

## THE ENIGMA OF THE ICELANDIC SAGA

The people of Iceland enriched the literature of the Middle Ages with a genre of epic prose that is found nowhere else in Europe. It takes the form of narratives depicting people and events belonging to a period of about one century, which begins in 930 and extends up to 1030. The Icelandic people had established themselves along the entire shore of the deserted island, and the settlers had divided among themselves the arable soil. During the first hundred years the population, composed of wealthy landowners who had left their native soil of Norway, bold adventurers and Vikings, tired of their unstable life of pillage, were looking for the stability that would be conducive to a permanent and ordered society. The settlers were rude, ambitious and avid for power; hence there were many instances of embittered and sometimes bloody clashes. This period abounds in personalities of great stature, fighting for their real or usurped claims. It can well be described as a heroic period, which gave men the opportunity to utilize all of their physical and mental faculties. Later on, in the thirteenth century, when the people of Iceland attempted to revive the memory of their

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ancestors from the earliest years of the country's history, their conception of them was magnified by the admiration of a generation of men who believed themselves to be the epigones of true heroes.

Yet, for a society as "primitive" as this one, the conflicts were fairly minor. They arose mainly over questions of family honor, property, power and women, which led to endless lawsuits, fights and surprise attacks. Putting one's cattle to pasture in a neighbor's field, a stolen sheep, the detailing of a whale which had been washed ashore on the coast, such were the causes of murderous assaults. Just as the theft of cattle is frequently the subject of the great Greek or Irish epos, it is not the nature of the conflict but that of the man involved that gives rise to the heroic act.

Thus the sagas unfolded within a modest framework, which to modern man may appear hardly worthy of attention. But here is the surprising thing: the narrative is so poignant, so lively that we are captivated by the flow of events which lead irresistibly to a tragic end. Man emerges in all his moral grandeur, he commands all of his bodily and mental faculties and incurs all risks. The story is at the same time so unvarnished, so simple and direct that one is led to believe that he is participating in real events. The authors of the sagas generally treated their subject matter with surprising objectivity, giving the impression of a chronicle of true historic facts. The writer hides behind his work. He does not talk of himself; he makes his characters speak and act. He does not express his opinion on the facts and the men. He shows neither sympathy nor disapproval. He doesn't judge; he tells the story. He doesn't state the motives for actions; he is only a spectator of an animated and often tragic scene. The reader must read between the lines: a word, a smile, a gesture suffice to reveal what is going on in the soul of a man at a critical moment in his life. In the clipped and perfectly natural dialogue the attentive reader discovers the most intimate thoughts of the men and women participating in the events described, like flashes of lightning piercing an overcast sky. Omens and dreams serve to prepare us for the outcome of actions, dictated by destiny itself. Here is an example.

Despite his moderate disposition, Gudmund is one of the most powerful men in the northern part of Iceland. He always wins out, thanks to his power and wealth. One day he pays a visit to a peasant in his district. He is given the seat of honor. At his side is a certain Ofeig, for whom this place is usually reserved. The latter puts his fist on the table and says, "Do you find this fist big, Gudmund?" The other answers, "No doubt." And the scene continues as follows:

"Do you think there is strength in it?"

"Certainly."

"Do you think that it can deal a great blow?"

"Assuredly."

"Do you think it could cause damage, broken bones and even death?"

What do you think of such a death?"

"Not very much. I would not like to risk it."

"If you do not want it so, do not sit down in my seat."

And Gudmund changed his place.

This is a short scene which, in a few words, shows the moral force of two men. Gudmund remains up to the end uncertain of the hidden intention in Ofeig's questions, but at the end the grand coup is made. By this method of presentation the characters of the sagas give the impression of being taken from real life. A modern writer could speak about the surprising psychological awareness of these authors from the thirteenth century. They did not depict standard types such as can be found almost everywhere in the literature of the Middle Ages. On the contrary, they knew that man is a composite being, that there are several tendencies at war within his soul, and too that the same character may evolve under the pressure of his life experiences. One could list a whole series of characters endowed with a complex psychology, which the authors of the sagas knew how to depict with surprising clarity.

