

THE STUDY OF OLD ICELANDIC

An introduction to the sources

1. The study of Old Icelandic.

Many Old Icelandic texts are important as comparative material for the study of English literature. There are parallels to *Beowulf* in *Grettis saga*, *Hrólfs saga kraka* and other works, and other Old English texts have their closest analogues in Icelandic. The eddas and sagas were an inspiration to a long succession of later British writers of whom Walter Scott, Thomas Gray, William Morris and W. H. Auden are perhaps the best known. See:

R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction* (1921).

Beowulf and its Analogues, tr. G. N. Garmonsway and J. Simpson (1968).

W. P. Ker, 'The Literary influence of the Middle Ages', *Cambridge History of English Literature X* (1921), ch. 10, pp. 217–41.

An important element in the development of Anglo-Saxon culture was the Germanic tradition brought to the British Isles by the Anglo-Saxon invaders in the fifth and sixth centuries. Direct information about this Germanic tradition is hard to find in English and German sources of the Middle Ages, but has been thought clearly identifiable in early Icelandic texts. In particular they contain information about the religion and mythology of the pagan North which is a help in understanding the religion of the pagan inhabitants of Germanic Europe generally. See:

G. Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen* (1973).

J. de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte I–II* (1970).

J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology I–IV* (1883–1900).

Cf. section 4 below.

The Viking Age is usually reckoned to have extended from AD 793 to 1066 (see chronology on pp. 32–33 below). The viking expansion that took place in this period was an important phase in the history of medieval Europe and viking activities in the British Isles had important consequences for cultural and linguistic development in late medieval England. Political and legal history in particular was deeply influenced by the viking settlements in Britain. Icelandic sources are of primary importance for the study of the vikings, their language and traditions. See:

P. Foote and D. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement* (1970, repr. 1980).

G. Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (1984).

- P. H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings* (1975).
 G. Turville-Petre, *The Heroic Age of Scandinavia* (1951).
 D. M. Wilson and O. Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art* (1966).
 H. Shetelig and H. Falk, *Scandinavian Archaeology* (1938).
 J. Brøndsted, *The Vikings* (1965).
 J. Simpson, *Everyday Life in the Viking Age* (1966).
 J. Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (1991).
The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings. Edited by Peter Sawyer (1997).
 J. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (2001).

Medieval Icelandic literature was also an inspiration for German writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly those like Herder and participants in the *Sturm und Drang* movement who were interested in ‘folk-literature’. *Volsunga saga* and the poems of the Poetic Edda (see section 4 below), in particular, were used by Richard Wagner in his Ring-cycle. Some Old French romances were translated into Old Icelandic and the translations have preserved some material that is no longer extant in the original French (e.g. parts of Thomas of Brittany’s version of the Tristan and Iseult story).

Interesting though the Viking Age is, and important for the history of the whole of Europe, the history of Iceland itself is also of great significance as the record of a unique early experiment in non-monarchic government and an assertion of political freedom and to some extent egalitarianism. The development of the Icelandic commonwealth and Church in the Middle Ages is an extraordinary story which can be followed in detail in near-contemporary Icelandic records. See section 3 below.

Some of the Icelandic sagas and eddic poems are great works of literature in their own right. Icelandic prose reached a high level of sophistication in the thirteenth century and the narrative skill of Icelandic saga-writers is unsurpassed in medieval Europe; the sagas have remained a unique and substantial achievement ever since, deserving to be widely known and studied for their own sake. See:

- W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance* (1908).
 W. H. Auden, *Secondary Worlds* (1968).
 Introduction to *Njal’s saga*, tr. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (Penguin 1960).
 Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age* (1998).
 Sigurður Nordal, *Icelandic Culture*, tr. Vilhjálmur T. Bjarnar (1990).
 Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas* (1988).

The sagas are primarily notable for their narrative skill, the detachment of the narrator and the simplicity, even starkness, of their style. The simplicity, however, is not the result of naivety, and often conceals bitter irony. The sagas are nevertheless narrative in what can be called its 'purest' form — the story told apparently for the story's sake, without any heavy moralising or intrusive analysis. But their content is also interesting and of permanent relevance, since in them many fundamental issues of perennial importance are treated, such as the relation between the individual and society, between freedom and authority, between idealism and expedience. These issues are presented in simplified and sometimes bald ways which make it easy to see their universality, though no naive solutions are offered and the outcome of the underlying complexities is often tragic. Though psychology is not one of the primary interests of the saga-writers, they have created many memorable and convincing characters and depicted many unforgettable scenes and situations, and in spite of the simplified picture they give of the world, the sagas are remarkably realistic in their portrayal both of character and social life.

1.1 The Icelandic language.

Translations of many of the major texts in Old Icelandic are available and much can be learned from them and from secondary works on the subject. But there are still many important texts that are difficult of access for those who do not know the original language. Besides the inherent inadequacy of all translations, the fact that one of the primary qualities of the Icelandic sagas is their style and verbal expression means that in their case more than usual is lost in translation, and one of the main pleasures of reading them is blunted. Not only the style but also the way of thought and even the values of saga-writers are embodied in their actual words, and no translator can reproduce them accurately. Translation is obviously even less adequate for the poetry. Most sagas contain some verse, and not only the inherent qualities of the verse itself are lost in translation, but the interplay and interrelationship of verse and prose are obscured.

Icelandic is also a living language and has changed comparatively little from the Middle Ages to the present. It is an ideal medium of expression for narrative prose and it is a great aesthetic experience to read it and hear it. Many valuable works of literature exist in modern Icelandic and Iceland is an exciting place to go to and its inhabitants interesting to talk to. Learning the Icelandic language not only makes it possible to come as close as possible to the landscape physical and mental of the vikings and farmers of medieval

Iceland, it opens up a whole world of experience of which translations and secondary writings give only a pale reflection.

The Icelandic language is derived from the language of the vikings who settled in Iceland in the ninth and early tenth centuries. They mostly came from Norway, and Icelandic seems to be particularly closely related to the dialect of south-west Norway in the Middle Ages. Other viking colonies had very similar languages in the Middle Ages (the Faeroes, Shetland, Orkney, the Hebrides, Greenland), but except in the Faeroes, the Norse dialects in them have since disappeared. Faeroese is now the language still spoken that is most closely related to Icelandic.

Norway and the viking colonies in the Atlantic, including Iceland, can be regarded as a close-knit cultural and linguistic area in the Middle Ages and the language of the western vikings is often called Old Norse, or sometimes Old West Norse to distinguish it from East Norse, the dialects of Sweden, Denmark and the Baltic islands. Sometimes the term Old Norse is used to mean the parent language of all the Scandinavian dialects. The term Old Icelandic is used of the language of Iceland before the Reformation (1550), Modern Icelandic of the language from then to the present.

Since the Middle Ages Icelandic has changed less than the other Scandinavian languages and the sagas are still intelligible to present-day Icelanders. The amount of change that has taken place in pronunciation is however obscured by the fact that the standard spelling adopted in most modern editions of the sagas and the standard spelling of modern Icelandic (which, like that of English, is rather archaic) are very similar. Medieval texts spelled as in the original manuscripts are very much more difficult for modern readers to understand. Changes of syntax and inflections have also taken place, though they are not very great, and of course a lot of new vocabulary has been introduced since the Middle Ages, though recently the tendency has been to use native roots to express new concepts.

1.2 The approximate pronunciation of Old Icelandic can be reconstructed from our knowledge of the values of the Latin alphabetical symbols that were used to represent the sounds in the Middle Ages, from comparison with related languages, especially those from which loan words were adopted, from etymology, from the later history of the language and from the study of rhyme and assonance in poetry. There is also a treatise that describes the sounds of the language as they were in the middle of the twelfth century and recommends their spelling (Section 1.4 below).

1.3 In structure, Icelandic is similar to German and Old English; like them, it has largely retained the system of inflections inherited from Germanic. There

are some individual features in the grammar, however: Icelandic makes greater use of grammatical suffixes than other Germanic languages, and the definite article is often suffixed to the noun (*húsit* = the house); a reflexive suffix is frequently attached to verbs, creating what is known as a ‘middle voice’ which has reflexive, passive or reciprocal meaning (*verjask* = defend oneself; *finnask* = be found; *vegask* = kill each other); and particularly in early poetry some negative suffixes are used both with verbs and occasionally with other parts of speech (*vara, varat* = was not; *manni* = no man). Another feature of the language that is particularly likely to give rise to difficulties in translation is the very frequent idiomatic use of impersonal or subjectless verbs. In addition, adverbial or absolute prepositions are used much more commonly than in English (though they do occur in English, as in ‘come in’, ‘give up’). These are similar in function to German separable prefixes, but verbs do not normally have prefixes in Old Icelandic, and an object of such absolute prepositions is often implied (see *Part I: Grammar*, 3.7.7).

