

CHAPTER I

The Oral Prelude to Saga Writing

One of the consuming topics of twentieth-century medievalism was oral literature. The discussion was initiated by Milman Parry's Homeric studies in the 1920s, but it did not embrace medieval studies until the middle of the century when, in Europe, Ramón Menéndez Pidal issued his compendious critique of Joseph Bédier's inventionism, equivalent to Homeric unitarianism. In America Francis Peabody Magoun Jr. methodically applied Parry's formulaic analysis to *Beowulf*.¹ The opposition between Bédier and Menéndez Pidal never became truly thematic in Europe, but the formulaic and type-scene analysis of Old English texts became a cottage industry in the United States and was soon extended to other branches of medieval narrative literature. As early as 1966 Larry D. Benson published a disabling critique of the leap from formula to orality in Old English, but by this time the enterprise had acquired a momentum of its own and continued unabated.² It was propelled by a postwar expansion in the American universities, the concomitant phenomenon of "publish or perish," and (as at least one European scholar intimated) a peculiarly American taste for mechanics and quantification.³ Here there is no need to review the massive applications of the Parry-Lord method to medieval literature because John Foley has provided an ongoing and frequently updated assessment of this work.⁴

Almost exactly contemporaneous with but quite separate from the growth of oral-formulaic studies, there emerged a renewed interest in the orality of the Icelandic sagas. These developments were parallel

rather than interconnected for reasons that are readily understandable. Aside from the built-in insularity of all the subfields covered by the oral inquiry, perhaps most particularly the peripheral status of Old Icelandic studies, the sagas stand apart because they are in prose. Thus, whereas oral-formulaic studies, notably in Greek and Old English, focused increasingly on the formulism of the individual verse or verse segment, that avenue was closed to Icelandic prose studies.⁵ Robert Kellogg tried to capitalize on the Parry-Lord method with an oral-formulaic analysis of Eddic poetry, but his initiative has not taken root.⁶ More fruitful for saga studies was Lord's type-scene analysis, but the experiments in this style have been sporadic.⁷

Beginning in 1959—that is, at the time of Menéndez Pidal's neotraditionalist critique of Bédier—I reviewed the problem of orality in the sagas.⁸ The situation in saga studies was in fact quite similar to the opposition between inventionism and traditionalism in *chanson de geste* studies, but the sequence of events was inverted. Whereas Bédier's inventionism came first for the *chanson de geste* and was challenged only fifty years later by the traditionalist Menéndez Pidal, in saga studies it was Heusler's traditionalism (what he called *Freiproza*) that prevailed first and then gradually came under attack by a group of inventionist scholars in Iceland.⁹ My own views, initially without knowledge of Menéndez Pidal's work, were traditionalist. I argued against the Icelandic view that the sagas were thirteenth-century fictions based on scattered and disorganized traditions and forged into narratives at the writing desk by individual "novelists." Based on references to oral transmission, genealogical discrepancies that could only have resulted from faulty oral transmission, and narrative variants too distant from one another to be explained by scribal interventions, I judged that the sagas must be derivative from full oral traditions.

A few years later I went further and argued that the native sagas exhibit structural and rhetorical principles in common that could only be understood in terms of highly developed oral practices.¹⁰ If it can be shown that the sagas are structured in the same or similar ways and if the dramatic techniques remain constant throughout the corpus, such norms are unlikely to have been devised at a single blow at the beginning of the thirteenth century. It seemed to me more likely that form and rhetoric were inherited from an anterior oral tradition that

gave shape to the narrative style of the sagas before they were actually written down.

The general and justified criticism of my book was that it oversimplified the structure of the sagas and overstated the common features. Structural abstraction was a symptom of the times and a reflex of the literary morphologies that were current in the 1960s—not so much Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*, which became popular in the United States at that time and clearly isolated a narrative morphology very different from the sagas, as the appearance of general morphologies of the novel.¹¹ Structure was one of the bywords of the decade. The reception of my book therefore tended to emphasize the structural component more than the rhetorical strategies, but as I now look back, I find myself more satisfied with the rhetorical observations, as will emerge below.

The gist of my study was the suggestion that there was such a thing as a complete oral saga before the written saga came into existence. Furthermore, I proposed that the form of the oral saga was conditioned by the confrontational patterns of Norse heroic poetry, which had put their stamp on the Icelandic saga traditions. The effect of the argument was to underline the native features of the sagas and to place them in a long-standing literary continuity rather than to emphasize their status as a thirteenth-century innovation. My argument also had the effect of portraying the sagas as more or less simultaneous surfacings of oral tradition, rather than as independent works in a literary evolution extending over a century or so. Such an argument capitalizes on the difficulty of dating the sagas and relating them to one another in an evolutionary chain. We do not know which is the oldest saga, but whichever we choose as a point of departure, it cannot serve very well to explain later developments in saga writing. It does not seem possible to establish a literary continuity in which one saga inspires the next and so on down the line. Each saga is idiosyncratic and appears to be a new beginning. It is thus possible to argue that they spring from independent oral roots rather than from systematic literary schooling.

