

Kings' Sagas and Norwegian History

The Northern World

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Peoples, Economies and Cultures

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Kings' Sagas and Norwegian History

Problems and Perspectives

By

Shami Ghosh



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For Manini

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Medieval Norwegian History and the Problem of Sources

As is the case with the other medieval Scandinavian kingdoms—and unlike, for example, England or France—there are few written sources for the history of Norway from before c.1200.¹ Those wishing to study the earlier history of Norway, Denmark and Sweden must rely primarily on archaeological data as the only truly contemporary native evidence. Of the surviving texts, documentary material is only extant in reasonable quantity from c.1200 (somewhat earlier for Denmark; somewhat later for Sweden); the prior past of these three kingdoms is accessible in the written record primarily through narratives composed during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which tell of the history of Scandinavia from prehistoric times right up to the authors' present. In most cases, especially for the period before the twelfth century, these texts cannot be checked against external evidence, although there do exist a few narratives produced outside Scandinavia, which occasionally provide some (normally very sketchy) contemporary accounts from the ninth century onwards. A further potential problem is that many of the extant texts were composed by Icelanders; Iceland was a more-or-less independent commonwealth until 1262–4, though its poets and magnates often served in the courts of various Scandinavian kings. As is the case with the kingdoms, there are no contemporary native narratives of Icelandic history from before the twelfth century. Using the extant texts thus often means seeing Scandinavian history through an Icelandic lens, and considering the extent to which this reflects the views of the other peoples of Scandinavia.

Contemporary written narratives of Danish history begin somewhat earlier than for the rest of Scandinavia, probably because Denmark was

¹ I exclude runes from this study; although useful for social and linguistic history, they rarely contain any narrative or information relevant for political history. For orientation on runic scholarship, see Düwel's brief survey (2004); and in more detail: Page (1987b), and Sawyer (2000). Specifically on Norwegian runes: Spurkland (2005).

geographically closer to continental Europe, and perhaps also because the Danish king Knútr (Canute) ruled England during the early eleventh century, and England was already home to a more flourishing literary culture than anywhere in eleventh-century Scandinavia.² Danish historical writing begins with hagiography around the year 1100; more secular histories commence in the 1130s with annalistic works. The *Chronicon Roskildense* (c.1140)³ is the earliest Danish (and Scandinavian) history with more of a narrative content. We have also, apart from the thirteenth-century vernacular works (produced largely by Icelanders), the brief history of Sven Aggesen (c.1185–c.1188)⁴ and the voluminous history of Saxo Grammaticus (c.1208)⁵ in Latin.

Latin historical writing in Norway begins in the middle of the twelfth century, but no works on Norwegian history before the thirteenth-century vernacular compendia can begin to compare with the scope of Saxo's Danish history.⁶ There are no Latin histories specifically of Sweden from this period; vernacular works date from the middle of the thirteenth century or later. The most detailed accounts of the histories of these kingdoms are provided in the vernacular Old Norse texts known collectively as the 'kings' sagas' (*konungasögur*), which were written down in the decades around 1200, and are thought to have been composed, almost exclusively, by Icelanders.⁷ The present study is concerned with the sagas on Norwegian kings of the past (and thus excludes sagas on contemporary kings), which predate, as far as can be ascertained, the vernacular works

² For an account of early Danish literature, see Colbert (1992: 5–18). An excellent recent history of Knútr's reign is provided by Bolton (2009); discussion of some of the difficulties presented by the few native sources that might be contemporary is given in Townend (2001; 2002a; 2005).

³ Gertz (ed. 1917–22, i: 14–33).

⁴ Gertz (ed. 1915–16). For a translation with a good introduction: Christiansen (trans. 1992).

⁵ Friis-Jensen and Zeeberg (ed. and trans. 2005). For extensively annotated English translations: Ellis Davidson and Fisher (trans. 1979–80) (books I–IX); Christiansen (trans. 1980–1) (books X–XVI). For a recent introduction: Riis (2006).

⁶ There is little literature that is normally considered 'Norwegian' from before c.1200; see, however, Knirk (1993: 10–32), for a discussion of the beginnings of Norwegian literature that complicates this picture somewhat. The problem of national designations arises from the close relations between Iceland and the rest of Scandinavia, the Icelandic origins of many of the extant manuscripts, and the fact that many texts seem to have had audiences, and also some kind of (probably oral) antecedents, in Norway.

⁷ For accessible introductions to the kings' sagas: Ármann Jakobsson (2005); Sverrir Tómasson (2006: 98–122); see also Knirk (1993: 28–32). Theodore Andersson's magisterial survey of scholarship up to c.1980 remains indispensable (1985); it is complemented by Whaley (1993a).

about the Danish and Swedish kings; with the exception of the Roskilde chronicle, the Latin histories of Norway (which are somewhat lengthier than the Roskilde chronicle) also appear to have been the earliest native Scandinavian secular histories, preceding Sven Aggesen by some years, and Saxo by a few decades.

Since there exist a number of different sagas of Norwegian kings, all of which, however, cover largely the same events, the efforts of earlier scholarship were principally directed to explicating the relationships between the various texts, and to identifying their sources. Only in the past two decades has significant effort been given to illuminating the role(s) of these works within their social, historical and literary contexts.⁸ The issues include, for example, the authenticity of the information provided; the authors' concepts of history and truth; and the kinds of influences, literary or otherwise, under which the narratives were produced. The aim of the present work is threefold: to present a critical overview of the recent research on these newer topics of interest; to highlight some of the more important problems posed by the source material; and to suggest some pathways for further research.⁹ Furthermore, it is hoped that this monograph might also provide some pointers as to how the study of the kings' sagas could be better integrated into the larger field of scholarship on medieval European historiography: in her survey of 1993, Diana Whaley stated that "one of the greatest challenges in this area still to be met is to establish how the *konungasögur* relate to other medieval European historiography",¹⁰ and while there have been some significant studies attempting to meet this challenge, there remains much work yet to be done on this aspect of the kings' sagas.

In the remainder of the present chapter, I provide an overview of the sagas, their content and dates of composition, as well as their principal cited sources: the skaldic verse that the saga authors use as authentication for their narratives. Chapter two presents a detailed consideration of the issues arising in connection with the use in the sagas of verse that

⁸ Some of the newer avenues of scholarship were already signalled by Diana Whaley (1993a); on *Heimskringla* (*Hkr*), a study opening up new areas of scholarship was presented by Bagge (1991).

⁹ Note that this is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of research; the focus is on works since c.1985, and on studies most relevant for the principal themes of the present work. Earlier scholarship and studies of cognate research fields have been cited very selectively, though I have tried in all instances to indicate the standard syntheses or works of reference.

¹⁰ Whaley (1993a: 57).

is thought to be contemporary with the events reported in the sagas, and how this verse relates to the prose narrative in which it is embedded. Chapter three examines the possibility of influence from non-Scandinavian sources on the composition of the sagas, and suggests that more attention needs to be given to the cultural traffic around the North Sea in the years *c.*1000–*c.*1200 in order better to understand how the kings' sagas relate to the wider sphere of medieval European historiography, which experienced a significant period of development on the continent and in England from around 1100 onwards. The last chapter considers the function of the kings' sagas in their contemporary political context, and also raises some questions arising from the fact that they were composed by Icelanders, at a time when Iceland was increasingly coming under Norwegian domination.

The Kings' Sagas (konungasögur)

Non-hagiographical historical writing in Scandinavia begins in the twelfth century, and the first extant historical work is Ari Porgilsson's *Libellus Islandorum* or *Íslendingabók* (*Ísl*),¹¹ a narrative of the settlement and conversion of Iceland (Ari lived from 1068 to 1148; the first, no-longer extant version of *Ísl* was written *c.*1125, and the second by 1133).¹² According to all extant accounts, Iceland was settled primarily from Norway, and

¹¹ For orientation: Hermann (2007); Sverrir Tómasson (2006: 76–80); Whaley (2000: 169–72). For more detailed interpretation: Duke (2001); Mundal (1994); and the introduction and notes in Grønlie (trans. 2006). In the following, I provide page references to English translations of cited medieval primary sources, where available. Where I cite the original from an edition with facing-page translations, no further references are given for the latter. Where I refer only to verse, if the verse numbering is identical in the original and the translation, no references are given for the latter. However, the reference to a published English translation does *not* indicate that that is the translation actually presented in the present text: all translations provided here are my own, unless explicitly stated otherwise. The verse is cited from editions of the sagas in which it appears; references to the new editions (with translations) of the complete corpus of skaldic poetry are also given where available, and these should in every case be consulted for the current state of scholarship. Note that although portions of many of the texts cited below are also translated in the readers of Page (1995) and Somerville and McDonald (2010), I provide no individual references to these latter works, which are more useful for a synoptic overview in translation of the primary sources than for consulting individual texts.