Grammars: The fullest account of the phonology and morphology of Old Icelandic is in A. Noreen, *Altisländische und Altnorwegische Grammatik* (1923). The best treatments of syntax are in A. Heusler, *Altisländisches Elementarbuch* (first published 1913; 3rd edn 1950) and M. Nygaard, *Norrøn syntax* (1905). For students who do not read German the best book has till now been E. V. Gordon, *An Introduction to Old Norse*, rev. A. R. Taylor (1957). A fuller introduction to the grammar is to be found in S. Valfells and J. E. Cathey, *Old Icelandic: An Introductory Course* (1981).

For Modern Icelandic:

Stefán Einarsson, *Icelandic: Grammar, Texts, Glossary* (1949).

Jón Friðjónsson, *A Course in Modern Icelandic* (1978).

Stanislaw Bartoszek and Anh-Dao Tran, *Icelandic for beginners* (1991).
[with tape]

There is also an ancient Linguaphone course.

Dictionaries: The best dictionary of Old Icelandic is J. Fritzner, *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog* I–III (1883–96); IV, *Rettelser og Tillegg*, by F. Hødnebø (1972). R. Cleasby and G. Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (1874) is less reliable. G. T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (1919) is an abridgment of the latter, and is fairly adequate for reading prose texts. For poetry Sveinbjörn Egilsson, *Lexicon Poeticum*, rev. Finnur Jónsson (1931), is the best help. For eddic poetry the glossary in the edition of H. Kuhn, tr. B. La Farge and J. Tucker (section 4 below) is useful.

The standard dictionary of Modern Icelandic is S. Blöndal, *Íslensk-Dönsk*

Orðabók (1920–24). Árni Böðvarsson, *Íslensk orðabók* (1985) is handier. For etymology consult Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, *Íslensk Orðsifjabók* (1989) or Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (1977). Two parts (1: a–bam, 2: ban–da) have so far appeared of *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog: A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (1995– ; in progress).

1.4 Icelandic is unusual in having a medieval description of the sounds of the language from early in the literary period. See *The First Grammatical Treatise*, ed. Hreinn Benediktsson (1972), and ed. Einar Haugen (1972). This treatise was written in the second half of the twelfth century.

The runic alphabet was used in the North before the Latin alphabet was introduced with the coming of Christianity in the eleventh century. Runes were, however, rarely used for recording literary texts and hardly any early inscriptions survive from Iceland. But there are many in continental Scandinavia from both the Viking Age and earlier (and later) periods. They throw valuable light on the early history of the Scandinavian languages; rather less (because of their shortness) on early culture in the North. See:

R. W. V. Elliott, *Runes. An Introduction* (1959).

S. B. F. Jansson, *The Runes of Sweden* (1987).

B. Dickins, *Runic and Heroic Poems* (1915).

R. I. Page, *Runes* (1987).

E. Moltke, *Runes and their Origin. Denmark and Elsewhere* (1985).

1.5 The Scandinavian languages constitute the northern branch of the Germanic group of languages. Gothic represents the eastern branch, English, German and Dutch are members of the western branch. See:

E. Prokosch, *A Comparative Germanic Grammar* (1939).

The Germanic languages are members of the Indo-European family of languages, which also includes the Celtic languages (among which are Welsh and Irish), the Italic languages (including Latin and its derivatives, chiefly French, Italian and Spanish), the Slavonic languages (including Russian), Greek, Iranian and Sanskrit. See:

W. B. Lockwood, *Indo-European Philology* (1969).

W. B. Lockwood, *A Panorama of Indo-European Languages* (1972).

1.6 There are very few dialectal features in Icelandic, and to all intents and purposes it can be regarded as a language without dialects. On the other hand there are distinct styles of writing in the Middle Ages which have been characterised as the ‘native’ or ‘popular’ style, used in most of the sagas containing Scandinavian subject-matter, and the ‘learned’ style, which can be further

divided into the ‘clerical’ and ‘courtly’ styles, found in some saints’ lives and sagas containing romance material. Latin was certainly one of the influences on the formation of the literary language of Iceland, and Latin books were known and translated in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; moreover some Latin books were composed by Icelanders in the Middle Ages (and later). See:

P. Lehmann, *Skandinaviens Anteil an der lateinischen Literatur und Wissenschaft des Mittelalters* (1936–37); reprinted in *Erforschung des Mittelalters* V (1962).

Arngrímur Jónsson, *Opera Latine Conscripta*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, *Bibliotheca Arnarnæana* IX–XII (1950–57).

The use of the Latin alphabet was introduced into Iceland by Christian missionaries, many of whom came from England. Both the form of the alphabet used and the content of many books was influenced by foreign models, both English and from other European countries; see sections 6, 8 and 9 below. But the sagas written in the ‘native’ style are considered to be most characteristic of Icelandic culture and its greatest achievement. Both in the Middle Ages and later these sagas have been important in the development of an Icelandic national identity. See section 8 below.

2. Reference books.

The ultimate source of most of our knowledge of the literature and culture of medieval Iceland is in manuscripts written in Iceland in the Middle Ages. Original manuscripts have been lost almost entirely and we are dependent on later, sometimes much later, copies. A number of sagas are known chiefly from seventeenth-century paper copies of medieval vellum manuscripts.

The surviving manuscripts, which to begin with were mostly the personal possessions of Icelandic farmers, were nearly all collected in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by scholars who, in the wake of the renaissance revival of interest in the Middle Ages, were particularly concerned with Nordic history. This was the origin of the modern study of Old Icelandic, and the manuscripts are now mostly to be found in libraries and institutes in Reykjavík, Copenhagen, Stockholm and Uppsala, though some have found their way to libraries in London, Edinburgh, Utrecht, Wolfenbüttel and elsewhere. Some have remained until quite recently in private hands. The printed catalogues of these collections are listed in H. Bekker-Nielsen, *Old Norse-Icelandic Studies: a Select Bibliography* (1967), in *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Studies* 1971, 36–7, and in K. Schier, *Sagaliteratur* (1970), xx.

An account of the Icelandic manuscripts that survive from before 1300 is given by Hreinn Benediktsson in *Early Icelandic Script* (1965). He discusses the handwriting and spelling of these manuscripts and gives specimen reproductions of at least one page of each of them. Many of the most important manuscripts have been published in facsimile in one of the following series:

Corpus Codicum Islandicorum Medii Aevi I–XX (1930–56) [CCIMA].

Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile I– (1958–).

Íslensk handrit. Icelandic Manuscripts I– (1956–).

Manuscripta Islandica I– (1954–).

Many thirteenth-century manuscripts contain single works (or fragments of them), while in the fourteenth century many collections of texts were made in large manuscript books. Two of the most important and biggest of these to survive are *Möðruvallabók* and *Flateyjarbók*. The first contains a collection of Sagas of Icelanders, the second a collection mostly of Kings' Sagas. They are reproduced in CCIMA I and V.

Some manuscripts were illuminated. *Flateyjarbók*, for example, was elaborately decorated. Otherwise it was mostly religious and legal manuscripts, generally probably commissioned and owned by wealthy churches or maybe landowners, that were expensively illuminated. Specimens are printed in colour in Halldór Hermannsson, *Icelandic Illuminated Manuscripts of the Middle Ages*, CCIMA VII. See also Jónas Kristjánsson, *Icelandic Illuminated Manuscripts* (1993).

2.1 The standard collected edition of the sagas is in *Íslensk fornrit*, 23 volumes so far, of which the first appeared in 1933; it now contains all the Sagas of Icelanders, many of the Kings' Sagas and some Bishops' Sagas. A two-volume edition of the Sagas of Icelanders in modern spelling, *Íslendinga sögur*, appeared in 1985–86, reprinted in three volumes, 1987; this version is available on CD-rom with concordance (1996) and there is a translation in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (5 vols, 1997).

2.2 For books published before 1942 there is a fairly comprehensive list in Halldór Hermannsson, *Cornell University Library, Catalogue of the Icelandic Collection bequeathed by Willard Fiske* (1914; Additions 1913–26 [1927] and 1927–42 [1943]). From 1963 to 1980 there was the annual *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Studies* (now available on line). There are bibliographies of various genres in volumes of *Islandica*. See also H. Bekker-Nielsen, *Old Norse-Icelandic Studies: a Select Bibliography* (1967).

2.3 The following periodicals are mostly in English and contain many useful and relevant articles:

Saga-Book
Mediaeval Scandinavia
Islandica
Scandinavian Studies
Scandinavica

Arkiv för nordisk filologi and *Alvíssmál* are also devoted to northern research, but many of the articles are in German or the Scandinavian languages.

2.4 There is an encyclopaedic work of reference (again not in English) in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, I–XXII (1956–78), which has helpful bibliography on many topics. Handier is the one-volume *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano (1993). For the general history of Icelandic literature see:

Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie* I–III (1920–24).

J. de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte* I–II (1964–7).

Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature* (1957).

Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide. Ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, *Islandica* XLV (1985).

Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas* (1988).

Sigurður Nordal, *Icelandic Culture*. Tr. Vilhjálmur T. Bjarnar (1990).