At roughly the same time as my book appeared, I tried to underpin the notion of an oral saga by exploring the frequent references to oral tradition, such formulas as “people say,” “some people say,” “most people say,” “it is told,” “it is reported,” and so forth.¹² I collected 231 references of this type and sorted through them to ascertain whether

they could tell us anything about the nature of the oral transmissions. My conclusion was that 174 (ca. 75 percent) of the references were either stylistic mannerisms or likely to be spurious, but that the remaining fifty-seven (ca. 25 percent) constituted genuine evidence of orally transmitted narrative. This residue is located in nineteen different sagas and *þættir* and therefore suggests general recourse to oral tradition by saga writers. I went on to scrutinize the content of the fifty-seven authentic references and observed that thirty of them pertained to conflicts or to the settlement of conflicts. Given the fact that conflicts are the very stuff of the sagas, it therefore seemed reasonable to suppose that such references imply the widespread availability of oral traditions relative to the conflict situations that appear in the written sagas.

Because of the popularity of oral-formulaic analysis in the 1960s, my work on the sagas was no doubt understood to be a promotion of oral literature,¹³ but such was not the case. In the 1970s I voiced opposition to the idea that *Beowulf* and the *Nibelungenlied* are in any sense recordings of oral tradition.¹⁴ I considered both to be literary creations based only remotely on oral material. *Beowulf* appeared to me to be a Virgilian exercise in literary epic. In the case of the *Nibelungenlied* I argued that the immediate sources were written poems and that the poet's technique and point of view could be identified through the application of traditional literary analysis; that is to say, one can compare the end product with sources that are fairly easy to reconstruct in outline. I therefore considered the prose transmissions of Iceland to be an entirely different problem from the poetic traditions of England and Germany, and I was by no means an advocate of oral theory in general.

As I moved away from oral theory as it applied to literature in England and on the Continent, other students of Old Icelandic literature became more receptive to it. Lars Lönnroth in particular, having come to teach at the University of California, Berkeley, in the summer of 1965, became a spokesman for the oral-formulaic studies that were dominant in the United States but had gained little attention in Europe.¹⁵ In the same year as the publication of Lönnroth's book on *Njáls saga*, the Icelandic scholar Óskar Halldórsson shifted the position of the "Icelandic School" significantly in a small but revolutionary book on *Hrafnkels saga*.¹⁶ Sigurður Nordal's study of the same saga from 1940—well publicized in R. George Thomas's translation of

1958—still stood as the chief pillar of inventionism as applied to the sagas.¹⁷ Nordal had argued that *Hrafnkels saga* should be understood as a fiction contrived by an author intent not on conveying traditional narrative but on achieving literary effect. Óskar Halldórsson argued that it was in all probability not a fiction but a version of tradition that had passed through the normal distortions that give the appearance of fiction. Since the publication of his book, Icelandic scholars have been more open to the idea that the sagas are based extensively on oral tradition.

The fruit of this evolving reassessment was harvested in the studies of Gísli Sigurðsson.¹⁸ They mark a return to the study of narrative doublets in the sagas; that is, instances in which the same story is told in differing forms in different sagas. The problem for scholars had always been to determine whether these doublets are similar enough to allow for the assumption that one is a literary borrowing from the other, or whether they are so different that they must derive from independent and ultimately oral sources. Gísli Sigurðsson appears to have resolved the controversy in favor of the view that there were fully evolved stories that could be set down independently by different authors without reference to written versions.

In the United States Carol J. Clover rethought the problem of oral antecedents in an innovative essay published in 1986.¹⁹ Located at a university richly endowed with resources on languages, literatures, and cultures throughout the world, she availed herself of those resources to gather material on the transmission of prose narrative in non-European cultures. She observed that these transmissions have two salient features. In the first place, “prose” is a term that does not adequately describe even the prose parts of these traditions. Aside from the fact that the traditions are almost universally prosimetrical, the prose sections normally employ a poetically heightened, rhythmic prose that is the very antithesis of what we find in the Icelandic sagas. The second striking feature of these narratives is that they are significantly shorter than the Icelandic sagas. Where they appear to be longer—as in the case of the Japanese *Tale of Heike* or the Turkish *Dede Korkut*—there is evidence that they have passed through a process of literary amalgamation in the written transmission.

On the basis of these observations Clover concluded that there is no evidence for the existence of a “long prose form” in the oral traditions

of the world. The traditions that have been available for study turn out to be neither pure prose nor long. The effect of Clover's argument is to isolate the situation in Iceland: if Iceland did in fact have a long prose saga at the oral stage, that phenomenon would be unique in our wider experience. At the same time, however, there is abundant evidence that there were oral traditions of some kind in Iceland. If they were not a long form, they must therefore have been a short form, and the appearance of written sagas running to two or three hundred pages must represent a literary elaboration of episodic traditions. To explain the evolution from microform to macroform, Clover had recourse to the thinking of the Africanists Daniel Biebuyck and Isidore Okpewho, who had noted that African performers know more than they actually recite, and know in addition how their performed episodes fit into a larger narrative context. Clover referred to this larger context as the "immanent whole."²⁰ Icelandic storytellers presumably also knew an "immanent whole," but by analogy the international evidence suggests that they too told only parts of it at a sitting. Some attempt at rendering the "immanent whole" was a strictly literary venture and emerged for the first time in the written sagas as we have them.