¹² For an introduction to historical writing in Iceland (excluding works of contemporary history): Whaley (2000); see also Würth (2005), for a very brief introduction placed within a broader context of literature dealing with the past.

Icelanders remained interested in the history of the land of their origin.¹³ Ari tells us that he had included “konunga ævi” (“kings’ lives”) in the first version of *Ísl*.¹⁴ It is not known which kings he dealt with, or in how much detail. However, there is a reference in *Heimskringla* (*Hkr*), written in the thirteenth century, to Ari as the first to write in Norse, and the author apparently knew Ari’s work on the kings, so it appears to be the case that Ari’s “konunga ævi” remained available in some form at least till the early thirteenth century.¹⁵ Ari’s was possibly the second work written on the

¹³ For more nuanced perspectives, cf. the critical studies on the settlement of Iceland by Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson (2003), Orri Vésteinsson (1998), and Sayers (1994).

¹⁴ *Ísl*: 3 (Grønlie, trans. 2006: 1).

¹⁵ “Ari prestr inn fróði Porgilsson, Gellissonar, ritaði fyrstr manna hér á landi at norrœnu málí frœði, bæði forna ok nýja [...] Hann tók þar ok við mórg önnur dœmi, bæði konunga ævi í Nórégi ok Danmörku ok sva á Englaði eða enn stórtidendi, er gørzk hófðu hér á landi” (*Hkr* I: 5–7; *HkrH*: 4–5: “The priest Ari the Wise, son of Porgils, son of Gellir, was the first of men in this land to write lore in the northern tongue, both old and new [...] He also included many other narratives, both the lives of kings in Norway and Denmark and of the kings of England or any major events which had taken place here in this land”). Similar praise occurs in the prologue to the *Separate saga* on Óláfr helgi Haraldsson (*Hkr* II: 419–22), and in more condensed form in *Ólafs saga helga* (*Hkr* II: 326; *HkrH*: 473). There are also explicit references to Ari as a source for chronological information in both versions of *Ólafs saga helga* (*Hkr* II: 410; *HkrH*: 533): “Óláfr konungi inn helgi var þá hálfertögr at aldri, er hann fell, at soga Ara prests ins fróða” (“King Óláfr the Holy was thirty-five years old when he fell, according to the narrative of priest Ari the Wise”); *Hkr* II: 431 (this comes from the prologue to the *Separate saga* and is not translated by *HkrH*): “Pat var tveim vetrum síðar en Hákon konungr fell, at soga Ara prests ins fróða Porgilssonar” (“That was two winters since King Hákon fell, according to the narrative of priest Ari Porgilsson the Wise”); and in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* (*Hkr* I: 239; *HkrH*: 153–4): “Svá segir Ari prestr Porgilsson, at Hákon jarl væri þrettán vetr yrir fðjúrleifð sinni í Prándheimi, áðr Haraldr gráfeldr fell, en sex vetr ina síðustu, er Haraldr gráfeldr lifði, segir Ari, at Gunnhildarsynir ok Hákon borgðusk” (“Priest Ari Porgilsson says that Jarl Hákon spent thirteen years on his patrimony in Trondheim before Haraldr gráfeldr fell, and during the last six winters that Haraldr gráfeldr lived, Ari says, the sons of Gunnhildr and Hákon fought each other”). *Hkr* names Oddr Kolsson, grandson of Hallr af Síða, as Ari’s source for the *ævi Nóregskonunga* (*Hkr* I: 6; *HkrH*: 4): “Hann ritaði, sem hann sjálfur segir, ævi Nóregskonunga eptir soga Odds Kollsonar, Hallssonar af Síðu, en Oddr nam at Porgeiri afráðskoll, þeim manni, er vitr var ok svá gamall, at hann bjó þá í Niðarnesi, er Hákon jarl inn ríki var drepin” (“He wrote, as he himself says, the lives of the kings of Norway following the narrative of Oddr Kolsson, the son of Hallr of Síða, and Oddr got his information from Porgeir, a man who was wise and so old that he settled there in Niðarnes when Jarl Hákon the Mighty was killed”); Hallr is said in *Hkr* to have been one of the first Icelanders converted to Christianity in the reign of Óláfr Tryggvason (*Hkr* I: 319–20; *HkrH*: 209): “[Pangbrandr] kom til Íslands í Austfjörðu í Álptafjörð inn syðra ok var eptir um vetrinn með Halli á Síðu. Pangbrandr boðaði kristni á Íslandi, ok af hans orðum lét Hallr skírask ok hjón hans óll ok margir aðrir hófðingjar” (“Pangbrandr arrived in Iceland in South Álptafjörð in the East Fjörð district, and lived with Hallr af Síða that year. Pangbrandr preached Christianity in Iceland, and because of his words Hallr had himself baptised, along with all his household, and many other chieftains as well”). Ari does not actually name Oddr as an informant, doubtless because the extant text of *Ísl* no longer includes the Norwegian kings’ lives; in his account of the

subject: the priest Sæmundr Sigfússon (1056–1133) is referred to in Oddr Snorrason's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason (c.1190) as a source,¹⁶ and a reference in a poem known as *Nóregs konungatal*, thought to have been composed c.1190 and preserved in the *Flateyjarbók* manuscript of c.1390, seems to indicate that Sæmundr narrated the lives of the ten kings following Haraldr hárfagri.¹⁷ This is all we know about Sæmundr's work; given that Ari is said in *Hkr* to have been the first to write in the vernacular, it is likely that Sæmundr wrote in Latin. Clearly, both Ari's and Sæmundr's histories were available in the years around 1200, and were thus potential sources for the writers of the many still-extant histories composed in this period. Nevertheless, we should stress that even these earliest written sources do not date from before the twelfth century; if Sæmundr started with Haraldr hárfagri Hálfdanarson, he wrote about a king who lived two centuries before his own time.

Ari's and Sæmundr's works on the Norwegian kings of the past are now lost; the extant texts (excluding histories of contemporary kings in the thirteenth century) may be divided into three categories: the so-called Norwegian synoptics, which comprise the vernacular *Ágrip af Nóregs*

conversion too, Hallr is the first named Icelander to be converted, though Ari also actually gives the names of many of the “margir aðrir hófðingjar” (*Ísl*: 14; Grønlie, trans. 2006: 7). For discussion of *Hkr*'s use of Ari, cf. Sverrir Tómasson (1988, 279–90), who argues that the “konunga ævi” was an important source, not just of information, but also of ideology, providing the framework on which the *Hkr*-author elaborated. On the narrative of conversion as presented in *Ísl* and later sources, see Jochens (1999: 645–7).

¹⁶ “ok þessir menn samþykjkjask, Sæmundr enn fróði ok Ari enn fróði Porgilssonr” (Ólafur Halldórsson, ed. 2006b: 209 (MS S; MS A diverges only slightly); Andersson, trans. 2003: 74: “and these men, Sæmundr the Wise and Ari Porgilsson the Wise, agree on this”); “þessa bings getr Sæmundr prestr hinn fróði, er ágætr var at speki” (MS A); “ok þessa getr Sæmundr enn fróði, at hann samnaði saman seiðmönnum” (MS S); “ok slikt sama segir Sæmundr frá Óláfi konungi, at hann samnaði saman miklu fjölmenni í Niðarnesi af seiðmönnum” (MS S)(Ólafur Halldórsson, ed. 2006b: 232–3; Andersson, trans. 2003: 85: “priest Sæmundr the Wise, who was famous for his wisdom, reports about this assembly” (MS A); “and Sæmundr the Wise reports that he [sc. Óláfr Tryggvason] assembled wizards” (MS S); “and Sæmundr also says the same about King Óláfr, that he assembled a great multitude of wizards at Niðarnes” (MS S)).

