WEEK 3 LECTURE: OLD NORSE LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE
SAGA LITERATURE
THE ORIGINS OF SAGAS: COMPOSITION AND TRADITION

Some important dates:

Medieval:
871 (+/-2): Beginning of Icelandic settlement period
c.930: Iceland fully settled
999/1000: Conversion of Iceland to Christianity
1056: First Icelandic bishop consecrated
1117: Icelandic law codes written down for the first time
1152–1262: Sturlung age (*Sturlungaöld*)
1262: Iceland loses its independence to the Norwegian king

Modern:
1911: The University of Iceland is established in Reykjavík
1918: Iceland becomes independent of Denmark, but remains in Union with the Danish King
1940: Sigurður Nordal publishes the monograph *Hrafnkatla*
1944: Iceland becomes a fully-independent republic
1955: Halldór Laxness wins Nobel Prize for literature
1958: *Hrafnkatla* is translated into English by R. George Thomas

Intertextuality:

Kemr hann ok víða við sǫgur aðrar en þessa. Hann kemr við Laxdœla sǫgu, sem mǫrgum er kunnigt. (ÍF 4, 180)
'He plays a part in many other sagas other than this one, including *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, as many people know.' (*Eyrbyggja saga*, transl. Quinn, 197)

Landnámabók, The Book of Settlements. Collection of genealogies and farm names relating to the major settlement families. Preserved in a number of manuscripts; Sturlubók, a medieval manuscript, includes many narratives that parallel the sagas.

Multiple versions and discrepancies (a *very* conservative list):

- How many sagas survive in substantially different versions? At least five: *Gísla saga, Eiríks saga rauða, Bandamanna saga, Ljósvetninga saga, Fóstbrœðra saga…*That's even without asking whether *Grœnlendinga saga* should be thought of as a version of *Eiríks saga*, or vice versa.
- Sagas that are referenced in one form by *Landnámabók* but seem not to exist in that version anymore: *Hávarðar saga, Harðar saga*
- Sagas with poetry in it, surviving in versions where the poetry is moved around or quoted to a different extent: *Egils saga, Njáls saga*
- Sagas where the same poem it attributed to different people in different circumstances: *Bjarnar saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Kormáks saga* and *Laxdœla saga*.
- Sagas with at least one scene that differs dramatically from its telling in another source: *Hrafnkels saga, Laxdœla saga, Eyrbyggja saga*

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The Tale of the Story-wise Icelander (*Íslendings þáttr sǫgufróða*)

Translated by A. Maxwell from *Morkinskinna*, a compilation of *þættir* (tales) and kings' sagas dating to around 1220.

'It so happened one summer that a bright young Icelandic man came to the king and asked to be taken into his care. The king asked if he knew any lore, and he claimed that he could tell stories. The king then said that he would keep him, but that he would be obligated always to entertain anyone who asked him. He did so and grew popular among the king's men. They gave him clothes, and the king gave him weapons. And so it went until Yule.

Then the Icelander grew sad. The king asked him why, and he answered that he was just in a bad mood.

"That can't be it," the king said, "so let me guess. I would guess that you have run out of stories to tell. This winter you have always entertained anyone who has asked you. Now you are upset that you're out of stories at Yule."

"It is just as you say," he replied. "I have only one story left, and that one I dare not tell here, for it is the story of your travels."

The king said, "And that is exactly the story I most desire to hear. Now don't tell any stories until Yule, since people are busy now. But on the first day of Yule begin the story, and tell a little bit of it. I will arrange it with you so that the story lasts as long as Yule. Now a lot of drinking takes place at Yuletide, and there is little time for sitting around and hearing stories. Nor will you be able to see, while you are telling, whether I am pleased or not."

So it happened, and the Icelander told his story. He began on the first day of Yule and spoke for a while. But the king soon told him to stop.

Then people started drinking, and many of them discussed how bold it was of the Icelander to tell that story, or how they thought the king would like it. Some thought that he told the story well, but some were less patient. And so it went on during Yule.

The king made sure that people listened carefully, and under his direction the story and Yule ended at the same time.

On Twelfth Night, after the story had ended earlier in the day, the king said, "Aren't you curious, Icelander, to know how I liked the story?"

"I am afraid to know, my lord," he answered.