3. The history of Iceland.

The earliest literary source for the history of Iceland is *Íslendingabók* (Book of the Icelanders) by Ari Þorgilsson, a priest who lived from 1067 or 1068 to 1148. No medieval manuscript of this work survives, but we have seventeenth-century copies of it transcribed from a manuscript probably written about 1200. From these it is apparent that the text we have is a revision of a work first composed between 1122 and 1133. It was probably the first narrative prose work to be written in the Icelandic language (it records that parts of the law were written down in 1117–18, and the tithing law may have been written down when it was introduced in 1096). Only one Icelandic prose author before Ari is known, Sæmundr the Wise, but it seems that he wrote in Latin. *Íslendingabók* is counted the most reliable source for the period of Icelandic history it covers, from the settlement down to 1118.

Ari is often mentioned as an authority by later Icelandic writers, and he must have written other books, but they do not now survive.

The settlement of Iceland is described in greater detail in *Landnámabók* (Book of Settlements), which gives an account of the settlement of the country area by

area, with information about several hundred individual settlers, their families and origins, and their principal achievements. *Landnámabók* survives in several versions mostly preserved in rather late manuscripts. These versions are all believed to derive ultimately from a lost book compiled by Styrmir the Wise, prior of the monastery on Viðey (d. 1245). It is possible that Styrmir's compilation was based on a yet earlier one in which Ari may have had a hand. The surviving versions of *Landnámabók* contain summaries of many stories told in the sagas about Icelanders during the first century of the settlement, but in some cases these are derived from the sagas themselves and do not therefore necessarily confirm the events in them as historical. They also contain many anecdotes which throw light on beliefs and social organisation in the early settlement period. See:

Íslendingabók. Landnámabók, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk fornrit I (1968).

The Book of the Icelanders, ed. and tr. Halldór Hermannsson, *Islandica* XX (1930).

The Book of the Settlement of Iceland, tr. T. Ellwood (1908).

The Book of Settlements, tr. Hermann Pálsson and P. Edwards (1972).

Íslenzk handrit I and III (1956, 1974) contain facsimiles of the manuscripts of *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*.

There is an excellent account of the early history of Iceland with generous extracts in translation in G. Jones, *The Norse Atlantic Saga* (1986). There are extracts from *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* in E. V. Gordon, *An Introduction to Old Norse* (1957). See also G. Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (1953), ch. 4.

3.1 One important chapter of *Íslendingabók* is devoted to the account of the conversion of Iceland to Christianity in AD 1000 (or 999), an event that had profound consequences for the subsequent history of the nation and the development of its culture. It made possible literary activity and laid the foundation for the literary tradition that led to the writing of sagas in the thirteenth century. Many of the sagas also give accounts of the coming of Christianity, but one of the fullest is in *Kristni saga*, which is probably by Sturla Þórðarson (1214–1284), compiler also of one of the versions of *Landnámabók*, and nephew of Snorri Sturluson. The later history of the church in Iceland is told in *Hungrvaka* ('Hunger-awakener', covering the period 1056–1176, and probably written in the first years of the thirteenth century) and in various Bishops' Sagas. See:

Kristnisaga . . . Hungrvaka, ed. B. Kahle, *Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek* 11 (1905).

Biskupa sögur I–II (1958–78).

Byskupa sögur I–II, ed. Jón Helgason (1938–78).

Byskupa sögur I–III, ed. Guðni Jónsson (1948).

Biskupa sögur I–III, *ÍF* XV–XVII (1998–2003). IV–V expected soon.

There is a good discussion of the conversion by D. Strömbäck, *The Conversion of Iceland* (1957).

3.2 The later secular history of Iceland is told in the compilation known as *Sturlunga saga*, which includes sagas covering much of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, mostly written within living memory of the events themselves (hence these sagas are known as ‘Sagas of Contemporaries’). The largest section of this compilation is known as *Íslendinga saga*, and this is by Sturla Þórðarson. It is the best source for the history of Iceland in the thirteenth century down to the 1260s, the period during which many of the best-known sagas were first written, and covers the life of Snorri Sturluson (Section 7 below). It can be supplemented, particularly as regards Iceland’s relations with Norway, by *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, also by Sturla. See:

Sturlunga saga I–II, ed. G. Vigfusson (1878); tr. J. H. McGrew and R. G. Thomas (1970–74).

Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar, ed. G. Vigfusson, tr. G. Dasent, *Icelandic Sagas* II and IV, Rolls Series (1887–94).

The best modern introduction to thirteenth-century Iceland is Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *The Age of the Sturlungs*, in *Islandica* XXXVI (1953). There is an excellent general history of medieval Iceland in Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth* (1974).

3.3 The medieval constitution and law of Iceland is recorded in *Grágás*, preserved in manuscripts of the late thirteenth century (and fragments from the twelfth). See:

Laws of Early Iceland I–II, tr. A. Dennis *et al.* (1980–2000).

Bandamanna saga, ed. H. Magerøy (1981), particularly pp. liv–lix.

3.4 Icelanders also wrote sagas about the other viking discoveries and colonies in the North Atlantic: about the Orkney islanders (*Orkneyinga saga*, tr. Hermann Pálsson and P. Edwards, 1981), the Faeroe Islanders (*Færeyinga saga*, tr. G. Johnston, 1975; 1994), the Greenlanders and the attempts to settle in America (*Eiríks saga rauða*, sometimes known as *Þorfinns saga karlsefnis; Grænlendinga saga; Grænlendinga þáttur*, sometimes known as *Einars þáttur Sokkasonar*). See *The Vinland sagas*, tr. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (1965); *Eirik the Red and other Icelandic sagas*, tr. G. Jones (1961); and G. Jones, *The Norse Atlantic Saga* (1986).

4. Eddic poetry.

Eddic poetry is gnomic and narrative poetry with legendary subject-matter, partly mythological and partly about human heroes (who in some cases are reflections of historical figures of the Migration Age of Europe). The poems are anonymous, composed between the ninth and twelfth centuries. They are mostly in 8-line stanzas and in an alliterative metre similar to that used in Old English, Old Saxon and some Old High German poetry, but with some metrical variations not found in those languages. About 29 poems are preserved in one fairly large manuscript collection (though this manuscript, the Codex Regius, now lacks a section of probably 8 leaves which would have held several more poems) written about 1270, and a few in a fragment of another similar collection, AM 748 I 4to. Some further poems of the same kind are preserved or quoted in Heroic Sagas (section 8.1.5 below), and one or two survive as separate items in manuscripts containing predominantly other kinds of writing (a number are quoted in the Prose Edda, see section 7 below).

Facsimiles: *Håndskriftet nr. 2365, 4^{to} gl. kgl. samling . . . (Codex Regius af den ældre Edda)*, ed. L. F. A. Wimmer and F. Jónsson (1891). Also CCIMA X.

Norræn Fornkvæði. Sæmundar Edda, ed. S. Bugge (1867).

Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius, ed. G. Neckel, rev. H. Kuhn. I, *Text* (1962). II, *Kurzes Wörterbuch* (1968), is available in English, *Glossary to the Poetic Edda* by B. La Farge and J. Tucker (1992).

The Poetic Edda, tr. L. M. Hollander (1962); tr. H. A. Bellows (1923); tr. C. Larrington (1996).

Most of the poems that are not in the main collection are edited in *Eddica Minora*, ed. A. Heusler and W. Ranisch (1903, repr. 1974) and translated in *Old Norse Poems* by L. M. Hollander (1936).

4.1 Verse epic did not develop in oral tradition in northern Europe in the Middle Ages, but heroic lays (short narrative poems about heroes of ancient time) existed from at least the time of Tacitus (second century AD). Fragments survive in Old English (*The Battle of Finnsburg*) and Old High German (*Hildebrandslied*). The heroic poems of the Edda were arranged by the medieval compiler in a sequence comprising two poems about Helgi Hundingsbani, one about Helgi Hjörvarðsson, seven about Sigurðr (the Siegfried of German tradition) and Brynhildr, and eight about Guðrún (his wife) and her family. One poem is not part of the cycle, but is about the legendary smith Vǫlundr (Wayland). The characters in some of these poems are kings who lived in the Migration Age and the stories may go back to Gothic tradition of the time of

Jordanes (6th century AD). Other stories are no earlier than the Viking Age, and one or two of the poems are probably reworkings of old material from as late as the 12th century. See:

- Tacitus, *Germania*, tr. H. Mattingly (1948).
Runic and Heroic Poems, ed. B. Dickins (1915).
The Poetic Edda I: Heroic Poems, ed. U. Dronke (1968).
J. de Vries, *Heroic song and heroic legend* (1963).
H. M. Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (1912).
W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance* (1908).
P. Hallberg, *Old Icelandic Poetry* (1975).

4.2 In the thirteenth century many of the stories preserved in heroic lays were retold in prose (Heroic Sagas, *fornaldarsögur*). The oldest of these may have been *Skjöldunga saga*, about the early kings of Denmark, probably written towards the end of the twelfth century but now lost in its original form. The first part of Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, *Ynglinga saga*, about the early kings of Norway and Sweden, was written about 1220. The later examples of this genre are more romantic: *Völsunga saga* is based mainly on the heroic poems of the Edda, *Hervarar saga* partly on other similar poems. *Þiðreks saga* uses German versions of similar material, *Karlamagnús saga* is largely translated from Old French *chansons de geste*. Heroic Sagas written even later than these, often catalogues of viking adventures rather than traditions of the heroic age, are remoter from old tradition and eventually the genre becomes one of fantasy and folk-tale and difficult to distinguish from romance.