¹⁷ “Nú hefk talt / tíu landreka, / þás hverr vas / frá Haraldi. / Inntak sva / ævi þeira, / sem Sæmundr / sagði inn fróði” (Gade, ed. and trans. 2009, ii: 761–811, at p. 784, st. 36: “Now I have recounted the ten rulers, each of whom was descended from Haraldr; I have told their lives as Sæmundr the wise said”). *Flateyjarbók* is edited by Guðbrandur Vigfússon and C. R. Unger (eds 1860–8); on this compilation, cf. Rowe (2006); Würth (1991); both are concerned only with specific sections known as *þættir* (discussed further below). On *Nóregs konungatal*, in addition to Gade's edition, cf. Sverrir Tómasson (2002).

konungasögum (*Ágrip*; c.1190),¹⁸ and the *Historia Norwegie* (*HN*; c.1150–c.1200)¹⁹ and *Historia de Antiquitate regum Norwagensium* of Theodoricus Monachus (*HARN*; c.1180), both in Latin,²⁰ the three vernacular compendia, *Morkinskinna* (*Msk*; c.1220),²¹ *Fagrskinna* (*Fsk*; c.1225),²² and *Heimskringla* (*Hkr*; c.1225–c.1235);²³ and finally, a number of independent hagiographic sagas about the two Óláfrs held (in most medieval, and also many modern accounts) to be primarily responsible for the conversion of Norway and Iceland:²⁴ Óláfr Tryggvason (reigned 995–1000), who was the subject of two Latin lives by the Icelandic monks Oddr Snorrason (c.1190; this survives only in an Icelandic translation made c.1200) and Gunnlaugr

¹⁸ I cite Bjarni Einarsson (ed. 1985a); an alternative edition and translation is given by Driscoll (ed. and trans. 1995).

¹⁹ The date of the *Historia Norwegie* has occasioned some controversy: according to its most recent editor it was most probably written between the years 1160–75 (Mortensen 2003: 24), but opinions have varied widely; an overview of the discussion is in Mortensen (2003: 11–24). An alternative translation to that by Peter Fisher (published with Ekrem and Mortensen's edition), is provided in Kunin and Phelpstead (trans. 2001); references to the latter are not, however, given below.

²⁰ A heavily annotated translation is provided by McDougall and McDougall (trans. 1998).

²¹ I have normalised the spacing between words and expanded abbreviations, but retained the orthography given in Finnur Jónsson's edition; Unger's edition (1867) has also been consulted, though only cited from in a few instances, which are explicitly indicated. Andersson and Gade's translation (*MskAG*) provides a concordance of verses and episodes. The new edition of *Msk* (2011) was released too late to be incorporated into the present work; a concordance of cited passages has been provided to enable ease of reference.

²² *FskF* provides a heavily annotated translation, which includes cross-references to verse numbering in editions of the other compendia, and also gives the page numbers Bjarni Einarsson's edition, cited in the present work.

²³ A translation of the whole text is given by Lee M. Hollander (*HkrH*; the verse numbers in parenthesis refer to the numbers in Bjarni's Aðalbjarnarson's edition); his translations of verse must always be checked against the translations in the new edition of skaldic poetry (Gade, ed. and trans. 2009; Whaley, ed. and trans. forthcoming; note that although these are collaborative editions, for ease of reference they are cited only by the name of the volume editor, rather than by the name of the editor and translator of each individual poem). The saga of Haraldr Sigurðarson from *Hkr* is translated separately by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (trans. 1966), who present a more readable text of the verses than *HkrH*, but for the sake of consistency, I have given references only to Hollander's complete translation.

²⁴ The view provided by the sagas, that the two Óláfrs were responsible for a more or less top-down process of conversion, is no longer generally accepted. On the conversion of Norway: Bagge (2005); Bagge and Nordeide (2007); specifically on the efforts of Hákon góði (Aðalsteinsfóstri) Haraldsson in Norway: Williams (2001). On the conversion in Iceland: for brief surveys, see Byock (2001: 292–7); Kaufhold (2001: 75–81); and for a more detailed presentation: Jochens (1999). For a stimulating critique of past scholarship, see Orri Vésteinsson (2000). On the contrasting Icelandic and Norwegian narratives of the conversion of Iceland, see also Weber (1981).

Leifsson (c.1200);²⁵ and Óláfr helgi Haraldsson, who was the subject of two, now-lost, Latin hagiographical accounts and a still-extant *Passio et miracula beati Olavi*²⁶ (all probably composed in the middle years of the twelfth century), and about whom a number of vernacular sagas were also written. One of these is now lost; another, the so-called *Legendary saga* (*Ólhelg*), was composed c.1200, and might have been a source for the compendia, certainly appearing to draw on much of the same material; the third, Styrmir Káráson's saga, drawing on earlier accounts, is also now largely lost (fragments survive in *Flateyjarbók*), but was apparently used by the author of *Hkr* for his saga of Óláfr helgi.²⁷ In addition, there is the poem *Nóregs konungatal*, already referred to above, which provides very brief accounts (generally one or two verses) of the kings from Hálfdan svarti (late ninth century) to Sverrir (1177).

In the years around 1200, other works narrating Scandinavian history were also written, which may have been known to the authors of the vernacular sagas in the compendia. Some, such as *Orkneyinga saga*, which dealt with the earls of the Orkneys, and **Færeyinga saga*, on the Faroe islands (the latter work only survives from excerpts in the sagas on the two Óláfrs), are considered to be relatively 'historical' in their value, and are also thought to be fairly early, perhaps composed in the first decades of the thirteenth century, contemporaneously with the compendia. Others, such as *Jómsvíkinga saga* (composed c.1200–c.1230), about a viking group said to have been based on the Baltic shore of Germany, and **Skjoldunga saga* (a history of the Danish Skjoldung dynasty; this survives only in a much later Latin translation), are more legendary in nature and

²⁵ Gunnlaugr's work only survives in fragments translated in the late-thirteenth-century *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta*; the present study, however, only considers sagas up to the three compendia. The Norse translation of Oddr's history is edited by Ólafur Halldórsson (ed. 2006b), and translated by Andersson (trans. 2003).

²⁶ The text is in Metcalfe (ed. 1881); it is translated by Kunin and Phelpstead (trans. 2001).

²⁷ On the place of the sagas on the two Óláfrs in literary history, cf. Andersson (2006: 21–59); Phelpstead (2007) presents a study of hagiographic kings' sagas that asserts strongly the links between hagiographic traditions and the kings' sagas (specifically on the sagas on Óláfr helgi Haraldsson: 117–56); Laity (2004) provides a comparative study of the depiction of Óláfr in the *Ólhelg* and in *Hkr*. See also Fidjestol (1997a; 1997c) for discussions of *Hkr*'s accounts of the two kings and possible influences on these narratives; Bagge (2006) on the formation of hagiographic traditions around Óláfr Tryggvason, with extensive further references; and Foerster (2009: 79–95), for a brief discussion of the 'southern' influence on northern hagiographic traditions about the two Óláfrs and Knútr. For an introduction to religious literature in medieval Iceland: Sverrir Tómasson (2006: 158–73); specifically on hagiographic sagas: Cormack (2000; 2005).

are considered closer to the genre of *fornaldarsögur* (normally rendered in English as ‘legendary sagas’, though actually meaning ‘sagas of ancient times’).²⁸ Two other histories are also known to have existed and thought to have had some influence on the composition of the extant kings’ sagas: a history of the jarls of Hlaðir (**Hlaðarjarla saga*);²⁹ and **Hryggjarstykki*, probably a narrative primarily about Sigurðr slembir, a pretender to the Norwegian throne (died 1139), written by the Icelander Eiríkr Oddsson. The latter work was written around 1150 and is used by all three of the compendia;³⁰ it appears to have been the first independent (vernacular) kings’ saga. Unlike the synoptics and compendia, which narrate for the most parts events of at least a generation ago, and none of which are concerned with contemporary history, **Hryggjarstykki* was clearly a record of current events, and was, according to *Hkr*, based on eyewitness accounts,

²⁸ *Orkneyinga saga* is edited by Finnbogi Guðmundsson (ed. 1965), and translated by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (trans. 1982); **Færeyinga saga* is edited by Ólafur Halldórsson (ed. 2006a) and translated by George Johnston (trans. 1975); *Jómsvíkinga saga* is edited and translated by N. F. Blake (ed. and trans. 1962); and **Skjoldunga saga* is edited by Bjarni Guðnason (ed. 1982b). The *fornaldarsögur* are a relatively neglected genre, and are, like the kings’ sagas, narratives of the past. They are generally agreed to have been composed in their present form in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, though they might well go back to oral antecedents of some sort; the material they contain is inevitably related to events of the very distant past, which we would place in the eighth or ninth centuries, or earlier. An introduction is given by Sverrir Tómasson (2006: 145–51); for more detailed studies in English, see Mitchell (1991); Torfi Tulinius (2002; summarised in *idem* 2000).