The king said, "I liked it very much, and it was no worse than the matter permitted. But who taught you the story?"

He answered, "It was my habit out in my country to travel each summer to the Thing, and I learned part of the story each summer from Halldor Snorrason."

"In that case it is no wonder," the king said, "that you know it well. Your luck will now be with you. Be welcome here with me, and I will grant you whatever you want."

The king secured him good wares, and he grew into vigorous manhood.'

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Hrafnkels saga

***Íslenzk fornrit* I** ***Landnámabók*, S 283, H 244** S = Sturlubók manuscript H = Hauksbók manuscript	***Íslenzk fornrit* XI** ***Hrafnkels saga*, 97–8**
Hrafnkell hét maðr Hrafnsson; hann kom út síð landnámatíðar. Hann var enn fyrsta vetr í Breiðdal, en um várit fór hann upp um fjall. Hann áði í Skriðudal ok sofnaði; þá dreymdi hann, at maðr kom at honum ok bað hann upp standa ok fara braut sem skjótast; hann vaknaði ok fór brutt. En er hann var skammt kominn, þá hljóp ofan fjallit allt, ok varð undir gǫltr ok griðungr, er hann átti. Síðan nam Hrafnkell Hrafnkelsdal ok bjó á Steinrøðarstǫðum. Hans son var Ásbjǫrn, faðir Helga, ok Þórir, faðir Hrafnkels goða, fǫður Sveinbjarnar.	Hallfreðr setti bú saman. […] En um várit fœrði Hallfreðr bú sitt norðr yfir heiði ok gerði bú þar, sem heitir í Geitdal. Ok eina nótt dreymði hann, at maðr kom at honum ok mælti: “Þar liggr þú, Hallfreðr, ok heldr óvarliga. Fœr þú á brótt bú þitt ok vestry fir Lagarfljót. Þar er heill þín ǫll.” Eftir þat vaknar hann ok fœrir bú sitt út yfir Rangá í Tungu, þar sem síðan heitir á Hall-freðarstǫðum, ok bjó þar til elli. En honum varð þar eftir gǫltr ok hafr. Ok inn sama dag, sem Hallfreðr var í brott, hljóp skriða á húsin, ok týndusk þar þessir gripir, ok því heitir þat síðan í Geitdal.

Landnámabók

> There was a man called Hrafnkell, the son of Hrafn; he moved to Iceland late in the settlement period. He spent his first winter in Breiðdalur, and in spring went up into the mountains. He set his sheep to graze in Skriðudalur and fell asleep; he dreamed that a man came to him and told him to stand up and get away as quickly as possible; he woke up and moved away. He had not gone far when the whole mountain collapsed, burying a boar and a bull that he owned. Afterwards, Hrafnkell settled Hrafnkelsdalur and lived at Steinrøðarstaðir. His sons were Ásbjǫrn, the father of Helgi, and Þórir, the father of Hrafnkell the Chieftain, the father of Sveinbjǫrn.

Hrafnkels saga (Hallfreðr is Hrafnkell’s father)

> Hallfreðr put a farm together. […] But in the spring, Hallfreðr moved his farm north across the moors and set up farm in the place called Geitdalur. And one night he dreamed that a man came to him and said: “There you lie, Hallfreðr, and rather heedlessly. Move your farm away, west across Lagarfljót water. All your good fortune awaits you there.” At this he wakes up and moved his farm up across the river Rangá in Tunga, to the place that has since been called Hallfreðarstaðir, and lived there till old age. But he happened to leave behind a boar and a billy goat. And the same day that Hallfreðr moved away a landslide fell onto the buildings, and this stock was lost, and so the place has since been called Geitdalur.

Translations by Nicholas Jones in Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method* (Reykjavík, 2002/Cambridge, MA, 2004), p. 27.
For the different genealogies of Hrafnkell’s descendants, see the same volume, pp. 195–200.

‘Skǫmm er óhófs ævi’. Brief is the life of excess.