Though allowing for the existence of the "immanent whole" in some real but unrealized form, Clover specifically opposed my own supposition that there were full-length oral stories precursory to the written sagas, because that supposition does not square with the international analogies. The alternative idea, that the written saga could represent an amalgamation of shorter narratives, had been current since the nineteenth century as an offshoot of the rhapsodic theory of the Homerists. The *þátttr* theory, as it was known, was the notion that individual subtales had been linked to produce longer narratives. The theory had been most fully articulated by the Swedish poet A. U. Bååth in 1888, but had subsequently been dismantled by Andreas Heusler in 1913 on the grounds that well-defined short narratives cannot simply be placed end-to-end in order to create a long saga.²¹ Clover countered Heusler's objections by arguing that the short narratives were not fixed, unalterable tales but flexible episodes known to be parts of an "immanent whole" and therefore reconcilable with a longer narrative.

Clover offers a flexible solution reminiscent of the flexibility introduced into the Homeric discussion by Milman Parry. We are no longer

obliged to imagine that a Greek rhapsode committed all of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* to memory or that an Icelandic storyteller knew or performed the whole of *Egils saga* or *Njáls saga* as we know them. Rather, the Icelandic storyteller knew a number of incidents pertaining to Egill or Gunnarr or Njáll and could have told one or several incidents at one or several sittings. The oral flexibility hardened into a “long prose form” only at the written stage.

Clover’s theory might also serve to explain both the narrative style of the sagas, which was preconditioned at the oral stage, and the diversity of macrostructures in the written sagas, which can take the form of biographies (e.g., the skald sagas), regional chronicles (e.g., *Vatnsdæla saga*), conflict stories (e.g., *Reykðæla saga*), or tales of exploration (e.g., the Vinland sagas or *Yngvars saga víðförla*). These forms could also be combined, as in *Bjarnar saga Híttdælakappa* (skald saga and conflict saga) or *Egils saga* (biography, skald saga, and conflict saga). What Clover’s theory does not explain quite so well is how and why the first literary realizations of the “immanent saga” were so successful. If the first saga writers had no models in the prior tradition, how did they achieve such satisfactory wholes as *Egils saga*, *Gísla saga*, or *Laxdæla saga* on their first attempt?

Clover did, however, shift the debate significantly by widening the context, finding a middle ground between traditionalism and inventionism, and defining the oral materials more subtly. Unlike Heusler, Liestøl, and me she did not simply project the written sagas more or less as we have them back into oral forerunners but tried instead to discriminate between the oral and written stages and to suggest something about the transition from one to the other. She also leads us to think more flexibly about the denominations of oral narrative.

In a subsequent book Hermann Pálsson took a similar tack, though without reference to Clover’s paper.²² To some extent his study is antithetical to Clover’s, but it also carries forward her project of identifying the oral components differently. It is antithetical to the extent that, rather than internationalizing the evidence, it focused in close detail on the Icelandic evidence. On the other hand, the argument is reconcilable with Clover’s initiative by virtue of seeking to define the oral materials in a more nuanced way. It dissents from the idea that the sagas are based on oral stories peculiar to a particular locale and compares the traditions instead to “family heirlooms.” They were not

regionally confined because there was a far-flung marriage network in Iceland that would have ensured the circulation of oral information from one region to another.

The most readily ascertainable form of information was genealogical, but genealogy needs to be understood in two senses. On the one hand it comprised family relationships, such as those in the great compilations of *Landnámabók*. But it should also be taken to include *mannfræði* or personality lore; that is, details about the appearance, character, and actions of particular individuals. Hermann Pálsson explores how these personality sketches cropped up everywhere, presumably in oral and lost written accounts as well as in what has survived. He points out that *Njáls saga* is estimated to have “twenty-five carefully and skillfully executed character portraits” (p. 63) and suggests that the bulk of oral traditions served to portray persons from the Saga Age, although certain other narrative models, such as the love triangle (based on Brynhild and Sigurd) and the travel adventure, were also in circulation (p. 75).

At the end of his book he suggests that some sagas (*Grettis saga*, *Gísla saga*, *Njáls saga*) seem to subscribe to a five-part pattern, but he does not suggest that this form was adumbrated in oral tradition. Indeed, his position seems to be Cloverian in the sense that he assumes the written sagas to have been pieced together from memories and traditions about historical personalities. It is perhaps also Cloverian in the sense that it does not account well for the overall economy and drama of the saga as a whole. A sketch of Gísli’s personality does not lead compellingly to the symmetrical intensity of *Gísla saga* as a narrative. It is the extraordinary plotting of the sagas that remains to be explained, and that is the task of the following pages.