²⁹ On this text and its possible later use, see Andersson (1998).

³⁰ *Msk* explicitly draws on a narrative by Eiríkr Oddson, though to what extent *Msk* is actually dependent on **Hryggjarstykki* cannot be determined (*Msk*: 419; *MskAG*: 375: “Nv er at segja fra sonom Haralls konvings Inga oc Sigurþi sem sagt hefir vitr maþr oc scynsamr Ericr Oddzson”; “Now it shall be told about the sons of King Haraldr, Ingi and Sigurðr, as was narrated by Eiríkr Oddsson, a wise and sensible man”). Eiríkr’s work is also referred to in *Hkr*, in which the title of the work is given: “Svá segir Eiríkr Oddsson, er fyrsta sinn reit bessa frásagn” (*Hkr* III: 313; *HkrH*: 743: “Thus says Eiríkr Oddsson, who wrote this narrative for the first time”); “Svá sagði Guðriðr Birgisdóttir, systir Jóns erkibiskups, Eiríki Oddssyni, en hon lézk Ívar biskup heyra þat mæla” (*Hkr* III: 317; *HkrH*: 747: “Guðriðr Birgisdóttir, the sister of Archbishop Jón, told this to Eiríkr Oddsson, and she claimed that she heard Bishop Ívar say this”); “Eiríkr reit bók þá, er kólluð er Hryggjarstykki. Í þeiri bók er sagt frá Haraldi gilla ok tveimr sonum hans ok frá Magnúsi blinda ok frá Sigurði slembi, allt til dauða þeira. Eiríkr var vitr maðr ok var í þenna tíma löngum í Noregi” (*Hkr* III: 318–19; *HkrH*: 748: “Eiríkr wrote the book which is called Hryggjarstykki. In this book is a narrative about Haraldr gilli and his two sons and about Magnús blindr and Sigurðr slembi, until their deaths. Eiríkr was a wise man and at that time he spent many years in Norway”); “Svá sagði Eiríki Ketill prófastr, er varðveitti Máriukirkju, at Sigurðr væri þar grafinn” (*Hkr* III: 320; *HkrH*: 749: “The provost Ketill, who had custody of St Mary’s Church, told Eiríkr that Sigurðr was buried there”). *Fsk* contains no such explicit reference, but it has been suggested that the text “is indebted to **Hryggjarstykki* both as a direct source and indirectly via the influence of **Hryggjarstykki* on *Msk*” (Finlay 2004: 10).

as well as the fact that Eiríkr himself was, according to *Hkr*, in Norway for a long time.³¹

Mention should also be made of another such work of contemporary history that predates the compendia, but is still extant: *Sverris saga*, which was written about the king Sverrir Sigurðarson (reigned 1177–1202), at least in part by the Icelander Karl Jónsson, abbot of the Benedictine monastery at Þingeyrar.³² Although the present study excludes this text from consideration because the issues arising in a saga about a living king are of necessity rather different from those concerning narratives about kings in the more-or-less distant past, the methods and techniques used by the author of *Sverris saga* might well have influenced authors of the later compendia,³³ and its existence, at least, needs to be kept in mind. Furthermore, the synoptics were written during the period of civil war immediately preceding and during Sverrir's rule, and the compendia during the rule of his grandson Hákon Hákonarson; both reigns were contested (see further below). A study of the relationship between *Sverris saga* and the sagas of past kings might therefore well prove illuminating with regard to the political ideologies of the various saga authors and their perspectives on the changing face of Norwegian kingship and its relationship to Iceland during this turbulent period.

Sverris saga and the sagas of kings of regions other than Norway will be discussed briefly on occasion in the following chapters, but the present work makes no claim to provide a study of all the kings' sagas; only the compendia and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the synoptics, will receive

³¹ “ENN nefnir Eiríkr fleiri menn, er honum sogðu frá þessum tíðendum, vitrir ok sanreyndir, ok váru nær, svá at þeir heyrðu eða sá atburðina, en sumt reit hann eptir sjálfs sin heyrn eða sýn” (*Hkr* III: 319; *HkrH*: 748: “And Eiríkr names many wise and reliable men who told him about these events, and who were nearby, so that they heard or saw what happened, and some things he wrote according to what he himself heard or saw”); cf. the previous footnote on Eiríkr's presence in Norway.

³² *Sverris saga* is edited by Þorleifur Hauksson (ed. 2007), and translated by Septon (trans. 1899). On *Sverris saga* and the other major contemporary kings' saga, about Sverrir's grandson, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* (Mundt, ed. 1977; Dasent, trans. 1894; this was composed 1264–6, after the period of concern for this study), see Bagge (1996), and Orning (2008); for an introduction: Sverrir Tómasson (2006: 16–21). The date of composition of *Sverris saga* has been the object of some dispute; see most recently Orning (2008: 40–1) for discussion. At least part of it was written by Karl Jónsson in the 1180s, and the rest, perhaps by another author, in the first quarter of the thirteenth century. *Hákonar saga* is agreed to have been written by the Icelander Sturla Þórðarson, nephew of Snorri Sturluson and one of the last significant Icelandic skalds.

³³ Beyschlag (1986).

much detailed treatment.³⁴ In the following paragraphs, I provide brief introductions to these two groups of texts.³⁵

We do not possess the very beginning of *Ágrip*, but the extant text starts with the death of Hálfdan svarti, the father of Haraldr hárfagri, in c.880, and ends with the accession of Ingi krókhryggr Haraldsson in 1136. It is thought that the original text included all of the reign of Hálfdan, and continued till the accession of Sverrir in 1177, though there is no firm evidence of this.³⁶ Theodoricus's history spans about the same period, beginning with the reign of Haraldr Hálfdanarson, and concluding with Sigurðr Jórsalafari Magnússon in 1130; Theodoricus explicitly says that he stops here because he does not wish to write about the degenerate time that followed the death of Sigurðr.³⁷ Both texts do cite verse, but it is notable that Theodoricus, although referring to Icelandic verse as a historical source

³⁴ The reason for this is primarily a matter of scope; to consider the later, contemporary sagas, as well as the hagiographic texts on the Óláfrs, the more or less legendary material of *Skjoldunga saga* and *Knýtinga saga* (on Knútr and his sons: Bjarni Guðnason, ed. 1982a; Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, trans. 1986), and the Latin histories of the Danish kings, would take the present work far beyond manageable proportions. Furthermore, the bulk of the literature on the kings' sagas, which it is the aim of the present work to survey, focuses on the compendia and the synoptics, primarily because of the overlap in material and sources, and also because staying with these works allows scholars to concentrate on themes relating to the histories of Norway and Iceland, and the relationships between the two countries. This is not to deny, however, that studies of the kings' sagas aiming for an understanding of their place in the historical consciousness of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Scandinavia would be enriched by including other works of past history, whether sagas of other kings, hagiographies, *Íslendingasögur* ('sagas of Icelanders' or 'family sagas'; see further below at n. 60), or *fornaldarsögur*, as only all such works taken together can begin to present a real glimpse into the value and function of the past in medieval Scandinavian society; almost all these works are contained, moreover, in Icelandic manuscripts (though not exclusively so), and are thus of relevance for understanding the Icelandic view of the past.

³⁵ No attempt is made in the following overview at a full exposition of the issues concerning authorship, date and textual relationships. For discussion of the textual relationships and dates, readers should consult, in the first instance, Andersson's survey (1985); the first port of call for further information on the synoptics, *Msk* and *Fsk* should be the introductions to the recent translations, listed in the bibliography; and for *Hkr*, Whaley (1991).

³⁶ Driscoll (1995: x).

³⁷ HARN: 67, ll. 6–13 (McDougall and McDougall, trans. 1998: 53, 11–18): "Nos quoque hujus schedulæ hic finem facimus, indignum valde judicantes memoriarum posterorum tradere scelera, homicidia, perjuria, parricidia, sanctorum locorum contaminaciones, Dei contemptum, non minus religiosorum deprædationes quam totius plebis, mulierum captivations et cetera abominationes, quas longum est enumerare. Quæ ita exuberaverunt quasi in unam sentinam post mortem prædicti Regis Siwardi" ("We shall, however, make an end to this little note here, judging it greatly unworthy to pass on to the memory of those to come the crimes, murders, perjuries, parricides, desecrations of holy places, the contempt of God, and the plunderings no less of the religious than of the whole people, the captures of women and other abominations, which it would take long to enumerate.