Thus the sagas, although they reflect a rough kind of life in a rural society, are genuine masterpieces. The question then arises, how was it possible that such realistic prose could be created in this isolated corner of northern Europe? Only Ireland knows such tales in prose; everywhere else the poetic form was mandatory. What would be more natural than to think that Irish art, much more ancient than the sagas, influenced the latter. But in truth the only identity lies in the use of prose and for

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the rest there are such great differences that any influence whatever seems unlikely. For example, the Irish narratives unfold in an atmosphere of unreality, clearly in opposition to the pronounced realism of the sagas. The style of Icelandic prose is vigorous and simple; it's the language spoken every day. On the contrary, the Irish style is ornate and frequently is elevated to a highly artificial poetic form. One must conclude therefore that the saga is a fruit that matured on the Icelandic soil itself.

The enigma is for that reason all the more challenging. How then did this miracle happen? How could an art, comparable only to that of the realistic novel of modern times, emerge among a people so small in number, dispersed over the lengthy coastal stretches of a barely habitable island, in which sheep raising and fishing constituted the main wealth because the severity of the climate made the cultivation of cereals unremunerative? First of all one might point out that this population, composed of members of the rural aristocracy of Norway, constituted a sort of elite, which felt itself menaced by the unifying policies of King Harold, and which resolved to leave its ancestral lands. With all the pride of a rustic nobility it established itself in Iceland and cherished there the memory of its forebears. It did not shut itself up in the solitude of the new country. On the contrary, the Icelanders were intrepid navigators; they maintained relations with the people of Scandinavia as well as of Ireland, Scotland and England. The poets enjoyed great success with their scaldic art at the courts of the Scandinavian kings and petty lords and lived for a number of years in Norway and Denmark. After the conversion to Christianity, many young people, aspiring to ecclesiastic honors, went to study abroad, first to Germany and England, then later to Paris, Montpellier and Bologna. We see the imprint of this orientation toward Western Europe everywhere. Despite their remoteness, the Icelanders always kept up a close and continuing contact with the centers of medieval culture.

The Icelanders have at all times manifested a great interest in history. The settlers of the virgin soil conserved only a recollection of it, which soon became confounded with their Norwegian pre-history. They had to create themselves their

own history, and the powerful families of the aristocracy cultivated the annals of their line with great care. One example will suffice: that of a book, entitled *Landnáma* (that is, occupation of the land), which relates the colonization of Iceland with an astonishing abundance of details. The book lists the first settlers from one end of the coast to the other, indicating their place of origin, their ancestors, the extent of the land they acquired, the donations made to their companions or servants, and finally their descendants in direct line. We have thus detailed information on four hundred inhabitants of Iceland. The *Landnáma* constitutes an example unique in European historiography; the *Domesday Book* provides only a remote analogy to it. The men of the thirteenth century, having been able to write a frequently quite detailed narrative of a previous period of more than two centuries, could draw on an extremely rich tradition. Above all, the genealogies of the characters described in the sagas—which by their abundance and prolixity amaze the modern reader—show the keen interest taken in family records. The Icelandic people rightly considered the sagas as infallible testimony to their ancient history. The realism of the presentation, the profusion of minor facts, the veracity of the characters come together to give us the impression of a rich and detailed historic source. It seems legitimate to deduce from this the following conclusions. The great families nourished with jealous care the memories of the actions and conduct of their ancestors; at family gatherings on festive occasions each family had the chance to hear a recital of the family history of its neighbors and could thereby enrich, and perhaps also rectify, its own history. At the session of the general assembly (of the Althing) an even more numerous and representative audience gathered, and from a collection of family chronicles a sort of general history could thus emerge and crystallize.

We have proof of the popularity of these narratives and tales. It isn't necessary to enumerate here the best known examples. It is enough to say that the narration of historical facts, contemporary as well as of times past, found interested listeners. In such an environment an oral tradition could freely develop. It was able to attain a superior form because it was the good narrators who won the approval of a highly educated

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and demanding audience. The simple and purely realistic style of the sagas is therefore only the fully matured fruit of a long series of oral accounts.