Short-Term Traditions

We may begin with two sagas that have not, to my knowledge, been included in discussions of oral tradition in Iceland, *Sturlu saga* and *Guðmundar saga dýra*. Both deal with events in the second half of the twelfth century, and it is supposed that both were written in the early thirteenth century. The protagonist of the first, Sturla Þórðarson, the progenitor of the Sturlung family that came to dominate the political and cultural scene in the thirteenth century, died in 1183. The protago-

nist of the second, Guðmundr dýri Þorvaldsson, was a successful chieftain in the North and died in 1212. In Sturla's case the saga was probably written within fifty to sixty years of the events described, and in Guðmundr's case the saga seems to have been written very soon after his death.²³ The time that elapsed between the historical occurrences and the composition of the sagas was therefore relatively short, and the events described would still have been within living memory.

If we ask why these sagas have not been included in the ongoing discussions of oral tradition, at least two reasons suggest themselves. The first is that they are difficult to read. They are an almost impenetrable clutter of names and events. Such matters may well have been comprehensible to a contemporary audience that remembered or had heard about the events recounted, but these events are a jumble for modern readers who have no background. Nor is the accumulation of detail alleviated by any of the pointed dialogue, scenic focus, or sustained drama that is characteristic of the tales from Saga Age Iceland. Without taking careful notes, the modern reader finds it difficult to retain any sense of the narrative or how it is put together.

A second reason for the omission of these sagas from earlier discussions is what might be referred to as the straitjacket of genre. Ever since the days of Peter Erasmus Müller, the sagas have been divided up into discrete genres and have been studied genre by genre rather than as a global phenomenon.²⁴ Furthermore, the various genres have been ordered in a definite hierarchy, with by far the greatest attention devoted to the sagas about early Iceland, only a small and quite specialized literature devoted to the kings' sagas, and very little literary attention paid to the texts assembled in *Sturlunga saga*. The walling-off of genres runs quite counter to the practice of modern literary history, which is more likely to organize chronologically. Thus it would be quite normal to encounter a study of the narratives of a given national literature in the period 1800–1850, but no study exists of the Icelandic narratives in the key period 1200–1250. The genre boundaries are persistently observed. The alternative proposition advanced here is that a study of contemporaneous or nearly contemporaneous sagas traditionally assigned to different genres may give a different slant on the transmission of older narrative traditions.

Sturlu saga

The first three chapters of *Sturlu saga* confront the reader with a truly intimidating array of eighty-two names, aside from genealogical information. Indeed, these chapters amount to not much more than a listing of names, with no clear indication of which names will be important for the subsequent narrative. Only in chapter 4 does something approaching a story begin. The woman companion of a certain farmhand named Aðalríkr comes under suspicion of having stolen linen from Aðalríkr's employer, Skeggi Gamlason. The matter is not settled, and Aðalríkr eventually kills Skeggi. Skeggi is the *þingmaðr* (constituent or supporter) of Sturla and his father, Þórðr, so that it falls to Sturla to prosecute Aðalríkr, who has in the meantime taken refuge with Oddi Þorgilsson. The effect of the incident is thus to put Sturla Þórðarson and Oddi Þorgilsson in opposite camps and potentially at loggerheads.

Chapter 5 tells us that Aðalríkr is eventually able to get abroad with the aid of Oddi and Oddi's brother-in-law. Sturla learns after the fact that Oddi is at the bottom of this escape. In a second, unrelated incident there is an attempt to prosecute Sturla's cousin Gils Þormóðarson in a paternity case, but Sturla is able to break up the court proceeding and avert outlawry with a money payment. The chapter concludes with a summary statement: "Þessi voru af Sturlu upphöf fyrst, er hann átti málum at skipta við menn" [these were the first cases in which Sturla contended legally against others].²⁵ This is an important comment because it can be read to say a good deal about the nature of the story that is being told. It suggests a biographical focus on Sturla, and it suggests that an important aspect of a man's biography consists of his legal dealings or, more broadly perhaps, his contentious dealings of any kind with other people. Finally, it suggests that these dealings were remembered and therefore perhaps told serially. The dealings did not necessarily focus on two particular individuals in conflict but could instead involve the protagonist and a series of opponents.

Chapter 6 shifts the focus to the family of Oddi Þorgilsson. That is a meaningful shift because an underlying opposition between Oddi and Sturla has already been established. The refocusing on Oddi's

group suggests that we have not heard the end of the troubles between Oddi, or his family, and Sturla. We learn, in fact, that the projected antagonist will not be Oddi himself, because he dies the next winter and his death is soon followed by the deaths of his sister Álfðís and their father, Þorgils, the following spring (1151). Oddi's brother, Einarr Þorgilsson, now becomes the leader of the clan, although it is noted that he is not learned in the law and has a lisp. The narrative at this point becomes much simplified and more surveyable; the reader has been led to focus on Einarr Þorgilsson at Staðarhóll and Sturla at Hvammr, their farms located respectively on the northern and southern sides of the peninsula extending into Breiðafjörður. The stage is now set for a regular conflict between the two parties, and that conflict is in fact the substance of the next thirty chapters down to the time when Sturla dies (1183), soon to be followed by Einarr (1185). A compressed synopsis of the action might look like this:

1. In a complicated sequence of events, Einarr Þorgilsson protects the ne'er-do-well Þórir inn fjölkunngi (the sorcerer) against the people at Hváll (not far from Staðarhóll), one of whom Þórir has wounded. Einarr offers his protection because Þórir has been resident with Einarr's foster father Þorgeirr Sveinsson.
2. Two of Þórir's equally scurrilous companions show up at Kambur in Króksfjörður (a little to the north) and attack Jón Þórarinnsson, who was introduced in passing in chapter 3, because of injuries alleged but not explained. Jón kills one of his assailants, but people feel that the district governance was not what it once was under Þorgils Oddason and they begin to move away.
3. Yngvildr, who has been introduced in chapter 1 as the daughter of Þorgils Oddason and is therefore in the clan of the Staðhyltingar, is widowed, then becomes involved with Sturla's brother-in-law Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson. She gives birth to a child, but the matter is concealed and the birth is attributed to another woman. Sturla is suspected of being complicit in the cover-up. Sturla and Einarr Þorgilsson bring suit against each other and both are condemned to lesser outlawry.
4. On the way to a thingmeeting Einarr raids and plunders at Hvammr.

5. A dispute over shearing rights leads to a quarrel between Sturla's stepson Einarr Ingibjargarson and Einarr Þorgilsson.
6. The elderly priest Þorgímr has his young wife abducted by a member of Einarr Þorgilsson's household. That leads to more tension between Einarr and Sturla when Þorgímr appeals to Sturla for help. Sturla initiates a plan that results in the severe wounding of the abductor.
7. Sturla's stepson Einarr Ingibjargarson initiates a flirtation with the wife of Einarr Þorgilsson's þingmaðr Sigurðr kerlingarnef. Sigurðr appeals to Einarr Þorgilsson and thus provokes another confrontation between Sturla and Einarr, in which Sturla maintains the upper hand.
8. Viðarr Þorgeirsson, the son of Einarr Þorgilsson's foster father, is killed by a certain Kjartan Halldórsson in a quarrel over a woman. Sturla elects to shelter Kjartan and thus places himself once more in opposition to Einarr Þorgilsson.
9. Twenty-nine new characters are introduced. A household member of Einarr Þorgilsson's þingmaðr Erlendr Hallason beats a member of Sturla's household and in turn is killed by Sturla and his son Sveinn. A settlement is reached.
10. Einarr Þorgilsson lays claim to the inheritance of Qzurr auðgi in Búðardalr and disputes the claims of others, notably Oddr Jósepson, who then appeals to Sturla.
11. Einarr Þorgilsson seizes everything he can lay his hands on in Búðardalr and constructs a fort around Staðarhóll. Sturla and Einarr Ingibjargarson collect whatever is left, leaving Einarr and Oddr Jósepson behind in Búðardalr in command of the forces they have levied.
12. Einarr Ingibjargarson makes raids on Staðarhóll that culminate in a regular battle. The outcome favors the Búddælir, and Einarr Ingibjargarson is severely wounded.
13. The two camps consolidate, with each side supported by a bishop. A settlement is reached by arbiters, but Sturla thinks it is to his disadvantage and refuses to pay, at the same time taking the precaution to fortify Hvammr. An unwary Einarr Ingibjargarson is nearly caught by the Staðhyltingar.
14. Einarr Ingibjargarson takes service with King Magnús Erlingsson and falls at Áluvellir (1180). A new settlement is reached between

the parties at Staðarhóll and Hvammr, but Sturla continues to demur. The Staðhyltingar conduct a raid at Skarfstaðir south of Hvammr and then return north.

15. Ingjaldr at Skarfstaðir (the son of Sturla's foster father Hallr) learns what has happened and apprises Sturla, who sets out in pursuit of the Staðhyltingar. A great battle is fought on Sælingsdalsheiðr.
16. Both sides return home, leaving most people with the impression that this is the decisive moment at which the tide turns in Sturla's favor.
17. Sturla feuds with Þorleifr beiskaldi and Einarr Þorgilsson over a killing by one of Sturla's þingmenn. The settlement of the case obliges Sturla to pay a small fine.
18. A day laborer stops by at Hvammr and Hítardalr (where Þorleifr lives) and is treated to scathing remarks by Sturla and Þorleifr at each other's expense.
19. The story starts anew with a complicated action in which twenty-two additional characters figure. In this action Einarr Þorgilsson and Sturla find themselves on the opposite sides of a quarrel between Þorsteinn drettingr and Þórhallr Svartsson. Sturla's son Sveinn conspires with Þorsteinn against Þórhallr.
20. Yet another new narrative thread leads to an inheritance dispute in which Þórhallr is killed by two of Sveinn Sturluson's henchmen.
21. A seduction case causes a certain Álfr Örnólfsson to switch his thing affiliation from Einarr Þorgilsson to Sturla.
22. Yet another inheritance dispute pits Einarr Þorgilsson against Sturla.
23. A whole new cast of characters, numbering twenty-eight, gives rise to two abductions, both of which are settled by Jón Loptsson.
24. Still another fresh narrative start, with forty-nine new characters, sets the stage for a further inheritance dispute, which is once again settled by Jón Loptsson.
25. The continuation of the dispute puts Sturla at loggerheads with Páll Sölvason at Reykjaholt.
26. Páll's wife Þorbjörg attacks Sturla with a knife, and he uses his moral advantage to get the dispute settled on his own terms.
27. Sturla makes an exorbitant demand for compensation that astonishes everyone and causes Páll to demur.