(see below), only ever explicitly cites Latin verse, and not as a historical source. *Ágrip*, on the other hand, while containing only seven verses, appears to be very much like the later sagas of the compendia in terms of the method in which verse is used, with verses fulfilling all the functions in which they are later employed by the authors of the compendia.³⁸

The *HN* is of a somewhat different nature from both these works: clearly modelled on non-Scandinavian Latin histories, and written in a more learned style than the *HARN*, it begins with a geographical description of Scandinavia, and then commences its report of Norwegian history with a narrative of the mythical Ynglingar dynasty, not recorded in either of the other two synoptics, or in *Fsk* or *Msk*.³⁹ It ends abruptly in the middle of Óláfr helgi Haraldsson's reign in 1015, but it is apparent from the prologue that the work was intended to continue up to the author's own time.⁴⁰ The *HN* appears to adopt a somewhat more sceptical stance than the other two synoptics—and the compendia—with regard to some of the received tradition about the Norwegian past (for example, the unification of Norway under Haraldr hárfagri or the survival of Óláfr Tryggvason after the battle of Svǫldr; these events are discussed further in chapter two). All three works were composed by Norwegians,⁴¹ and appear to betray some measure of a Norwegian bias. Theodoricus's history is dedicated to Eysteinn Erlendsson (an opponent of King Sverrir Sigurðarson), archbishop of Niðaróss (now Trondheim); *Ágrip* also appears to have been composed in the Trøndelag area. The *HN* cannot be securely located, but Lars Boje Mortensen suggests that it was not associated with the see of

All of which overflowed as if in one cesspit after the death of the afore-mentioned King Sigurðr".

³⁸ O'Donoghue (2005: 25–45).

³⁹ Mortsensen (2003: 17–18) identifies as its most important sources Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesie pontificum* (written c.1065–c.1070; Schmiedler and Trillmich, eds and trans. 1968a) and Honorius of Autun's *Imago mundi* (written between 1110 and 1139; Flint, ed. 1983; note that the same author's *Elucidarius* was translated into Old Norse c.1200: see below, chapter three, n. 132), both of which could have incited the author to begin his work with a geographical introduction, which was quite commonplace in the continental Latin historiographical tradition, but does not occur in the other Norwegian works (note, though, that *Ynglinga saga* in *Hkr* contains a very brief geographical description of the northern lands: *Hkr* I: 9–10).

⁴⁰ "Si quid uero nostris temporibus memorie dignum accidisse repperi, hoc ipse addidi" (*pref.*: "And indeed if I found anything that happened in our own time worthy of being remembered, I have added it").

⁴¹ We should note, though, that *Ágrip* survives in an Icelandic manuscript; for discussion of the author's nationality, cf. Driscoll (1995: x–xii).

Niðaróss, originating rather in royal or episcopal circles from somewhere in eastern Norway, predating Sverrir's rise to power.⁴²

Nothing is known about the authors' ultimate Scandinavian sources for their narratives, though the lost histories of Ari and Sæmundr seem to be likely possibilities, and oral reports of some sort, whether verse or prose, Icelandic or Norwegian, must also have played a role. It seems certain that there was some relationship between the synoptics, though exactly what this was has not been conclusively determined.⁴³ Even though none of the synoptics is explicitly cited in any of the compendia, all three were potential sources for the latters' authors. All the synoptics are characterised by their brevity. For example, in the Íslenzk fornrit edition, *Ágrip* covers 54 pages; in the same edition, the shortest of the compendia, *Fsk*, takes over 300 pages. One of the significant ways in which the compendia expand on the synoptics is by the introduction of verses, though the prose narratives are also far more detailed. A question that has often preoccupied earlier scholarship is the extent to which the authors of the synoptics also had access to any of the verse quoted in the compendia; this relates to the equally important question as to the purpose of the expansion in the later works. It should be noted that the time in which the compendia were written appears to have witnessed the rise of an increasingly stable and (relative to earlier ages) centralised monarchy in Norway, whereas the synoptics were written during a period of civil war.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the compendia were composed when Iceland was coming increasingly

⁴² Mortensen (2003: 22–4).

⁴³ Andersson (1985: 201–11); Mortensen (2003: 16–17)

⁴⁴ On this period of Norwegian history (c.1130–c.1270), during which the monarchy, after about a century of unrest, managed to gain the upper hand and some stability, and Iceland and the outlying regions of Norway were brought firmly under royal control, see Helle (2003); on the narratives and ideology of kingship, cf. Bagge (1987; 1996), and Orning (2008). Narrative accounts of this period are provided primarily in the kings' sagas (for Norway) and *Sturlunga saga* (for Iceland); the broad outline seems to be confirmed by the early documentary material that is extant from the thirteenth century. It should be noted that stability was only really achieved by the end of this period, and it would not have been apparent in the 1220s (when *Fsk* and *Msk* were probably written) that the newer forms of monarchical government would ultimately prevail. *Sturlunga saga* is a compilation of texts (belonging to the genre known as *samtíðarsögur*, 'contemporary sagas') dealing with Icelandic history between c.1117 and 1264; the title stems from the fact that much of its content treats of the Sturlungar, one of the most powerful families in Iceland in this period. The text is edited by Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnþogason and Kristján Eldjárn (eds. 1946), and translated by Julia McGrew (trans. 1970–4). For introductions: Guðrún Nordal (2000); Úlfar Bragason (2005); more detailed studies are in Guðrún Nordal (1998); Tranter (1987).

under Norwegian control.⁴⁵ Thus the fact that such works, using a large amount of possibly Icelandic verse about Norwegian kings, were written during this period, is in itself one that raises many questions as to the texts' function in the political relationships between Icelanders and the Norwegian kings. Reference will often be made to the three synoptics in the chapters below, but because the compendia provide so much more detail, and also draw so significantly on verses that were purportedly composed at the time of the events reported—and were thus possibly sources for the synoptics, or might at least have been known to the authors of these texts—the focus will be on the three compendia.

Of these, *Msk* and *Hkr* seem certainly to have been composed by Icelanders; the nationality of the author of *Fsk* is a matter of some doubt, but he is generally thought to have been Norwegian. The oldest of the compendia is *Msk*, thought to have been composed c.1220, possibly at the monastery of Munkaþverá in Iceland.⁴⁶ It begins with the reign of Magnús góði Óláfsson (1034), and ends in 1177; by far the longest section is the joint saga of Magnús and Haraldr Sigurðarson. A significant feature of this text is its inclusion, within the sagas of kings, of a large number of *þættir* (plural of *þáttir*), short narratives about Icelanders abroad, which give the text as a whole a distinctly Icelandic perspective on Norwegian kingship.⁴⁷ It has long been the least studied of the three compendia, though this situation has now begun to be rectified with the major critical work of Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade in the introduction and apparatus to their translation, and Ármann Jakobsson's monograph devoted to *Msk*.⁴⁸ *Msk* is agreed to have been a source for both the other compendia; as to its own sources, it is not really possible to get beyond postulating some sort of combination of a vaguely-defined 'oral tradition', and some written works, including the lost **Hryggjarstykki*, and possibly some Anglo-

⁴⁵ On Icelandic political history in the civil war period, see Jón Jóhannesson (1974: 226–87) for the most accessible survey in English; more recent discussions are in Gunnar Karlsson (2004: 316–65); Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (2007); Sverrir Jakobsson (2009: 163–70). More generally, on Icelandic social and political structures up to the absorption of Iceland by Norway, see Byock (2001); Gunnar Karlsson (2004); Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (1999). Byock and Jón base themselves primarily on accounts from the *Íslendingasögur*, while Gunnar prefers the lawcode (*Grágas*) and *Sturlunga saga*.

⁴⁶ Andersson and Gade (2000: 66–72).

⁴⁷ For an introduction to *þættir*: Rowe and Harris (2005); further discussion is in chapter four.

⁴⁸ Andersson and Gade (2000); Ármann Jakobsson (2002).

Norman histories;⁴⁹ much of the material, especially the *þættir*, stems from no identifiable source.