- Fornaldar sögur Nordrlanda I–III*, ed. C. C. Rafn (1829–30).
Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda I–IV, ed. G. Jónsson (1950).
The Saga of the Volsungs, ed. and tr. R. G. Finch (1965).
Saga Heiðreks konungs ins vitra (= Hervarar saga), ed. and tr. C. Tolkien (1960).
Hervarar saga, ed. C. Tolkien and G. Turville-Petre (1956).
Hrólf's saga kraka in *Eirik the Red and other Icelandic sagas*, tr. G. Jones (1961).
Seven Viking Romances, tr. Hermann Pálsson and P. Edwards (1985).
P. Hallberg, 'Some Aspects of the Fornaldarsögur as a Corpus', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 97 (1982), 1–35.

4.3 Mythological poetry like that found in the first ten poems of the Edda (the tenth, *Alvíssmál*, is in fact placed after *Völundarkviða*, the first of the heroic poems, in the manuscript), has not survived except in Icelandic recording. It is, however, clear from the fact that many of the myths in them appear in

related form in Latin in Saxo Grammaticus' *History of the Danes* (c.1200) that they were at one time also known in other parts of Scandinavia if not more widely, and Icelandic sources are also held to give information about the mythology of the Germanic peoples in general.

The first four poems in the Edda mainly concern Óðinn. *Völuspá* is a survey of cosmology, telling of the creation of the world and its end, *ragnarök* (doom of the gods), after which a new world will appear. *Hávamál* is largely gnomic, and perhaps reflects the values of the viking worshippers of Óðinn, about whom it includes some narratives told in the first person.

Skírnismál is about the proxy wooing on Freyr's behalf of the giant-maiden Gerðr. The remaining mythological poems are mainly about Þórr, except *Lokasenna*, in which Loki insults each of the other gods in turn. This poem, like *Þrymskviða*, about Þórr's recovery of his lost hammer, is comic and satirical, though not all scholars agree that they were therefore not composed in heathen times.

The Poetic Edda II, ed. U. Dronke (1997).

The Elder or Poetic Edda I. *The Mythological Poems*, ed. and tr. O. Bray (1908).

Völuspá, ed. Sigurður Nordal (1978).

Hávamál, ed. D. A. H. Evans with *Glossary and Index* by A. Faulkes (1986–87).

Þrymskviða is edited in E. V. Gordon, *An Introduction to Old Norse* (1957).

4.4 Mythological as well as heroic material is found in some skaldic poetry (see section 5 below), in the Prose Edda (see section 7 below), and in the *History of the Danes* of Saxo Grammaticus. These literary sources give only a partial view of pagan religion. Knowledge of actual cult and worship has to be built up from the study of place-names and archaeology, supplemented with information in historical sagas (Kings' Sagas, some Family Sagas, particularly *Eyrbyggja saga*) and early Latin sources such as the ninth-century Life of St Ansgar and Adam of Bremen (eleventh century). Some information is found in Arabic accounts by Muslim travellers who met vikings in Russia and the south Baltic region. Records of early laws also give some hints. Some of this information can be confirmed from later superstition and folk-belief which can be seen as survivals from heathen times. But on the whole it is easier to find information about mythology than about religion. Our knowledge of pre-Christian beliefs and practices is very scanty, and almost non-existent from before the Viking Age except for the few statements in Tacitus and other classical writers.

Saxo Grammaticus, *History of the Danes* I–II, tr. P. Fisher, ed. H. E. Davidson (1979–80).

P. A. Munch, rev. M. Olsen, *Norse Mythology* (1926).

G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (1964).

H. R. E. Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (1964).

R. I. Page, *Norse Myths* (1990, 1994).

For St Ansgar, Adam of Bremen and the Arabic sources, see G. Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (1984), 439–40 and 425–30, and P. G. Foote and D. M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement* (1970), 408–12. See also the articles ‘Adam of Bremen’, ‘Ansgar, St’ and ‘Arabic sources’ in *MS*. For place-names see M. Olsen, *Farms and Fanes of Ancient Norway* (1928).

5. Skaldic Poetry.

The earliest skaldic poetry is from about the same time as the earliest surviving eddic poetry (ninth century), but it remained fashionable longer. Court poetry, though of a rather literary kind, continued to be composed until the second half of the thirteenth century, and religious (Christian) poetry in skaldic style remained popular throughout the fourteenth century. Skaldic poetry distinguishes itself from eddic poetry in the following respects:

PRESERVATION: Skaldic poems are preserved almost exclusively as quotations, often of only a single stanza or just a few lines, in sagas (principally Kings’ Sagas and Sagas of Icelanders) and in the Prose Edda (see section 7 below). Sometimes verses are quoted that are complete poems in themselves (*lausavísur*), but often only short excerpts are given. In some cases scattered quotations can be assembled into a more or less complete poem, but only a few long skaldic poems have been preserved entire. There are no collections of skaldic poetry in medieval manuscripts.

The quotations in Kings’ Sagas are generally to corroborate information given in the prose narrative, and are often in fact the source of that saga author’s information. In Sagas of Icelanders the verses are more often spoken by the characters in the story, and constitute part of the dialogue, or express the characters’ comments on or reaction to events in the story; such verses are thus an integral part of the narrative, or can sometimes be regarded as embellishments of it. The quotations in the Prose Edda are mostly to illustrate particular kinds of poetic diction, although some skaldic poems are also quoted in it as sources of mythological information.

The majority of skaldic poems preserved must have been handed down orally from the time of composition until they were incorporated in thirteenth-

century written works. In oral tradition they may have been accompanied by prose narrative and have been the core of anecdotes. These could have been important sources for saga-writers.

ATTRIBUTION: While all eddic poetry is anonymous, most skaldic poetry is attributed to a named poet, and in many of the quotations in the sagas the poem is associated with a particular event in the poet's experience. Many of these attributions are probably correct, though some are certainly the result of mistake or invention. Probably quite a lot of poetry was composed by anonymous poets as dramatic recreations of the attitudes and feelings of characters in traditional stories. Dating of individual poems is very problematical. Details of the lives of many poets are known from the sagas in which they appear.

SUBJECT-MATTER: A few skaldic poems survive on legendary or traditional subjects, but the majority relate to events contemporary with the poet. A large number of preserved poems are praise poems, either about a king (court poetry), sometimes composed as a memorial after his death, or about a figure from Christian tradition, or about women or addressed to them. Few of them are narrative in the ordinary sense, though the praise often involves enumeration of the subject's achievements, and frequently incorporates accounts of sea voyages and warfare. It is common for first-person comment to be included, and in long poems it seems to have been traditional to devote a section or sections of the poem to the subject of poetry itself and its composition. Some devotional poetry was composed in skaldic style in the 12th century and later.

STYLE AND METRE: Skaldic poets used a greater variety of metres than eddic poets, some of them very elaborate and making high demands on the technical skill of the poet. The most frequent form is called *dróttkvætt*. This used an 8-line stanza normally with six syllables per line, fixed rhythm in the last two syllables, alliteration linking each pair of lines and internal rhyme within each line. The diction is also inclined to be very elaborate, with extensive use of poetical words (*heiti*) and periphrases (kennings), and with interwoven sentences and clauses (though the syntax within each clause is often not complicated). This metrical and verbal complexity must have made great demands on the audience as well as on the poets, and both were evidently highly sophisticated (though not necessarily learned), and generally must have been an élite group in society. At some stages there were movements towards greater simplicity and directness, both in some Christian poems (presumably directed at a less sophisticated audience) and occasionally in court poetry (particularly in the tenth and twelfth centuries some poets composed court poetry in a style closer to that of eddic poems). Many of the kennings in skaldic verse contain

allusions to heathen mythology, and these seem to have been avoided for a while after the introduction of Christianity.

There are three kinds of overall structure in skaldic poems. *Lausavísur* were single eight-line stanzas complete in themselves, the *flokkr* was a series of such stanzas in a sequence forming a longer poem, a *drápa* was a sequence of 20 or more stanzas divided into sections marked by recurring stanzas or parts of stanzas forming a kind of refrain (*stef*).

In spite of its complexity, the cultivation of skaldic poetry, at any rate until the thirteenth century, seems to have been an oral and public activity, and there is no reason to doubt that on many occasions it was composed extempore. But although it was a highly-valued art and its successful practitioners were highly honoured and rewarded, even the court poets do not seem to have constituted a special class in society and were not truly professional poets.

In the literary period sagas were written in which the hero was a famous poet (and sometimes lover), and biographies of Icelandic poets almost became a distinct genre. But although these sagas quote a lot of the hero's poetry, they usually include verses by others as well, and no attempt seems to have been made to collect the œuvre of the hero in writing or to compose a true literary biography.