28. Páll appeals to Jón Loptsson, who is sympathetic to his case and deaf to Sturla's representations.
29. Sturla must finally defer to Jón Loptsson, who offers to foster his son Snorri at Oddi, but reduces the compensation he is owed from two hundred hundreds to thirty hundreds.
30. Páll rewards Jón richly.
31. Þorbjörg dies, and Sturla sees no reason for further hostilities. He himself dies in 1183, and Einarr Þorgilsson dies two years later.

A reader confronted with this summary is likely to find it quite opaque. The only gist of the story that will emerge is that there is an ongoing conflict between Sturla Þórðarson and Einarr Þorgilsson, each supported by a shifting group of family and friends. But even this minimal sense of structure is purchased at the cost of radical simplification. A number of the chapters show a complexity suggestive of a whole saga, and it requires heavy-handed omissions to reduce them to a couple of summary sentences. The action in the central chapters is not articulated in such a way as to make it coherent or memorable. As often as not, a new chapter gives the appearance of starting all over again, rather than attaching to the previous chapter in a continuous flow.

Furthermore, the narrative details of the conflict may strike the reader as both disconnected and repetitive, without any hierarchy in terms of relative importance or dramatic profile. The issues are familiar enough to saga readers, but they are not constructed in what we are accustomed to think of as saga style. The quarrels are provoked by woundings and slayings (1, 2, 9, 17), by sexual disputes of various kinds including paternity and parentage questions, abductions, and seductions (3, 6, 7, 8, 19, 21, 23), by inheritance disputes (10, 11, 20, 22, 24), by raids (4, 12, 14), and once (atypically) by a dispute over shearing rights (5). Sexual and inheritance disputes are the most common, the former at least being familiar from, for example, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Gísla saga*, *Hallfreðar saga*, *Hávarðar saga Ísfrðings*, *Kormáks saga*, *Ljósvetninga saga*, *Njáls saga*, *Reykðæla saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, and *Víga-Glúms saga*. It is curious, however, that the inheritance disputes, which are well illustrated in *Sturlunga saga*, are so poorly represented in the

classical sagas, with exceptions in *Egils saga*, *Laxdœla saga*, and *Vápnfirðinga saga*.²⁶

The classical sagas tend to organize such quarrels and provocations in a mounting crescendo. The action of *Bjarnar saga Hítöelakappa* passes through increasingly drastic stages—from insult to slander to assassination plots and finally to direct assaults—but this crescendo effect is missing in *Sturlu saga*, although the late introduction of Jón Loptsson might be considered an intensification. For the most part the provocations seem freely interspersed, in an order that the writer probably thought of as chronological. The materials are arranged serially rather than dramatically. Only the battles of the Staðhyltingar against the Búðdælir (12) and on Sælingsdalsheiðr (15) approach the scenic articulation characteristic of the classical sagas. In the first of these actions, the details are limited to information on the wounds and casualties inflicted during the encounter, but in the action on Sælingsdalsheiðr there is a considerably greater deployment of detail. Ingjaldr informs Sturla of the raid, and Sturla wordlessly takes down his weapons and then responds to his wife's query with pointed understatement. She in turn incites his followers. The pursuit is set in relief with information on the route taken by each group and the dialogue in each camp, as well as the words that pass between the antagonists. The chapter is question (21) could serve with honor in any saga.

Aside from this chapter, it is not until the last six chapters that the narrative acquires saga dimensions and saga rhythm. In the three chapters preceding the last six, no fewer than eighty-six new characters are introduced, but in the final six chapters we find not a single new character. Instead there are a vivid confrontation between Þorbjörg and Sturla, high tension, and a much larger proportion of dialogue. The author appears to have exchanged the role of chronicler for a new role as dramatist.

The last-minute literary reprieve does not, however, do much to alter the effect of the text as a whole. It remains predominantly a registration of regional conflicts centered at Staðarhóll and Hvammr. The author makes little use of the strategies that have made the sagas famous, the economy of detail designed to focus on a particular outcome, the escalation of tensions, the creation of memorable

personalities, and the tantalizing deferral of the finale. On the other hand, the battle on Sælingsdalsheiðr and the last chapters make it clear that these literary strategies were already in the air and available for use.

Guðmundar saga dýra

Guðmundar saga dýra takes place in north central Iceland rather than in northwestern Iceland, but chronologically it is a continuation of *Sturlu saga*. The action begins in 1184–85 and carries down to 1212 when Guðmundr dýri dies. It is shorter and simpler than *Sturlu saga* but has much in common with it structurally. It begins obliquely with the family of Guðmundr Eyjólfsson in Reykjadalr. When Guðmundr retires at Munkaþverá, his property passes to his son Teitr, but Teitr is lost at sea. The inheritance is subsequently disputed by his father Guðmundr and Guðmundr's two brothers Halldórr and Björn.