Peter Foote: ‘In this shape, of course, the saying reflected a blend of observation and wishful thinking countenanced by most of us, supported by much chronicled history, and backed by stout canonical utterance’. (‘*Skǫmm er óhófs ævi*’, p. 143)

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Gestr Oddleifsson: tradition informs the plot

Laxdœla saga

Gestr Oddleifsson bjó vestr á Barðastrǫnd, í Haga. Hann var hǫfðingi mikill ok spekingr at viti, framsýnn um marga hluti, vel vingaðr við alla ina stœrri men, ok margir sóttu ráð at honum. Hann reið hvert sumar til þings ok hafði jafnan gistingastað á Hóli. (ÍF 5, 87)

'A man called Gest Oddleifsson lived at Hagi on the Bardastrond coast of the West Fjords. He was an important chieftain and especially wise man, who could foretell many events of the future. Most of the foremost men of the country were on good terms with him and many sought his advice. He attended the Althing every summer and generally spent the night at Hol on his way.' (transl. K. Kunz, p. 328)

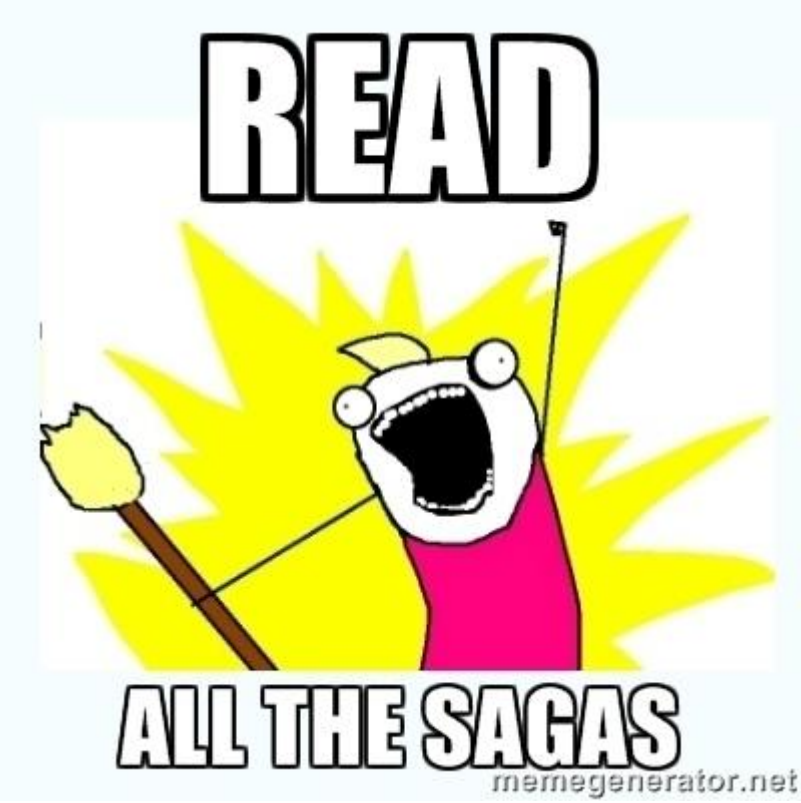
Gísla saga

Gestr hét maðr ok var Oddleifsson; hann var kominn til þings ok var í búð hjá Þorkatli auðga.

"Eigi munu þeir allir samþykkir it þriðja sumar, er þar eru nú í þeim flokki." (ÍF 6, 20–21)

'There was a man named Gestr, son of Oddleif. He arrived at the assembly and shared a booth with Thorkel the Wealthy.'

'Three summers from now, the men in that party will no longer see eye to eye.' (transl. M. Regal, p 506)



Reading list:

Andersson, Theodore M. 2004. 'Five Saga Books for a New Century: A Review Essay', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 103: 505–527

Clover, Carol J. 1986. 'The Long Prose Form', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 101: 10–39

Clunies Ross, Margaret. 2010. *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) esp. chapters 3 and 4

Gísli Sigurðsson. 2008. 'Orality Harnessed: How to Read Written Sagas from an Oral Culture?', transl. N. Jones, in *Oral Art Forms and their Passage into Writing*, ed. Else Mundal and Jonas Wellendorf (Copenhagen: Tusculanum), 19–29

Quinn, Judy. 2000. 'From Orality to Literacy in Medieval Iceland', in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 30–60

Additional material:

Andersson, Theodore M. 1988. 'Ethics and Politics in *Hrafnkels saga*', *Scandinavian Studies* 60: 293–309

Andersson, Theodore M. 2006. *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press)