Many of the early court poets were Norwegians, and skaldic poetry was probably cultivated throughout medieval Scandinavia, though little Danish or Swedish vernacular poetry has been preserved. But from the eleventh century onwards most surviving skaldic poetry is by Icelanders, though the subject-matter remains Norwegian to a large extent. The most celebrated early poet is Egill Skallagrímsson, and the saga about him includes much of his poetry (though the attributions of many of the poems in the saga have been disputed) as well as giving a fine portrait of the viking poet. He was not only technically skilful, but also succeeded in expressing what seem to be genuine emotions in his verse.

G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry* (1969); *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (1953).

R. Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry*, *Islandica* XLII (1978).

L. M. Hollander, *The Skalds, a Selection of their Poems* (1968).

C. V. Pilcher, *Icelandic Christian Classics* (1950).

P. Hallberg, *Old Icelandic Poetry. Eddic Lay and Skaldic Verse* (1975).

P. Foote and D. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement* (1970), ch. 10.

W. A. Craigie, *The Art of Poetry in Iceland* (1937).

Egils saga, Íslenzk fornrit II (1933).

Egil's saga, tr. G. Jones (1960); tr. Hermann Pálsson and P. Edwards (1976); tr. C. Fell (1975).

Bjarne Fidjestøl, *Selected Papers* (1997).

Russell Poole, ed., *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets* (2001).

The whole corpus of non-eddic verse is collected in *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning* A I–II, B I–II, ed. Finnur Jónsson (1912–15). There is a full study of kennings in R. Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden* (1921). Finnur Jónsson, *Lexicon Poeticum* (1931) is a dictionary of skaldic usage. See L. M. Hollander, *A Bibliography of Skaldic Studies* (1958).

6. The twelfth century and learned literature.

The most productive period of early Icelandic literature, the ‘classical’ period, is the thirteenth century, and the literature of that century is largely secular narrative. But there was also a lot of literary activity in the twelfth century, mostly clerical, utilitarian or didactic, and much of it discursive (i.e. non-narrative).

The sources of much of this early literature were foreign, and indeed many of the books produced were translations. Many Icelandic clerics received education abroad, though schools were also established at the two bishop’s sees in Iceland and at the monasteries (of which there were five established in the twelfth century). It was probably the normal European curriculum that was taught in these ecclesiastical institutions, though schools of a kind may have existed in some large landowners’ houses too, where history and native traditions may have been given more emphasis. But a number of early historical works are by priests or are associated with one of the monastic centres, and some were written in Latin, like the lost works of Sæmundr the Wise and the earliest biography of Óláfr Tryggvason by the monk Oddr Snorrason.

The principal historical works of the twelfth century are Ari’s *Íslendingabók* and *Hryggjarstykki*. The latter was an account of Norwegian history in the mid-twelfth century. Little is known about its author, Eiríkr Oddsson, and his work only survives as extracts in *Heimskringla* and *Morkinskinna* (a thirteenth-century compilation of Kings’ Sagas). Towards 1200 Norwegians started to write surveys of their country’s history — short Norwegian texts of this kind survive in both Latin and Norse, though Latin works by Icelandic authors on kings of Norway are known only through vernacular histories derived from them. In Iceland the first sagas of individual kings were compiled in the late twelfth century. One of the most important early Kings’ Sagas was *Sverris saga*, chiefly the work of Karl Jónsson, abbot of the monastery at Þingeyrar in northern Iceland from 1169 to 1181 and 1190 to 1207, who had personal contact with the king. An early version of *Landnámabók* may also have been

compiled in the twelfth century, and Icelandic genealogies were certainly being written down then. *Veraldar saga* was written about the middle of the century, and is a world chronicle largely based on Latin sources.

Among the most extensive narratives in the vernacular in this period were saints' lives. These were mostly translated from Latin, though towards the end of the century lives of native saints came to be written (Icelandic bishops); and the earliest texts on the Norwegian missionary kings Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson are more like saints' lives than biographies. The first sagas about contemporary Icelanders were produced at the end of the century.

But a good deal of what was written in the twelfth century was not narrative. Homilies, partly translations, partly adaptations of foreign works, were written and collected for use by Icelandic clergy. Some theological treatises were translated, as were the *Dialogues* of Pope Gregory the Great. Treatises on geography, astronomy, chronology, the calendar and mathematics were produced, mostly based on Latin works, and *Physiologus* (a bestiary) and other 'scientific' treatises were translated. The most original was the *First Grammatical Treatise* (see sections 1.4 above and 7 below). This scholarly activity continued during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and many such works, preserved in late manuscript compilations like *Hauksbók* (early fourteenth century), probably existed in Icelandic in the twelfth century. Such works were also compiled in Norway, where the two most significant contributions were *Stjórn*, containing translations of parts of the Old Testament and a huge early fourteenth-century paraphrase of and commentary on the earliest books; and *Konungs skuggsjá* (King's mirror, c. 1250), an account of the duties of the merchant, the courtier and the king.

The laws were first compiled and codified in the twelfth century, and annals may have been started, though most of the surviving annals are from a later period.

An idea of the literary activity of early Iceland can be obtained from the list of the surviving manuscripts written in Iceland before 1300 in Hreinn Benediktsson, *Early Icelandic Script* (1965), i–liii. See also:

G. Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (1953).

G. Turville-Petre, 'Notes on the Intellectual History of the Icelanders', *History* XXVII (1942), 111–123.

D. Strömbäck, 'The Dawn of West Norse Literature', *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Studies* (1963), 7–24.

The Icelandic Physiologus, ed. Halldór Hermannsson, *Islandica* XXVII (1938), 1–15.

The Hólar Cato, ed. Halldór Hermannsson, *Islandica* XXXIX (1958), ix–xxxiv.

O. Widding, H. Bekker-Nielsen, L. K. Shook, ‘The Lives of the Saints in Old Norse Prose. A Handlist’, *Mediaeval Studies* XXV (1963), 294–337. *First Grammatical Treatise*, ed. Einar Haugen (1972); *The First Grammatical Treatise*, ed. Hreinn Benediktsson (1972).

7. Snorri Sturluson (1178–1241).

With the possible exception of Sturla Þórðarson (3.1, 2 above), Snorri is really the only medieval Icelandic author about whom we have enough biographical information and by whom enough writings survive to allow us to build up a full picture of the writer and his *œuvre*. He therefore emerges as the most eminent medieval Icelandic author. He is thought to have written the Prose Edda and *Heimskringla*, and the separate *Saga of St Óláfr*, and maybe also *Egils saga* (on this see section 5 above). Snorri was also a poet, and a fair amount of his verse survives in *Háttatal* (the third part of the Prose Edda), in *Sturlunga saga* and *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* (see section 3.2 above), and in the *Third* and *Fourth Grammatical Treatises*.

For biographical sources see Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. A. Faulkes (1982), xxxiii; this edition is available in paperback, published by the Viking Society for Northern Research (2000). Three further volumes comprise the other parts of the Prose Edda, Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. A. Faulkes, 2 vols (Viking Society for Northern Research 1998) and Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Háttatal*, ed. A. Faulkes (Clarendon Press 1991, repr. Viking Society for Northern Research 1999). The standard edition of the Prose Edda is still *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* I–III (1848–87). There is a complete translation in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, tr. A. Faulkes, Everyman’s Library (1987).

Heimskringla is edited in *Íslensk fornrit* XXVI–XXVIII; tr. L. M. Hollander (1964); tr. S. Laing, Everyman’s Library 717, 722, 847 (1961, 1964). See D. Whaley, *Heimskringla. An Introduction*. Viking Society for Northern Research (1991).

As part of the Prose Edda, or in association with it in some manuscripts, there are preserved a number of skaldic poems, including some with mythological or legendary content, some eddic poetry, including some poems not in the Codex Regius of the eddic poems, and the four *Grammatical Treatises*; see sections 1.4, 4 and 5 above and Snorri Sturluson, *Edda* (1982), vii. These last are particularly important for understanding attitudes to poetry and language in medieval Iceland.

8. The Sagas.

Because so much early Icelandic literature is anonymous, and because of the difficulties of dating individual works, it is scarcely possible to approach it author by author or chronologically. It is similarly difficult to locate works either geographically or sociologically. Some are clearly clerical works, and may have originated in one of the Icelandic monasteries or cathedral schools, others are secular, but may nevertheless have been written by clerics (cf. section 6 above). Some works are aristocratic in tone, but except for those clearly written for a Norwegian audience, it is difficult to distinguish works written for a ruling class from those intended for a wider public, and there were no urban audiences. The *Alþingi*, though undoubtedly important for the development of literature and culture as the meeting-place for people from all parts of Iceland and all levels of society, was not a permanent institution and no works seem to have originated in association with it except possibly *Íslendingabók*, *Landnámabók*, and the law codes; and there was no royal court in Iceland. Most scholars therefore describe the literature in terms of genre or subject-matter. Since most prose authors were self-effacing and non-committal, to order them in terms of the history of ideas is also impracticable, though most scholars try to distinguish pre-Christian from post-Christian texts, and to determine which ones were influenced by foreign romance. It is no longer common to try to distinguish literature of oral origin from works composed in writing, though some claim to distinguish oral elements in the written documents we possess and orality and literacy are still much discussed.