The result is a conception of the saga which may be summed up with the words of the great scholar Andreas Heusler: "In several cases one has the impression that the text is dictated; the parchment registers the verbal text with the fidelity of a phonograph." This sentence expresses with great clarity one of the theories on the development of the saga. First there was an oral tradition, going back even to the time of the events that the saga relates. This tradition became enriched with all sorts of themes that sprang from the imagination, popular tales, foreign influences, the personal experiences of the successive narrators. It attained a classical form insofar as the technique and the style of the prose were concerned. The time came when this oral tradition found a recorder, who took the trouble to give the flowing narrative of the storytellers the form of a written and thereafter established text.

It cannot be denied that this theory has the merit of being quite simple. Not only does it provide a plausible explanation of the fact that so many personalities and particularities of a period of about two hundred and fifty years previous were still remembered in the thirteenth century, but it also furnishes a solution to the problem of the style itself of the saga. For this reason it may be understood why this theory, with more or less important modifications, has enjoyed considerable vogue. It was only in the course of the present century that an entirely contrary explanation was arrived at, and it is important to stress that it was the Icelandic scholars themselves who vigorously attacked the obsolete concepts as to the origins of the saga.

They insist that the sagas are above all literary works, that individual artists wrote these "historical novels." It is therefore necessary to try to understand them as any other literary work. In fact, one may discern in the sagas authors perceptibly different from each other, each with his own temperament and even his own style. One is thus tempted to make a comparison with the study of the *chansons de geste*. But let us remember in this regard some knowledgeable words of the scholar August Becker: "I am opposed to the assurance of those who have

presumed (these to be) original poems and who have thrown themselves rashly into an abyss of pure speculation. I consider as the greatest danger the fact that the preserved texts have no more importance and that one's entire interest is devoted to their hypothetical predecessors now irremediably lost." The same danger menaces the study of the saga. These historical novels have a freshness and a vigor of style which give them high importance from a literary point of view, but one doesn't dare attribute them to gifted authors; one assumes rather the excellence of an oral tradition.

This is then the problem: what importance is it legitimate to attribute to this popular tradition? On this point an agreement will never be reached. The philologists treat it with a certain disdain. The folklorists like to extol it. What then is its exact value? Knut Liestøl, a folklorist of great reputation, had the chance to study popular traditions conserved in isolated valleys of Norway, which are quite comparable to the Icelandic sagas. They also record the actions and conduct of characters who had lived two hundred and fifty years before these accounts were collected in the course of the nineteenth century. The example thus lends itself to a comparison of the two traditions. For the collection of the Norwegian tales was made with all the exactitude that scientific folklorists could bring to the work, and in addition documents were available that permitted control of the reliability of the facts related in the oral accounts. It goes without saying that this cannot be regarded as a purely historical text. It is easy to point out examples of confusion, exaggeration or omission between generations. And yet these accounts are based on historical data and are considered in the environment in which they remain alive as historically true.

Do these Norwegian tales have an importance in clarifying the enigma of the Icelandic saga? At first there was no doubt about it. Liestøl even considered them to provide the final answer to the question. But on the other hand it was pointed out that these Norwegian tales were pure folklore, whereas the sagas were literary works. It would be derogatory to the dignity of the sagas as true works of art to place them on the same level as popular tales. The latter lack the excellence of composition and style, characteristic of the saga, it is all too true. But one

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has to take into account the environment in which these legends were kept alive. Whereas the people of Sotesdal and the Telemark lived out of the way of the Norwegian centers of civilization, the Icelanders traveled the seas of Europe and kept up relations with the most civilized peoples of the high Middle Ages. The Norwegian oral tradition became fully decadent because it was preserved until the century of writing and printing. Alongside of books, newspapers and educational pamphlets, what could still have been the function of an oral tradition? In Iceland, on the contrary, the laws, myths, the memory of the past could subsist because of a flourishing oral tradition. In the thirteenth century, Snorri Sturluson could still present a review of pagan mythology, extinct for two centuries, by drawing upon the memory of his people, but it is entirely plausible to suppose that oral accounts then existed on early Icelandic history. The settlers newly arrived on virgin soil had a genuine nostalgia for history. They studied the lives of the Norwegian kings and bishops, the book of the *Landnáma*, already mentioned, had been written as well as accounts on the conversion to Christianity. In such an environment it does not seem astonishing that the powerful families were able to conserve in their memory events from the beginning of their history as a free people.