Foote, Peter. 2004. '*Skǫmm er óhófs ævi*', in *Kreddur: Select Studies in Early Icelandic Law and Literature*, ed. Alison Finlay, Orri Vésteinsson, *et al*. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag), 128–43

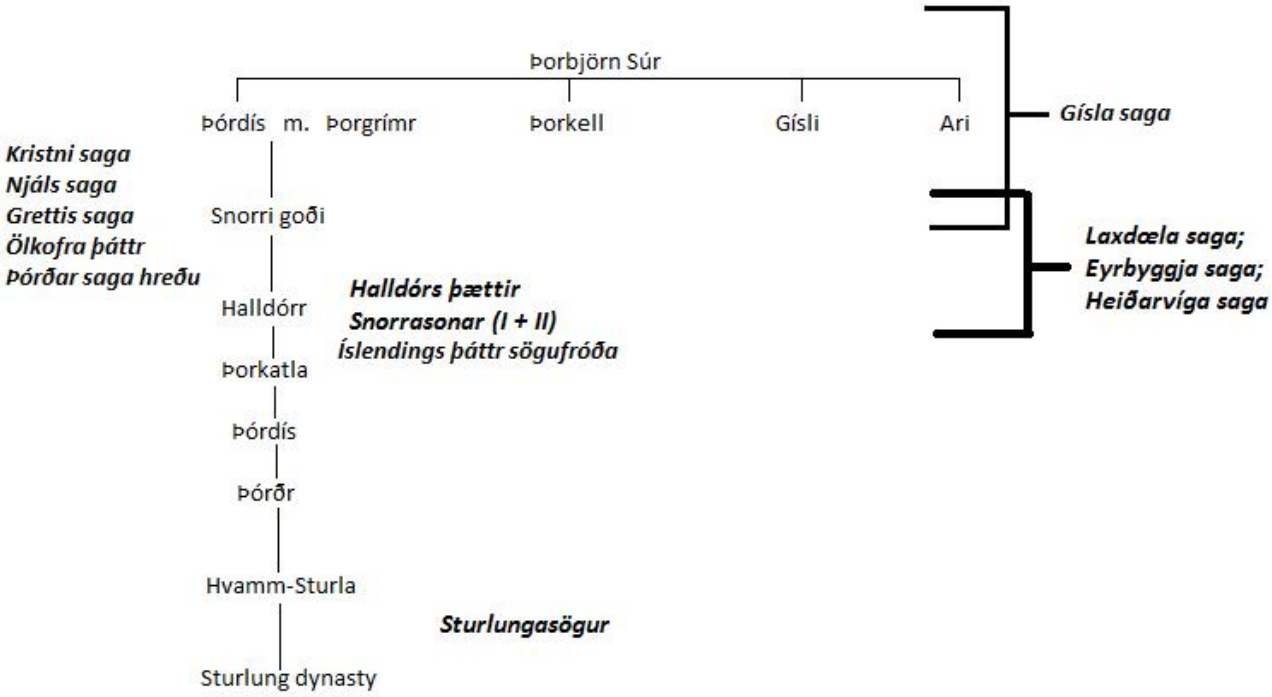
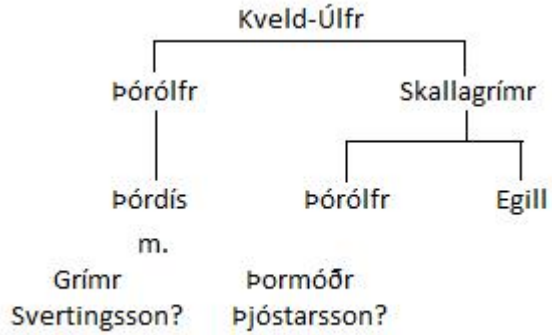
Gísli Sigurðsson. 2004. *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition. A Discourse on Method*, transl. by N. Jones (Harvard: Harvard University Press)

Hermann Pálsson. 1971, *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkels saga* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard)

Sigurður Nordal. 1940. *Hrafnkatla*, Studia Islandica 7 (Reykjavík: Ísafoldarprentsmiðja), transl. by R. George Thomas. 1958. *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða, a study* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press)

Genealogies:

Halldórr Snorrason and the Sturlungar



Egill Skallagrímsson's family