The saga is the characteristic narrative form, and modern writers would define it as a long prose narrative. Shorter narratives were not distinguished as a separate genre in medieval times, but these are now known as *þættir*, originally 'strands'; sg. *þáttur*. They are found dealing with most of the subjects that also appear in saga form and are often classified with the sagas under those subjects.

Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Dating the Icelandic sagas* (1958).

K. Schier, *Sagaliteratur* (1970).

8.1 All sagas are written as though they are history, but some can be distinguished as containing more genuine historical information than others.

8.1.1 The Kings' Sagas are mostly about the kings of Norway. Some, e.g. *Knýtlinga saga*, are about the kings of Denmark. *Jómsvíkinga saga* is about events in the Baltic as well as Norway, but is in some respects more of a Heroic Saga than a King's Saga. Sagas about Norwegian kings are mostly found in compilations, some of them of massive size and covering many reigns,

like *Heimskringla*, *Fagrskinna*, *Morkinskinna*, *Flateyjarbók* (the two last are noteworthy for containing many *þættir* about Icelanders). In most cases they are based on earlier sagas but with many accretions. Sagas of individual kings have mostly been incorporated in the compilations, but there survive various versions of the sagas of the missionary kings Óláfr Tryggvason and St Óláfr, and some ‘biographies’ written by contemporaries of kings of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Sverrir, Hákon Hákonarson).

8.1.2 The Bishops’ Sagas and Sagas of Contemporaries are about events in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland written usually within living memory and generally taken to be factually reliable. Most of the Sagas of Contemporaries are collected in *Sturlunga saga*. Some of the Bishops’ Sagas are in effect Saints’ Lives (8.1.5; see also sections 3 and 6 above).

8.1.3 The Sagas of Icelanders (or ‘Family Sagas’) relate to the ‘Saga-Age’ (AD 930–1030). As history they are inevitably less reliable than the Kings’ and Bishops’ Sagas and the Sagas of Contemporaries, though earlier ones are assumed to be more accurate than later ones. They are artistic literary works rather than folk-tales, but with a good deal of history in them. They are probably best taken as intelligent guess-work about the past, reconstructions of the probable course of events according to such sources, literary and oral, as were available. But they are shaped by the attitudes of the thirteenth-century authors. As a genre they are more like documentaries than historical novels or histories. Novels are about the possible but not actual, whether set in the present or past. Fantasy is about the desirable but not possible. Sagas are about the probable (but not provable) events of the past, narrated realistically. Invention in sagas is therefore different from that in fiction, where both author and audience know that the story is not true. In sagas the invention is of what was thought by the author and accepted by the audience as most likely to have been true. See:

W. H. Auden, *Secondary Worlds* (1968).

M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij, *The Saga Mind* (1973).

Differences can be discerned between groups of sagas from different areas of Iceland in length (those from the eastern fjords are shorter), in the inclusion of verses (more common in those from the north and north-west) and in the degree of realism (greatest in some of those from the south). It is also worth noting that all the Sagas of Icelanders are anonymous, whereas a number of the Kings’ and Bishops’ Sagas are by named authors.

The following deal with the Sagas of Icelanders as a genre:

P. Hallberg, *The Icelandic Saga* (1962).

- P. Schach, *Icelandic Sagas* (1984).
- T. M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga. An Analytic Reading* (1967).
- T. M. Andersson, 'The Icelandic Sagas'. In *Heroic Epic and Saga: An Introduction to the World's Great Folk Epics*. Ed. F. J. Oinas (1978), 144–71.
- T. M. Andersson, 'The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas', *Speculum* 45 (1970), 575–93.
- D. Pearsall, 'The Story and its Setting', *Literature and Western Civilization. The Medieval World* (1973), 371–406.
- 'Landscape in the sagas', *Times Literary Supplement* 29th August 1936.
- J. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (1982).
- J. Byock, *Medieval Iceland. Society, Sagas, and Power* (1988).
- Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age* (1998).

There are essays on various sagas in *Sagas of Icelanders. A Book of Essays*, ed. John Tucker (1989).

8.1.4 For sagas about other areas of viking settlement, see 3.4 above.

8.1.5 The Heroic Sagas (or Mythical-Heroic Sagas, also sometimes Legendary Sagas, in Modern Icelandic *fornaldarsögur*, 'sagas of ancient time') are about events before the settlement of Iceland (and therefore take place in continental Scandinavia or other parts of Europe). They, especially the later ones, tend to be more fantastic than Sagas of Icelanders. Earlier ones are often based on traditional eddic-type heroic poems. Some can be labelled Viking Sagas; the material for others goes back to the Migration Age. See 4.2 above.

8.1.6 Romances came to be translated in Norway and Iceland in the thirteenth century. The first is thought to have been *Tristrams saga*, dated 1226, and based on the earliest French version of the Tristan and Iseult story, parts of which are no longer extant in the original; other Old French texts too survive only in Norse translation. Many were translated for the Norwegian court and are associated with the patronage of King Hákon Hákonarson (reigned 1217–63). They are mostly translated from Old French poems, but into Norse prose, and they are called 'sagas' like other prose narratives. A collection of Breton *lais* was made, known as *Strengleikar*, and a number of Arthurian romances were made into sagas. Foreign texts of other kinds too were translated, such as *Alexanders saga* (from Gautier of Chatillon's *Alexandreis*), *Rómverja saga* (based on Sallust and Lucan), *Trójumanna saga* (from Latin versions of the Troy story), *Stjórn* (based on the historical books of the Old Testament), *Gyðinga saga* (based on Maccabees and a life of Pontius Pilate), *Breta sögur* (from the Latin of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*). Many

of the originals of such sagas, whether written in French or Latin, were compiled in the British Isles. Thus material from the Matter of Britain, the Matter of France, and the Matter of Rome were all made into Icelandic sagas. Saints' Lives were also translated, mostly from Latin prose.

The later romances compiled in Iceland were free reworkings of romance and sometimes heroic material and can more accurately be described as fantasies. King Sverrir called them *lygisögur* ('lying sagas'; see *Porgils saga*, 8.2). Romances as a whole are usually known as *riddara sögur* ('Sagas of Knights or Chivalry'). See:

M. Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland* (1934).

H. G. Leach, *Angevin Britain and Scandinavia* (1921).

8.1.7 Nearly all prose narratives therefore were called sagas, whatever their origin, except annals and surveys of history like *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*, or discursive works like the *Grammatical Treatises* and writings on geography and other learned subjects. Poems, whether narrative or not, are not normally called sagas either.

8.2 One of the longest-lasting controversies about the sagas concerns their origins, particularly those of the Sagas of Icelanders. It used to be taken for granted that they were composed orally and transmitted orally over several generations before being written down in the thirteenth century. More recently many scholars have argued that they are more likely to have been composed, like other extended narratives in the Middle Ages and later, by learned literary authors using both oral and literary sources. The argument has a bearing on the reliability of the sagas both as historical sources for the events of early times and as sources of information about social and religious conditions during the first century of Icelandic history; it also has implications as to the proper way to approach them as literary works. There are two important medieval documents that are often quoted in this connection, though the references to sources and origins in the sagas themselves cannot be relied upon too much. See *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*, ed. U. Brown (1952), 17–18 (also in *Islandica XXXI* (1945), 14); and *Þorsteins þáttur sögufróða*, *Íslenzk fornrit XI*, 335–6 (a version of this story is translated in J. Simpson, *The Northmen Talk* (1965), 6–7). Snorri Sturluson's prologue to *Heimskringla* and other authorial prologues in the saga literature can also be quoted. See:

P. G. Foote, 'Some account of the present state of saga-research', *Scandinavica* 4 (1965), 115–26.

P. G. Foote, 'Sagnaskemtan: Reykjahólar 1119', *Saga-Book XIV* (1953–7), 226–39.

- Hermann Pálsson, *Sagnaskemtun Íslendinga* (1962).
 Sigurður Nordal, *The Historical Element in the Icelandic Family Sagas* (1957).
 T. M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins* (1964).
 K. Liestøl, *The Origin of the Icelandic Family Sagas* (1930).
 Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga and Society* (1993).
 Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar íslenskra sagnaritara á miðöldum* (1988).
 [English summary on pp. 398–413]

8.2.1 Another controversy has centred on the extent of foreign influence on the sagas, in particular about whether they can be regarded as having their origin in imitation of foreign romances, or even saints' lives. Some have believed that, as in other countries, books in Iceland must all have been written by clerics; others argue that the sagas are a secular genre and that there must have been a body of writers distinct from and uninfluenced by the learned class of clerics, and that there must have been a separate audience for secular literature from that for which religious literature was compiled. Certainly most writers about whom we know anything in the twelfth century seem to have been clerics, while in the thirteenth century there was a separation between secular and religious authority and many of the writers were secular. Even so, it should not be forgotten that secular authors would generally have had the same basic education as clerical authors, and it would not necessarily have made much difference to their writing which they were. See:

L. Lönnroth, *European Sources of Icelandic Saga-Writing* (1965).

An interesting theory was put forward by Sigurður Nordal in *Sagalitteraturen* (1953; Nordisk Kultur VIII B), that in the twelfth century saints' lives provided romance and sensational entertainment for the unsophisticated, while scholars wrote dry historical works. In the thirteenth century there was a unification of the imaginative tendency with realism and historicity in the sagas, but later the two tendencies diverged again and Icelandic literary culture fragmented once more into romance and fantasy on the one hand and annals and history on the other. Many of the datings on which this theory was based, however, have since been called into question.