The saga mentions so many people who actually lived, so many facts worthy of trust, demonstrates so frequently a proper appreciation of relative chronology that the existence of a rich and well conserved tradition can hardly be doubted. But what was the value of this tradition for the sagas that we know? We are far from believing, as does Heusler, that they were only simple recordings of oral tales. The sagas—at least the most important ones—were written with a consummate art. The arrangement of the elements of the narration, the competency displayed in the handling of a complicated action, the delineation of the characters, the orientation toward an end that blind men must reach, the manner of suggesting obscure motivations of action by means of trenchant dialogue, these are convincing proofs of a literary art totally conscious of itself. What may be left to oral tradition is only the confused memory of a pre-history, furnishing a few names of characters and minor details



about their lives, on the basis of which the author of the saga, with the help of a fertile imagination, constructed a lively action.

Such an assumption recommends itself by its natural simplicity. But hasn't it the same shortcomings as Heusler's theory? We agree today in recognizing that the *Chanson de Roland* is a great poem, the work of a very talented artist. But we know at the same time that it would have been impossible for him to write this masterpiece without the experience and efforts of countless storytellers and rhymers who provided him with a language and a highly specialized poetic technique. Couldn't we consider that the same was true for the Icelandic saga?

The existence of an oral tradition is frequently undeniable. We like to consider it as an accumulation of anecdotes and genealogical information, which constituted the raw materials on the basis of which the authors of the thirteenth century fashioned the sagas. But we also have proofs to the contrary. I will cite only a few examples. Many scaldic verses were preserved for several centuries; in passing them on it was necessary to accompany them with short narratives of the events which led to their improvisation. Sometimes whole series of such verses were related during the life of a poet, leading to the assumption that a short biography giving a framework to these poems was told along with them. Or an example better still: in 1119, during a wedding feast, a guest told the fabulous story of a character who lived before the colonization of Iceland. This saga was still known in the fourteenth century. In sum, don't the popular tales which survived on the lips of the people for several centuries clearly prove that narratives of considerable length can be conserved by oral tradition?

But there are two other aspects of the problem which I would like to oppose to the theory of the saga as a purely literary phenomenon: first, the historicity of these accounts and further the exceptional form of the prose. With regard to their historical character, it seems quite superfluous to mention it again after what we have said. However, admitting that the truth of the narrated facts is rather weak, as in all traditions of this type, there is still another unexpected and important aspect of this tradition. The sagas were written in the thirteenth century. Why precisely during this period? What was their interest to

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the men of this period, called "the age of the Sturlungs," because this powerful and very talented family played a preponderant role in the political affairs of the republic? Society was torn by continuous strife, leading to fullscale wars in which hundreds of men were engaged. The bitterness of the conflicts was demonstrated by cruel, even inhuman acts of violence. In the course of this century the freedom of the people was menaced. The king of Norway, who had stabilized his power in his own country, was on the lookout for possibilities of reuniting the former colonies with his kingdom; of these Iceland could be considered the pearl. Through intrigues that were facilitated by the greed of the Icelandic lords, he succeeded in having Norwegian sovereignty recognized in 1262. Evidently during the first part of this troubled century, in which signs of the decline of the free state were already manifest, the people looked back to a strong and glorious past. Those times had been equally turbulent and torn by bitter conflicts, but they had ended with the consolidation of the Icelandic state, which then, under the aegis of the Christian faith, flourished for a century in peace and stability. An attempt was made with the help of varying accounts surviving in various parts of the island to revive the passionate life of the past—and the sagas are eloquent testimony to this. If we share the opinion of the modern school, the authors would have had at their disposal only fragmentary accounts. How is it possible then that these writers rarely make any mistakes on the extent of the real culture of the pagan past? They knew perfectly well that their narrative took place at the height of the pagan period. It is only when the saga deals with events after the year 1000, the year of the conversion, that it makes a vague allusion to the new religion. The characters evince a mentality so purely pagan that a catalogue of Germanic customs could be compiled from the data of the saga. The authors never misjudge the nature of the conflicts; these did not involve small armies as during the period of the Sturlungs, but were skirmishes or engagements involving twenty or thirty participants. It is only truly surprising that an author, writing a semi-historical novel in the thirteenth century, could have given such a faithful image of a past that must have been absolutely foreign to him. There is only one possible explanation:

the authors of the sagas had at their disposal oral accounts going back to pagan times, and these were so rich that the life of the past could be freely recreated in their novels. In addition, these novels were not hypothetical sketches of the way of life and manner of living in these former times, but narratives depicting with precision the mentality of this period.