Fsk is thought to have been composed c.1225,⁵⁰ and “is usually considered to have associations with the court of King Hákon”⁵¹ It begins, like *Ágrip*, with Hálfdan svarti, and ends during the civil wars between Magnús Erlingsson’s faction and the Birkibeinar (Hákon’s grandfather Sverrir was supported by the latter group). It is unclear whether the author was Norwegian or Icelandic, without any compelling arguments for either nationality having been proposed; the text seems to be more favourable to the Norwegian kings than was *Msk*, but this does not make it necessarily less likely that the author was Icelandic.⁵² What is certain is that although the author of *Fsk* seems certainly to have known *Msk*, he elided almost all of the ‘Icelandic’ elements of the earlier compendium, leaving out the *þættir* about Icelanders that are such an important feature of the older work. But the *Fsk*-author did not just provide an expurgated version of *Msk*: he also clearly had sources not used, or used differently, in *Msk*; these probably included *Ágrip* and the sagas of the two Óláfrs. In addition, not all the verse cited in *Fsk* is also in the other compendia, with the author of *Fsk* sometimes appearing to include whatever verses he knew on a particular topic, without necessarily being very selective.

In this regard, as in many other things, *Hkr* differs from *Fsk*. Although there is no internal evidence in the text itself, *Hkr* is attributed to Snorri Sturluson, one of the most powerful *goðar* (chieftains; plural of *goði*) of Iceland in the first half of the thirteenth century (1178/9–1241).⁵³ Snorri sought (not entirely successfully) the patronage of Hákon Hákonarson, for whom he is thought to have composed *Háttatál*, a catalogue and commentary on skaldic verse forms; this poem is preserved as a part of the

⁴⁹ There is a thorough discussion of the oral and written sources in Andersson and Gade (2000: 11–65).

⁵⁰ See, however, Ólafia Einarsdóttir (2002) for a later dating of *Fsk* to c.1235.

⁵¹ Finlay (2004: 1).

⁵² Neither Norwegian nor Icelandic authorship of *Fsk* and *Ágrip* can be proven; Alison Finlay gives a tentative proposal of Icelandic authorship of *Fsk* (Finlay 2004: 15–17; O’Donoghue 2004: 96, also believes that *Fsk* was composed by an Icelander). We should note that Finlay’s argument rests largely on the belief that Norwegians would not have had much facility with verse, which seems to be an implausible assumption (the poets’ ethnicity is discussed further in chapter two). One could even argue that the author of *Fsk* chooses to follow the form of *Msk* not because he is Icelandic, but because he is not: in order to present, using an ‘Icelandic’ form of the compendium, a more positive image of the Norwegian kings than that given by *Msk*.

⁵³ On the nature of the power of the *goðar* and its exercise, cf. Gunnar Karlsson (2004); Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (1999).

work known as known as *Snorra Edda*, a discourse on mythology and poetics, which modern scholars and one medieval manuscript attribute to Snorri.⁵⁴

There is no unequivocal contemporary evidence in support of the belief that Snorri composed *Hkr*, and even if Snorri did author the text, there could be a substantial difference between what he wrote and the surviving manuscript versions. The authorship of *Hkr* has been much debated, with Patricia Pires Boulhosa recently providing a very critical view; other recent sceptical voices include Alan Berger, Margaret Cormack, Jon Gunnar Jørgensen and Jonna Louis-Jensen.⁵⁵ Berger, particularly controversially, points out that the circumstantial evidence for Snorri's authorship could equally well be applied to *Fsk* instead of *Hkr*; he also suggests that *Hkr* might have been written decades later than the prevailing scholarly consensus. In another major recent work on the kings' sagas, Tommy Danielsson, although open to scepticism, continues to refer to *Hkr*'s author as Snorri;⁵⁶ Whaley, in the standard introduction to *Hkr* in English, also accepts the view that Snorri was the author of *Hkr*.⁵⁷

Because of the difficulties involved with identifying Snorri as the author of *Hkr*, in the following I do not do so, though, given that there is no certainty either way on this issue, I do not discount the possibility, and on occasion I do raise certain arguments that are related to Snorri's life and how that might have influenced the composition of *Hkr*. We should note also that an independent saga about Óláfr helgi Haraldsson (the so-called *Separate saga*), much of which is, however, incorporated within *Hkr*, is also attributed to Snorri; regardless of whether he was the author or not,

⁵⁴ For introductions to Snorri's life and the issues relating to his authorship of *Hkr*: Bagge (1991: 1–63); Ciklamini (1978: 16–42); Whaley (1991: 13–40). On Snorri's *Edda*, see in brief Abram (2011: 24–7; 207–21), and Clunies Ross (2005: 157–84). Wanner (2008) is the most recent monographic study of the purpose and function of this text, and includes an up-to-date discussion of Snorri's life and political activities in relation to his literary pursuits (16–93), though scarcely mentioning *Hkr*. *Snorra Edda* is edited and translated by Anthony Faulkes (ed. 1982–98; trans. 1995). On the authorship of the prologue to Snorri's *Edda*, see also von See (1999: 275–310), who believes that the prologue is too theologically informed to have been composed by Snorri.

⁵⁵ Berger (1999); Boulhosa (2005: 6–21); Cormack (2001); Jørgensen (1995); Louis-Jensen (1997).

⁵⁶ Danielsson (2002b: 349–54; 65–7); in this context, cf. also Kolbrún Haraldsdóttir (1998), who argues that *Hkr* was not simply a compilation of earlier sources, but bears the stamp of authorial intention; she does not, however, adduce any evidence proving that Snorri was the author.

⁵⁷ Whaley (1991: 13–19).

there is sufficient correspondence between *Hkr* and the *Separate saga* to assume that both were composed by a single author.

Hkr is thought to have been composed in the years between 1225 and 1235; the intended audience of this work is a matter of speculation, though it is conceivable that it was intended for Hákon Hákonarson. *Hkr*, like the *HN*, but unlike all the other histories, goes back to a mythical pre-history, presenting a euhemerised version of Norse mythology in which the gods are said to be men of Asian origin who move to the north and become kings (the content of this origin narrative corresponds roughly to that given, in more extended form, in the prologue to *Snorra Edda*); this race of kings is called the Ynglingar, and Haraldr hárfagri Hálfdanarson is said to have originated from this dynasty. The narrative of pre-historic or mythological kings is contained in *Ynglinga saga*, the first part of *Hkr*, and is purportedly based primarily on *Ynglingatal*, a poem that is supposed to date from the reign of Haraldr hárfagri (c.880?–c.930?), and is presented as a part of the prosimetrum of *Ynglinga saga* (the other main verse source for the saga is the poem *Háleygjatal* by the poet Eyvindr skáldaspillir, also known only from *Ynglinga saga*, and thought to date the late tenth century). The narrative of *Hkr* extends to 1177 and the accession of Sverrir, as is the case with the other compendia.

Hkr is much longer and in many ways more detailed than either of the two other compendia, which the author clearly knew; nevertheless, it is characterised not by including everything contained elsewhere and more, but by a very perceptible authorial control and selection, and many verses and narratives given by the other compendia are elided in *Hkr*. For this reason, it is a work that has over the years generally been deemed of the highest literary quality of all the kings' sagas, and has also received more attention from a literary, interpretative perspective. Like the other compendia, *Hkr* includes plenty of verse, though in this work, after *Ynglingatal*, almost all the verse is in the *dróttkvætt* stanza, which is the most complex and formal of the metres employed in skaldic verse (see below); the author is also clearly more discriminating than the *Fsk*-author, fitting his verse more carefully into the prose, and omitting many verses included in *Fsk*. There is manifestly an effort to give the sagas of the individual kings a greater sense of narrative coherence than had been attained in the other compendia. Although Snorri Sturluson was certainly an Icelander, if he was the author of *Hkr*, he seems to have omitted the more explicitly Icelandic elements included in *Msk* (such as the *þættir*), and, according to some scholars, presents a largely pro-Norwegian view

of the history of the Norwegian kings (this aspect is discussed further in chapter four).