8.2.2 The sagas are admired not only for their realism and authorial detachment but also for their restrained style, which is generally simple and lacking in the more obvious rhetorical devices except understatement and irony. Not all sagas conform to this 'saga style' to the same degree, however, and it is clear that there was a fashion for ornaments of style in the later thirteenth century that affected all kinds of saga-writing, though particularly religious

and chivalric narratives. Attempts have been made to divide sagas into clerical, courtly and popular narratives, though the relationship of such divisions to social conditions in medieval Iceland is not clear.

8.3.1 *Hrafnkels saga* is particularly important because the arguments about the origins of the sagas have tended to focus particularly on it, and it has been the subject of intensive investigation, e.g.:

Sigurður Nordal, *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* (1958).

P. Halleux, *Aspects littéraires de la saga de Hrafnkell* (1963).

The text of this saga is edited in E. V. Gordon, *An Introduction to Old Norse* (1957), and translated by Hermann Pálsson (1971).

8.3.2 The greatest and longest of the Sagas of Icelanders is *Njáls saga*. There is a facsimile of one of the many medieval manuscripts in *Manuscripta Islandica* 6, and a text in *Íslenzk fornrit* XII. The translation by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson has a useful introduction. Several interesting books have been written about this saga:

Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Njáls saga. A Literary Masterpiece* (1971).

R. F. Allen, *Fire and Iron* (1971).

L. Lönnroth, *Njáls saga. A Critical Introduction* (1976).

Other major sagas that are particularly worth reading are *Egils saga* (see section 5 above), *Laxdæla saga* (*Íslenzk fornrit* V, translations in Penguin Classics and Everyman's Library), *Eyrbyggja saga* (*Íslenzk fornrit* IV, translation by P. Schach and L. M. Hollander, 1959, and in Penguin Classics, 1989), and *Grettis saga* (*Íslenzk fornrit* VII, translation in *Three Icelandic Outlaw Sagas*, Everyman Paperbacks, 2001).

9. Late medieval and modern Icelandic literature.

In the later Middle Ages copies of the old literature were assiduously made, but as far as new writing was concerned, the traditional forms of composition were replaced by new ones. Little new prose was written except for annals, some lives of saints and bishops, and fictional sagas. These last were imitations of earlier Sagas of Icelanders, Heroic Sagas and Romances, with a good deal of mixing of these types. The later sagas became more and more like fairy-tales. One new kind of prose that was introduced was the *exemplum*, the short anecdote or fable (*ævintýri*), used to illustrate a moral teaching. Collections of these were translated from Latin and Middle English in the fourteenth century and had a certain popularity. Religious legends were also popular.

Although few of the older type of sagas were compiled after the beginning of the fourteenth century, the older sagas were collected and copied and made into large compilations in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and were sometimes reworked into new versions. Many thirteenth-century sagas are now known only in versions made in later centuries. A number of the most splendid and important manuscripts are the result of this zealous scribal and editorial activity of the late Middle Ages in Iceland.

But the most fruitful area for new writing was in poetry. Eddic and skaldic poetry gave way to ballads (many of them translations or adaptations of foreign ballads; they had only a limited vogue in Iceland, where they are referred to as *dansar*) and *rímur*. *Rímur* are a peculiarly Icelandic genre and became a highly popular form of entertainment that continued until recent times (they are often sung or chanted). In diction they continue the skaldic tradition, but they are narrative poems, often very long and divided into sections or fits, and contain passages of lyric called *mansöngur*. The metres are like ballad metres (rhyming and in short stanzas) but rhythmically akin to some alliterative metres, and often highly elaborate. The material was often taken from sagas of various kinds, with a preference for the spectacularly adventurous, but they have a wide variety of subject. Although they became popular and many people came to know them by heart, they were always a somewhat literary genre, nearly always using literary sources and quite artificial in style and manner.

Religious poetry too changed in form, and by the fifteenth century the skaldic style had given way to simpler and more straightforward styles. One of the most popular poems ever composed in Iceland was Eysteinn Ásgrímsson's *Lilja*, a long devotional poem from about the middle of the fourteenth century (translation in Pilcher, 9.2 below) in a metre which had been introduced in the eleventh century under the influence of Latin hymnody.

Rímur and fictional sagas continued popular until modern times and are found in many manuscripts.

Some of the later Sagas of Icelanders are edited in *Íslenzk fornrit XIII* and *XIV*. The ballads are edited by Jón Helgason, *Íslenzk fornkvæði I–VIII* (1962–81). They are discussed by Vésteinn Ólason, *The Traditional Ballads of Iceland* (1982). Some *rímur* are collected in W. A. Craigie, *Sýnisbók íslenzkra rímna. Specimens of Icelandic Rímur I–III* (1952). Most of the later fictional sagas are collected in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, ed. A. Loth, Editiones Arnamagnæanæ B XX–XXIV (1962–5).

9.1 With the renaissance there came about a revival of interest in medieval Iceland, both in Iceland itself and abroad. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries a number of Icelandic scholars compiled works in Latin

(Arngrímur Jónsson, Magnús Ólafsson), which in some cases were published abroad. There were also some ‘men of the people’ who contributed to the revival by collecting early texts and writing about them in Icelandic (Björn of Skarðsá, Jón lærði). These antiquarians sometimes used texts that are now lost, so that their work can have particular value to modern scholars. See:

Arngrímur Jónsson, *Opera Latine Conscripta*, ed. J. Benediktsson, Bibliotheca Arnarnagnæana IX–XII (1950–57).

Two versions of Snorra Edda from the 17th century I–II, ed. A. Faulkes (1977–9).

Eddurit Jóns Guðmundssonar lærða I–II, ed. Einar G. Pétursson (1998).

9.2 After the Reformation in Iceland (1550), a large number of (Lutheran) hymns and other devotional poems were composed; the prose writings on religious subjects that soon became popular (and were printed in Iceland) were to a large extent translations (often from German). The most significant of the early protestant poets was Hallgrímur Pétursson, whose works are still widely read. Stefán Ólafsson (though like most writers of the period a priest) was a more secular writer. The seventeenth to nineteenth centuries also produced a number of more or less unlearned ‘peasant’ poets such as Bólu-Hjalmar. See:

Hallgrímur Pétursson, *Passíusálmar*.

C. V. Pilcher, *Icelandic Christian Classics* (1950).

Stefán Ólafsson, *Kvæði* I–II (1885–6).

9.3 Iceland has a rich folk-lore, comprising poetry, folk-tales, fairy-tales, riddles, proverbs etc. This was mostly collected from oral tradition in the nineteenth century (though collection continues today) and represents peasant culture largely from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries (when Iceland was under Danish rule), though it may contain some relics of pre-reformation times. The folk stories in particular give a good picture of Icelandic life in the eighteenth century and are in an elegant prose style.

Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri I–II, ed. Jón Árnason (1862, repr. 1954).

Íslenzkar gátur, skemtanir, vikivakar og þulur I–IV, ed. Jón Árnason and Ólafur Davíðsson (1887–1903, repr. 1964).

9.4 Icelandic lyric poetry developed in the nineteenth century largely under the influence of European romanticism. Some good poetry has been, and continues to be, produced. To begin with, the revival of poetry was closely connected with the nationalist movement and tended to be largely a celebration of Icelandic tradition, but there is some original work among it.

There has been little drama in Iceland before this century, though some

plays were written from the late eighteenth century onwards, and it has been argued that eddic poems represent a primitive form of Scandinavian drama. Prose fiction has developed in the same period and there have been some distinguished novelists, particularly Halldór Kiljan Laxness, some of whose novels have been translated, and Jón Trausti. They are at their best depicting Icelandic rural life. The saga tradition lies heavy on them.

Many of the books now being published in Iceland are memoirs and recreations of life in Iceland earlier this century.

Halldór Laxness, *Independent People* (tr. 1945).

Halldór Laxness, *Salka Valka* (tr. 1936).

Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature* (1957).

Icelandic Lyrics. Originals and Translations, ed. Richard Beck (1930).

Icelandic Poems and Stories. Translations from Modern Icelandic Literature, ed. Richard Beck (1943).

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Islandica XLV (1985).

M. Clunies Ross, ed., *Old Icelandic Literature and Society* (2000).

P. Foote, *Aurvandilstá: Norse Studies* (1984).

E. V. Gordon, ed., *An Introduction to Old Norse*, 2nd ed. rev. A. R. Taylor (1957).

J. Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age: the Vocabulary of Runic Inscriptions and Skaldic Verse* (2001).

J. Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (1996).

Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas* (1988).

Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder I–XXII (1956–78).

R. McTurk, ed., *A Companion to Old Norse–Icelandic Literature and Culture* (2005).

Sigurður Nordal, *Icelandic Culture*, tr. Vilhjálmur T. Bjarnar (1990).