There were then oral accounts going back to the first centuries after the colonization, and there is still more conclusive proof of this. We have spoken of the realistic style of the sagas and stressed the fact that it constituted a striking exception to all of medieval literature. As everywhere else, written literature started with the translations of religious books, especially hagiographies and sermons in Latin. From the twelfth century on, when the biographies of the Norwegian kings Olaf Tryggvason and Saint Olaf were written, their authors used Latin. Soon a great number of books destined for church use or the propagation of the Christian faith appeared in Icelandic. It goes without saying that they bore the stamp of their clerical origin; Latin constructions abound in them. Where then did the clear, direct style, the faithful mirror of the spoken language which typifies the sagas, originate?

Passages in the same lively and natural style were found in certain religious books written by clerics, and it has been presumed that the style of the saga was developed within the framework of ecclesiastic literature. This is a bold assumption. It seems more simple to assume that the monk who let a scene in the style of the saga escape from his pen was remembering the oral accounts heard in his youth. For people liked to tell tales in old Iceland. We have some very curious examples of this. At the court of King Harold, known as "the Hard Council," there was an Icelander who had already told so many tales that his store was depleted, so when the king ordered him to entertain his court during the Christmas festivities, he obeyed but against his will. He knew only one more story: the exploits of the king himself in his youth while in the service of the Emperor of Greece. At the end of the recital Harold expressed his satisfaction to the narrator with the exactitude of his tale and asked him how he had learned it. The Icelander replied, "I heard it many times from a man who had accompanied you in your

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campaigns. Every summer, at the Althing, he repeated it to the men assembled there." Now it is important to point out that this narrative contained a wealth of well-known anecdotes with which the storyteller had embellished the exploits of the young king.

This example illustrates the avidity with which the Icelanders learned stories of events which had taken place abroad. They were certainly not any less interested in hearing stories about their own past. In order for it to captivate an audience, a narrative had to be presented in a lively and interesting way. So the narrator created an oral style that rejected all forms of bookish expression. The style had to be direct and realistic, and he enjoyed dialogue with lively exchanges. On the other hand, as the audience itself knew the account, it refused to accept any innovations or imprecisions which slipped into the storyteller's version. But this did not prevent the tradition itself from gradually being modified. The storyteller embellished, organized and interpreted the facts; the audience accepted these changes when they suited its taste. But deviations that were too far from the facts of the account hardly passed critical notice.

The authors of the sagas had at hand a whole series of tales and anecdotes from which they could draw, as well as a technique of presentation stemming from the oral transmission of narratives over the course of centuries. They did not derive their masterpieces from nothing; they were the heirs of a rich patrimony. This in no way diminished their own part in the creation of the sagas. We have the impression that the oldest examples of this Icelandic prose were merely uncertain attempts. The authors did not yet know how to treat with the necessary freeness the data of the oral account. In fact, they presented in their writings a somewhat incoherent accumulation of separate episodes rather than a well-ordered saga. But gradually the authors learned how to command the facts of the legend. They succeeded in molding the mass of small details into a narrative which unfolded with convincing necessity from beginning to end. Sometimes they subordinated the events to a central idea and did not hesitate to remodel the account to conform to their own conceptions. Finally, there were some artists even who invented novels, keeping at the same time however a character so realistic that

they were considered for a long time as purely historical works.

Thus the miracle of the saga is satisfactorily explained, in my opinion. It could not have been born without the treasures of an oral tradition; it could not have reached such perfection in composition and style without the cooperation of artists who were highly talented and quite conscious of their art.