The names given to all three compendia are not original; *Morkinskinna* (“rotten parchment”) and *Fagrskinna* (“fair parchment”) are so-called because of the physical appearance of the earliest manuscripts, and *Heimskringla* (“circle of the world”) is the name assigned to the text in the sixteenth century and derived from the first two words of *Ynglinga saga*, with no medieval evidence to support such a title for the whole work. Manuscripts of the compendia divide up the sagas of the individual kings, so it is clear that they were intended as compilations of kings’ sagas, each of which was thought to have a distinct identity, though there are often overlaps between the individual sagas. It is generally accepted that the coherence of style and overall ideological tendency within each compendium points to a single author and authorial intent.⁵⁸

Skaldic Verse

Although the sagas were written only in the early thirteenth century, they draw considerably on verse accounts of events that they present as having been composed by poets associated with the kings, who were, therefore, contemporaries and often eyewitnesses. The principal pre-twelfth-century narrative source for Scandinavian history with any claim to being contemporary is therefore skaldic verse. This genre of poetry is notoriously complicated in its language, style and metre; it is often thought that this very complexity guaranteed a stability of content over centuries, and that the verse written down in the thirteenth century thus accurately records verse composed in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ For discussions of the question of author versus compiler (with regard to *Hkr*), cf. Kolbrún Haraldsdóttir (1998), and Wanner (2008, 26–8); more generally on the issue of saga authorship, see Kári Gíslason (2006), particularly useful for its extensive further references.

⁵⁹ The word ‘skald’ simply means poet, and skalds would have been reciters and composers of both ‘skaldic’ and ‘eddic’ verse (the latter term derives from the title of the so-called *Poetic Edda*); the distinctions are modern and have to do largely with the relative stylistic complexity and lack of narrative content in the former, though the content also tends to vary in that eddic metres tend not to be used for political or panegyric poetry, but rather for what we think of as mythological and heroic narratives. For concise introductions to skaldic verse: Vésteinn Ólason (2006: 27–53); Whaley (2005); Vésteinn provides more of a historical overview, while Whaley’s paper is a better introduction to matters of style. Frank (1985) remains an excellent survey of the main issues; von See (1999: 193–274) presents a more discursive and contentious reading of skaldic verse in the context of European

While skaldic verse can cover any number of diverse subjects, the poems cited in the kings' sagas are, for the most part, panegyrics, with some element of reportage about the immediate past. Some of the verses are also—as is more often the case in the *Íslendingasögur*⁶⁰—embedded within the narrative in such a way that they form a part of the dialogue, or present a response to a particular situation rather than a report that is supposed to corroborate the prose. Skaldic verse was manifestly a prized art form in Scandinavia, and many skalds were, according to later accounts, important figures in the courts of the Scandinavian kings; skalds of the period between c.900 and c.1110 were the subjects of a number of later sagas, which attest to their commemoration as outstanding figures in the Icelandic past. Skaldic verse continued to be cultivated well into the thirteenth century; Snorri Sturluson himself, as well as his nephew Sturla Þórðarson (who wrote a king's saga, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*), were accomplished poets, and like Snorri and Sturla, other skalds also appear

literary history. For a broader introduction to Old Norse poetry (including eddic poetry) and its possible functions, see Fidjestol (1997b; specifically on skaldic verse: 319–20); and more discursively, Gade (2000b), which focuses primarily on skaldic verse. Clunies Ross (2005) provides a thorough history of Old Norse poetry and poetics, again with attention given mainly to skaldic verse; see especially pp. 69–82 on the transmission and citation of verse in the sagas. Frank (1978) is a useful introduction to the style, content and history of skaldic verse that provides a good selection of texts with translations. Fidjestol (1982) provides a thorough overview of the verse presented in the king's sagas, as well as the difficulties involved in dating and attribution, and the reconstruction of long poems from individual stanzas. For technical studies of metre and style: Frank (1978); Gade (1995); and more briefly, Poole (2005). For the *Poetic Edda*, see further chapter four, n. 56.

⁶⁰ The *Íslendingasögur*, known in English as 'sagas of Icelanders' or 'family sagas', are probably the genre of medieval Icelandic writing best known to non-specialists; they are invariably set in what some scholars refer to as the 'saga age', roughly from the end of the ninth to the early eleventh century, which corresponds to the period in which Iceland was settled, and by the end of which Iceland had converted to Christianity. They are thus historical narratives, just as are the kings' sagas; the historicity of the *Íslendingasögur* has been much disputed, but there seems to be no compelling reason to believe that they contain significantly more or less fact than the kings' sagas dealing with the same period. The *Íslendingasögur* have been the subject of a vast body of international scholarship; only references to a few recent works of use to non-specialists are given here. For introductions to the genre: Sverrir Tómasson (2006: 122–39); Vésteinn Ólason (2005). Vésteinn Ólason (1998) explicitly addresses the issue of the function of the past in these sagas, and to some extent also their relationship to other genres; Andersson (2006) provides a discussion of the literary-historical context of the sagas in relation to other genres. Byock (2001) is a recent example of a history of Iceland based largely on saga accounts; his discussion of the historical value of the sagas (2001: 142–69) presents a view contrary to that argued in the present work with regard to the kings' sagas. For a guide to the older scholarship, see Clover (1985). On the oral background to the sagas (with some, albeit limited, relevance for kings' sagas as well), see Danielsson (2002a), and Gísli Sigurðsson (2004). O'Donoghue (2005) is an important recent work on the use of verse in the sagas.

often to have had a role to play in Norwegian court politics even in the thirteenth century.⁶¹ Little is known, however, about the process of education that poets underwent, whether in the thirteenth century or earlier, or about how older poems were preserved and transmitted to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. But it is evident from the references in the histories of both Theodoricus and Saxo that Icelanders had a reputation abroad as composers of historical poetry,⁶² and the art of verse-making seems to

⁶¹ On the Skaldsagas, cf. Poole (ed. 2001). On skalds and skaldic verse in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, see Guðrún Nordal (2001; esp. 117–95, on the social position of poets; she includes a prosopography of known thirteenth-century skalds), and Wanner (2006; 2008); more generally, on the real or perceived importance of skalds in Icelandic culture, see Grove (2007); Whaley (2001); cf. below, chapter two at nn. 22–33.

⁶² *HARN*: 1, ll. 7–11 (McDougall and McDougall, trans. 1998: 1, ll. 7–13): “Operæ pretium duxi, vir illustrissime, pauca hæc de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium breviter annotare, et prout sagaciter perquirere potuimus ab eis, penes quos horum memoria præcipue vigere creditur, quos nos Islandinga vocamus, qui hæc in suis antiquis carminibus percelebrata recolunt” (“I have thought it a praiseworthy deed, illustrious sir, to note down briefly these few things regarding the ancient history of the Norwegian kings, as we have been able to learn by assiduous inquiry from those—whom we call the Icelanders—amongst whom it is believed that the memory of these things thrives especially, who preserve these deeds as celebrated in their ancient songs”). Theodoricus elsewhere refers to the reputation of the Icelanders as preservers of history, though he appears to be suspicious of the value of their testimony (here specifically with regard to chronology) where it is not corroborated by written sources (*HARN*: 6, ll. 6–14; McDougall and McDougall, trans. 1998: 5, ll. 4–14): “Hunc numerum annorum Domini, investigatum prout diligentissime potuimus ab illis, quos nos vulgato nomine Islandinga vocamus, in hoc loco posuimus: quos constat sine ulla dubitatione præ omnibus aquilonaribus populis in hujusmodi semper et peritiores et curiosiores extisset. Sed quia valde difficile est in hujusce ad liquidum veritatem comprehendere, maxime ubi nulla opitulatur scriptorum auctoritas, istum numerum nullo modo volumus præjudicare certiori, si reperiri valet” (“We have given this number of years of the Lord here having most diligently inquired about it among those whom we call in the vernacular Icelanders, about whom it is agreed without any doubt that they have always been both more knowledgeable and more inquisitive than all other northern peoples in such matters. But since it is exceedingly difficult to attain the truth about such things, especially where no written authority provides support, we do not wish to hold to this date over a more certain one, if such a date can be found”). Saxo’s testimony about Icelandic poetry is as follows (Friis-Jensen and Zeeberg, eds and trans. 2005: *praef.i.4*; Ellis Davidson and Fisher, trans. 1979–80: 3): “Nec Tylensium industria silentio oblitteranda. Qui cum ob nativam soli sterilitatem luxurię nutrimenti carentes officia continuę sobrietatis exerceant omniaque vitę momenta ad excolandam alienorum operum notitiam conferre soleant, inopiam ingenio pensant. Cunctarum quippe nationum res gestas cognosse memorięque mandare uoluptatis loco reputant, non minoris glorię iudicantes alienas uitutes disserere quam proprias exhibere. Quorum thesauroſ historicarum rerum pignoribus refertos curiosius consulens haut paruam praesenti operis partem ex eorum relationis imitatione contexui. Nec arbitros habere contempsi, quos tanta uetustatis peritia callere cognoui” (“Nor should the zeal of the Icelanders be forgotten in silence. Lacking luxury in nourishment due to the innate sterility of their land, they exercise the virtues of continuous sobriety and are accustomed to devote their whole life to cultivating the memory of the deeds of foreigners; they compensate for their lack by their talent. As a form of pleasure, they are

have been a significant source of prestige and income for many Icelanders in other parts of Scandinavia.