Guðmundr tries to extricate himself by selling the property at half price to Eyjólfur Hallsson at Grenjaðarstaðir, on the understanding that Eyjólfur will take responsibility for the legal problems. Halldórr and Björn appeal to their respective chieftains, Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson at Mõðruvellir in Hõrgardalr and Qunndr Þorkelsson at Laugaland. The two chieftains then take over the land at Helgastaðir. As the dispute between Eyjólfur and the two chieftains heats up, Guðmundr dýri at Bakki in Øxnardalr remains neutral and works to keep the contending parties apart. The matter is eventually referred to the *alþingi*, where Þorvarðr and Qunndr mount no defense and are considered to be outlawed. When an attempt is made to confiscate the property at Mõðruvellir and Laugaland, Guðmundr dýri again intervenes to prevent fighting and is finally able to settle the matter through a marriage alliance.

This narrative occupies the first three chapters and concludes with the comment that Guðmundr “got great honor” from the case. The author might well have added, in the style of *Sturlu saga*, that this was the first case in which Guðmundr was involved—a case involving an inheritance dispute, as happens so often in *Sturlu saga*. What follows is in any event a serial account of Guðmundr's legal dealings in ten chapters (4–13), all leading up to the great burning at Langahlíð:

1. Guðmundr mediates a case arising from the slaying of a man in Qnundr Þorkelsson's camp, perpetrated by three men from Fljót.
2. Guðrún Þórðardóttir at Arnarnes has a complicated marital life and ends up marrying a certain Hákon Þórðarson after he kills her second husband, Hrafn Brandsson. Guðmundr dýri, who is Hákon's uncle, settles the case with Hrafn's family (chapters 5–6).
3. Þorgerðr Þorgeirsdóttir quarrels with her lover Ingimundr, and Ingimundr is slain by men in the employ of Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson and Qnundr Þorkelsson. Guðmundr dýri has no role in this tale.
4. Guðmundr dýri successfully prosecutes Brandr Qrnólfsson and his helpers for the slaying of a certain Sumarliði.
5. Þorfinnr Qnundarson (Þorkelssonar) woos Guðmundr dýri's daughter Ingibjörg but is rejected because Guðmundr claims that the kinship is too close. Þorfinnr eventually forces Guðmundr to agree, but the bishop declares that the offspring of the marriage will be illegitimate.
6. Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson's son Qgmundr sneis returns from abroad and wreaks havoc with married women at Draflastaðir and Laufás. The second incident precipitates an armed confrontation in which Qgmundr is nearly killed. In the subsequent litigation a settlement is reached, with Jón Loptsson supporting Qgmundr. Guðmundr dýri is charged with turning over the payment but fails to do so. Qgmundr then declares the settlement null and void.
7. One of the parties to a quarrel over trespassing cattle (that also has an overtone of sexual tension) takes refuge with Guðmundr dýri. Guðmundr's kinsman Þorfinnr Qnundarson offers to mediate but finds against Guðmundr's interests and incurs general dissatisfaction.
8. A certain Runólfr Nikulásson from Mjóvafell wounds a man during a horse match and is exiled from the district in proceedings managed by Guðmundr dýri and Kolbeinn Tumason (in Skagafjörður). Runólfr tries to placate Guðmundr with a gift of horses, but he later retracts the gift, thus doing a good deal of damage to Guðmundr's reputation. The quarrel continues at the residence of Guðmundr's kinsman Þorvaldr at Bægisá and is complicated by visits paid to a mother and daughter (both named Birna) at Efri-Langahlíð by Þorvaldr and his hired man Guðmundr

Tassason. The matter ends with the wounding of Þorvaldr, who is taken in by Guðmundr dýri.

9. Guðmundr gathers a force of ninety men against Qnundr Þorkelsson (the leader of the opposition) and surrounds his house at Langahlíð. Qnundr elects to keep his fifty men inside the house.

The burning at Langahlíð is clearly the high point of the saga and is described with epic detail pertaining to the igniting and progress of the fire, the dialogue between those within and those without, and the fate of a number of individuals as they either succumb in the house or try to escape. The style of this narrative is not dissimilar from (though considerably less full than) the account of the burning of Njáll and his household at Bergþórshváll in *Njáls saga*. What follows (chapters 15–23) recounts the aftermath of the catastrophe. We learn how Jón Loptsson takes charge of an enormous settlement but dies the next year; how Qnundr Þorkelsson leads a raid against Hákon Þórðarson, Guðmundr's nephew and one of the burners; how Hákon mounts a pursuit but is himself trapped; how Qnundr seeks help from Jón Loptsson's sons in the south; how Qnundr's son-in-law Þorgrímr alikarl is wrongly rumored to be advancing from the south; how Guðmundr captures and threatens to disgrace Qnundr's daughter but is prevented by Kolbeinn Tumason; how attempts at settlement alternate with bloodless confrontations; how Jón Loptsson's son Þorsteinn organizes a major attack on Guðmundr but is turned back; and, finally, how Guðmundr recruits six hundred men, corners Þorsteinn's men at Grund, and forces his surrender. The remaining three chapters tell of three minor disputes involving Guðmundr before he retires to the monastery at Þingeyrar and dies in 1212—"ok andaðisk þar ok lagði svá metorð sín" [and he died there and brought to an end his (worldly) honors].