P. Pulsiano, ed., *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (1993).

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Einar Skúlason's Geisli, A Critical Edition, ed. M. Chase (2005).

Gunnlaugs saga, ed. P. Foote and R. Quirk (1953).

Hávamál, ed. D. Evans, with *Glossary and Index* by A. Faulkes (1986–87).

Hervarar saga, ed. C. Tolkien and G. Turville-Petre (1956).

Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar, ed. Guðrún P. Helgadóttir (1987).

Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. A. Faulkes (2nd edn 2005).
 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. A. Faulkes, 2 vols (1998).
 Snorri Sturluson, *Háttatal*, ed. A. Faulkes (1991, repr. 1999).
Stories from the Sagas of the Kings, ed. A. Faulkes (1980).
Two Icelandic Stories, ed. A. Faulkes (1978).
Two Tales of Icelanders: Ögmundar þáttur dytts og Gunnara Helmings. Ólkofra þáttur, ed. I. Wyatt and J. Cook (1993).
Vafbrúðnismál, ed. T. W. Machan (1989).
Víga-Glúms saga, ed. G. Turville-Petre (1960).
Völuspá, ed. S. Nordal, tr. B. Benedikz and J. McKinnell (1978).
Porgils saga ok Hafliða, ed. U. Brown (1952).

Texts with parallel translation:

Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum, ed. M. J. Driscoll (1995).
The Book of the Icelanders, ed. Halldór Hermannsson, *Islandica* XX (1930).
Clemens saga, ed. H. Carron (2005).
The First Grammatical Treatise, ed. Einar Haugen (1972), ed. Hreinn Benediktsson (1972).
Fourteenth-Century Icelandic Verse on the Virgin Mary (2001), ed. K. Wrightson (2001).
 R. Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry*, *Islandica* XLII (1978).
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Guta saga, ed. C. Peel (1999).
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Historia Norwegie, ed. I. Ekrem and L. B. Mortensen, tr. P. Fisher (2003).
Jómsvíkinga saga, ed. N. Blake (1962).
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The Poetic Edda I: Heroic Poems, ed. and tr. U. Dronke (1969).
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The Poetry of Arnórr jarlaskáld, ed. and tr. D. Whaley (1998).
Saga Heiðreks konungs ins vitra (= *Hervarar saga*), ed. and tr. C. Tolkien (1960).
The Saga of the Volsungs, ed. and tr. R. G. Finch (1965).

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The Saga of Grettir the Strong, tr. Bernard Scudder (2005).

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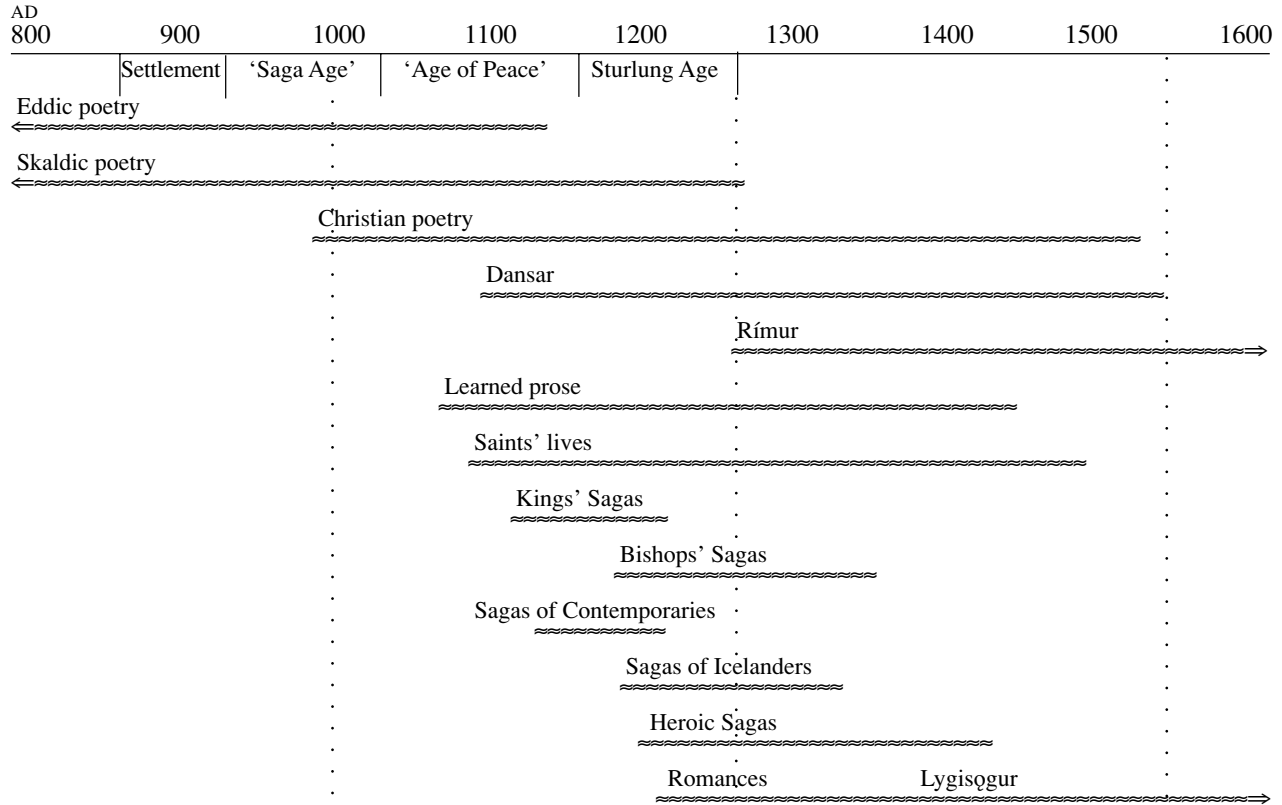
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The Life of Gudmund the Good, Bishop of Hólar, tr. G. Turville-Petre and E. S. Olszewska (1942).
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 Oddr Snorrason, *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, tr. T. M. Andersson, *Islandica LII* (2003).
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CHRONOLOGY

AD		Poets fl.
c. 725	<i>Beowulf</i> written	
793	First viking raid on Northumbria	
c. 850	Beginning of viking settlement in England	[Bragi the Old
c. 870	Beginning of viking settlement in Iceland	
871	Alfred the Great becomes king of England	
c. 885	Haraldr finehair becomes king of all Norway	[Þjóðólfr of Hvinir [Þorbjörn hornklofi
930	Foundation of <i>Alþingi</i>	
963	Division of Iceland into quarters	[Eyvindr skáldaspillir
c. 985	Beginning of settlement of Greenland	[Egill, Kormakr
995	Óláfr Tryggvason becomes king of Norway	[Einarr skálaglamm
999/1000	Christianity accepted in Iceland	[Hallfreðr
c. 1000	Discovery of America by vikings	
c. 1005	Fifth court established	
1010	Burning of Njáll	

- 1014 Battle of Clontarf [Sighvatr
1030 Fall of St Óláfr [Arnórr jarlaskáld
1056 First bishop at Skálaholt. Sæmundr the Wise born [Þjóðólfr Arnórsson
1066 Fall of Haraldr harðráði in England. Battle of Hastings
1067 Ari the Wise born
1096 Tithe laws introduced
1106 First bishop at Hólar
1117–18 Laws first written down
c. 1125 *Íslendingabók* compiled
1133 First monastery established (at Þingeyrar)
c. 1150 Earliest Icelandic manuscript fragments
1153 Archbishopric established at Niðaróss [Einarr Skúlason
c. 1170 *First Grammatical Treatise. Hryggjarstykki*
1179 Snorri Sturluson born
c. 1190–1210 *Sverris saga*
1197 Jón Loftsson dies
1199 Bishop Þorlákr of Skálaholt declared saint
1200 Bishop Jón of Hólar declared saint
1214 Sturla Þórðarson born
1215–18 Snorri lawspeaker
1217 Hákon Hákonarson becomes king of Norway
1218–20 Snorri's first visit to Norway
c. 1220 The Prose Edda
1222–31 Snorri lawspeaker again
1226 *Tristrams saga*
1237–9 Snorri's second visit to Norway
1240 Duke Skúli killed
1241 Snorri Sturluson killed 23rd September
c. 1250 Oldest surviving manuscript fragment of a saga of Icelanders (*Egils saga*)
1262–4 Icelanders acknowledge the king of Norway as their sovereign
1263 King Hákon dies
c. 1275 Codex Regius of eddic poems. *Morkinskinna*
c. 1280 *Njáls saga. Hrafnkels saga*
1284 Sturla Þórðarson dies
c. 1320 *Grettis saga*
c. 1340 Chaucer born
c. 1350 *Möðruvallabók* written [Eysteinn Ásgrímsson
1382 *Flateyjarbók* begun
1397 Norway and Iceland come under Danish rule
1550 Reformation in Iceland
1944 Iceland regains complete independence



The diagram shows the approximate periods during which the various medieval Icelandic literary genres were cultivated. The dotted lines mark the time of the conversion to Christianity (1000), the end of the Commonwealth (1262) and the Reformation (1550).

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