Although generally studied as an independent artefact, skaldic verse is always embedded within the prose context of the kings' sagas, which postdates the poetry by as much as three hundred years, at least in its current written form (the problems involved with the relative dates and reliability of verse and prose are discussed in some detail in the following chapter).⁶³ Because of its date, the prose cannot really have much claim to act as a check on the reliability of the verse, and the latter's historical accuracy can only be verified by comparing it with extant contemporary records; until around 1100, these exist almost exclusively for those verses dealing with Anglo-Saxon England and Byzantium. There are almost no other written sources for Scandinavian history, or for the history of the Scandinavians abroad.⁶⁴ The bulk of the contemporary (and in every case non-Scandinavian) evidence for Francia and its relations with Scandinavia and Scandinavians comes from before c.900, for which period there is a

said to have known and committed to memory the deeds of all nations, judging it to be of no less glory to treat of foreign virtues than to exhibit their own. Carefully consulting the treasures recorded as proofs of historical affairs, I have composed merely a meagre measure of the present work in imitation of their narratives. Nor did I disdain to accept as sources those whom I knew to be well-versed in such knowledge of antiquity". Both Saxo and Theodoricus might have drawn, directly or indirectly, on the passage in Tacitus's *Germania* that tells us with regard to the inhabitants of Germania that songs are "apud illos memoriae et annalium genus" (Ogilvie and Winterbottom, eds 1975, II,2: "the type of commemoration and annals [used] among them"), but given that a large amount of such verse is actually extant, it seems most likely—regardless of how authentically ancient any of the surviving poems are—that such a poetic tradition was indeed cultivated in Iceland, and was known in some way to both Saxo and Theodoricus.

⁶³ For an introduction to Old Norse prosimetrum: Harris (1997). My discussion below of the interaction of verse and prose in the kings' sagas is especially indebted to Poole (1991), and O'Donoghue (2005: 10–77); see also the earlier work of Fidjestøl (1982) on the difficulties regarding the placement and attribution of verses and the variants therein. For the broader context of prosimetrum in European letters: Dronke (1992); and with particular reference to historical literatures in Latin (including *Saxo Grammaticus*), Pabst (1994: 601–1048); the latter work is an invaluable guide to the history of Latin prosimetrum in medieval Europe.

⁶⁴ Cf. Jesch (2004b), for a recent effort to examine the historical evidence for viking activity on the continent in the late tenth and eleventh centuries. This paper illustrates the difficulty in verifying the information of skaldic verse when other contemporary accounts are lacking: for the most part, Jesch finds that it is not even possible to locate securely the places named in the verse, and little other information can be gleaned from the poetry beyond what is given in the saga prose accompanying it. On Anglo-Saxon attitudes to vikings, see Page (1987a); Zettel (1977). Byzantine sources present less detail of interest to the scholar of Scandinavian history, and for the most part cannot be compared with Norse sources; for a critical discussion of the Byzantine sources on Scandinavians: Obolensky (1970).

dearth of skaldic verse;⁶⁵ little of the extant poetry for the later period deals with journeys to Francia.⁶⁶ Scandinavian traders, warriors and settlers had a fundamental role in the history of early Rus, but unfortunately there is again little in the way of reliable contemporary evidence regarding their activities, or how these impacted the history of Scandinavia. The only contemporary Russian chronicle is the so-called Nestorian or Primary Chronicle of 1116 (*Povest' vremennykh let*), which appears unfortunately to be of somewhat dubious historical value regarding Scandinavians in Russia for the early eleventh century and before.⁶⁷

Given the state of the surviving source material, it is apparent that the extant narratives, however late they might be, must be carefully and critically scrutinised for their value for Scandinavian history before c.1100; fur-

⁶⁵ On Carolingian literary responses to the vikings: Andersson (1975); on the historical interactions between the vikings and Carolingian Francia, cf. e.g. Coupland (1998); Lund (1989), who show how similar viking warfare and plunder was to the methods used by the Carolingians themselves, and how the vikings were integrated into the economic and political systems of the Carolingians.

⁶⁶ On post-Carolingian perceptions of the vikings: Dumville (2003); Foerster (2009: 22–78; on Frankish, Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman histories); Fraesdorff (2005) (on Rimbert's late-ninth-century *Vita Anskari* (Schmiedler and Trillmich, eds and trans. 1968b); Adam of Bremen; Thietmar of Merseburg's *Chronicon* (early eleventh century; Trillmich, ed. and trans. 1957); and Helmold of Bosau's *Chronica Slavorum* (c.1167; Stoob, ed. and trans. 2002)); Zettel (1977). Fraesdorff provides a careful examination of how his texts depict religious, cultural, political and ethnic difference, against a backdrop of inherited classical and early medieval perceptions of the north and the ideology of Christian missionising. Zettel presents a detailed and painstaking study that surveys east and west Frankish and Anglo-Saxon narratives up to the end of the eleventh century, examining the physical, social, religious, political and military aspects of the Normans in these sources, as well as giving a brief analysis of the effects of their incursions into continental Europe and England; though now somewhat outdated, this work remains an essential starting point for these topics.

⁶⁷ The controversies surrounding this work are reviewed by Birgit Scholz (2000: 17–55); on the possibility of oral sources, cf. Melnikova (1996: 93–112). For a thorough discussion of the Scandinavian involvement in early Russian history, see the excellent study of Franklin and Shepard (1996); for an account based primarily on archaeology, cf. the more controversial work of Duczko (2004); cf. also Melnikova (1996). For Norse-centred studies of the vikings in the east, see Ellis Davidson (1976), and for the Varangians in Byzantium, see Sigfús Blöndal and Benedikt Benedikz (1978). Specifically on Haraldr hardráði Sigurðarson's career there: Bagge (1990). Ellis Davidson's work is less rigorously historical than that of Sigfús Blöndal and Benedikt Benedikz, including much that is taken from the *Íslendingasögur* without sufficient critical reflection about its historical value, but the author provides a useful survey of the Russian, Greek and Arabic sources, and some attention to cultural history as well. The role of Scandinavians in Russia and eastern Europe is a much more intractable problem than their settlement in England in around the same period, which is relatively well-documented in contemporary sources: see Hadley (2006), and Hunter Blair (2003: 55–115; 166–72), for surveys, and Whitelock (ed. and trans. 1979; esp. 310–53; 437–9; 452–78) for selected translated sources; on the linguistic contacts and their implications, see Townend (2002b).

thermore, even if we do not take the sagas and poems as representing the ‘facts’, we would need to consider the extent to which they reflect some sort of more broadly defined cultural survivals and may be used as windows into the cultural history of Scandinavia before the twelfth century. Few scholars today would look at saga prose as a reliable historical source for events before the twelfth century, but the poems of the skalds are still often seen as being, at the very least, “the indispensable source” as “guides to the mentality of the most important Nordic group, the military retainers, in the period 950–1050”,⁶⁸ and modern narratives of Scandinavian history remain heavily dependent on the framework, and often even on details, provided by the prosimetrum of the kings’ sagas.

The following chapter provides a critical review of the scholarship on the verse and prose of the kings’ sagas, with readings of some of the more important primary sources; it is hoped that this will not only be a useful point of reference for specialists, but will also contribute to the broader study of medieval European (as opposed to solely Icelandic or Scandinavian) concepts of source reliability, authenticity, and the means of accessing the distant past. Not only with regard to these questions, but also in terms of the function of the past, the kings’ sagas can and should be interrogated with regard to their relationship to other histories, not just those which deal with Scandinavia, but more broadly, the burgeoning European historiography of the central middle ages; these issues—the relationship with and influence of non-Scandinavian traditions, and the function of the past in Norway and Iceland—are the subject of chapters three and four. It is possible that studying Scandinavian historiography in conjunction with the historical traditions of other parts of Europe could prove beneficial both for Scandinavianists and those concerned with other regions. It is hoped that apart from providing an overview of the current state of scholarship, the present work will also provoke further research along the many avenues suggested in the following pages, which incorporate and support some views that will doubtless be controversial; and it will be all the better if any ensuing debate sharpens or conclusively lays to rest some of the arguments set forth here.

⁶⁸ Christiansen (2006a: 309).