–96. 4th edn rpt 1973. Oslo etc.: Universitetsforlaget.
GKS	<i>Den gamle kongelige samling</i> ‘The old royal collection’, now in either Reykjavík or Copenhagen (see Chapter 8)
Holm	<i>Kungliga Biblioteket</i> The Royal Library Stockholm (Holm perg – vellum manuscripts; Holm papp – paper manuscripts from the Stockholm collection)
ÍF	= <i>Íslenzk fornrit</i> , vols. 1–. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag (cited by volume and page numbers). A full list of all the ÍF volumes cited in this book can be found immediately after the Guide to Further Reading.
Lbs	<i>Landsbókasafn Íslands</i> Collection of the National Library of Iceland
NKS	<i>Den nye kongelige samling</i> ‘The new royal collection’ [from the Royal Library, Copenhagen] (see Chapter 8)
NRA	<i>Riksarkivet</i> , National Archive, Oslo
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> , 2nd edn (on the internet)
ON	Old Norse
UUB or UppsUB	<i>Uppsala Universitetsbibliotek</i> The University Library of Uppsala, Carolina Rediviva
4°	quarto (refers to size of manuscript page, 18–28 cm. high)
8°	octavo (refers to size of manuscript page, 9–20 cm. high)