The saga as a whole consists of an introduction with a moderate amount of genealogical matter, a sequence of largely unrelated incidents on Guðmundr dýri's dealings with others (most notably but by no means exclusively Qnundr Þorkelsson), the dramatic apogee at Langahlíð, a fairly prolonged account of the aftermath of Langahlíð, and three detached episodes at the very end. This structure is quite reminiscent of what we find in the classical sagas with their neutral

introductory material, gradually mounting conflicts, dramatic climaxes, and sometimes rather detailed epilogues. The chief deviation from this pattern lies in the less effectively organized sequence of conflicts, a number of which have nothing to do with the confrontation at Langahlíð. Indeed, half the chapters in this central section (chapters 5, 6, 8, 10, and 12) have little or no bearing on the antagonism between Guðmundr and Qnundr. The section as a whole could just as well be characterized as a record of Guðmundr's public life or as an account of regional conflicts during his life. The focus is on Guðmundr's record of success, with intermittent failures. The narrative centers on his *metorð* (honor), which is put in perspective at the end of his life when he retires to Þingeyrar.

The author gives the impression of being very close to the events but has not been able to abstract them into drama and personality to the same degree as in the classical sagas. We have in fact very little sense of Guðmundr's personality and none whatever of Qnundr's. The author seems not to have reflected on the persons of his tale, on the underlying issues, even on the tragedy at Langahlíð: in short, on all those matters that distinguish literature from chronicle and invite us to ponder politics, ambitions, social relationships, and the human lot. *Guðmundar saga dýra* offers no key to how these concerns became so central in the classical sagas.

Mid- and Long-Term Traditions: *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*

Our third text, *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*, narrates events from around 1120 and could have been written down as early as around 1220. The dating of the saga has been assessed differently, with estimates ranging from 1160 to 1237. As we will see below, the case for ca. 1220 rests on evidence that the author of *Ljósvetninga saga* inserted a passage from *Porgils saga*.²⁷ There is some reason to believe that *Ljósvetninga saga* dates from the 1220s, in which case *Porgils saga* would have to be a little earlier.²⁸ Thus there is a period of about a century that lies between the events described in *Porgils saga ok Hafliða* and the writing of the saga.

Like the previous sagas, *Porgils saga* begins with genealogical matter explaining the family connections and friendship bonds of

both Hafliði Másson at Breiðabólstaðr in Vestrhóp and Þorgils Oddason at Staðarhóll (Einarr Þorgilsson's farm in *Sturlu saga*) in Saurbær. The key figure in the first phase of the story is Hafliði's nephew Már Bergþórsson, who is promptly described as unpopular and ill natured. He is given in fosterage to a poet named Þórðr, who lives on Þorgils's land in Hvammsdalur. Már gives an ill return for good treatment and ends up wounding his foster father. We are told that there is a long story about the litigation that ensues and that this was the beginning of the trouble between Hafliði and Þorgils, but it is interesting that none of the story is told. The author does not aspire to the sort of overall regional news coverage that we found in *Sturlu saga* and *Guðmundar saga dýra*. Instead, the next six chapters focus on the further problems caused by Már.

These difficulties begin with the arrival at Þorgils's farm of another unsavory character in the person of Óláfr Hildisson. Þorgils advises him to take employment at Strandir, where he falls in with Már Bergþórsson. The two of them quarrel, and Óláfr inflicts a superficial wound. Már in turn abuses his host Hneitir, as well as Hneitir's daughter, and finally contrives to have Hneitir killed. As a result Hafliði prepares to prosecute Óláfr Hildisson, while Þorgils moves to prosecute Már. The upshot is that Óláfr is outlawed and free for the killing unless he is in Þorgils's company or on Þorgils's property. In response Þorgils lures Már into a trap and forces him to take to his heels with a humiliating loss of dignity.

From this point on the tension is shifted away from Már and Óláfr and is played out more directly between Hafliði and Þorgils (chapters 10–32). At the wedding at Reykjahólar, famous for an interesting record of literary activity, the most distinguished guests are Þorgils and Hafliði's son-in-law Þórðr Þorvaldsson from Vatnsfjörður. The festive high spirits take the form of mockery aimed at Þórðr, a mockery not encouraged but also not discouraged by Þorgils. When Þórðr then discovers the presence of Óláfr Hildisson at the feast, he protests, and when his protest is ignored, he departs with his men (chapter 10).

Sometime later a certain Grímr Snorrason is roughly treated by Óláfr on the playing field and appeals to Hafliði, who promises unspecified help. Grímr then contrives to kill Óláfr (chapter 11). In the next episode Þórðr Rúfeyjarskáld takes a fancy to Þorgils's ax,

but Þorgils avers that he himself has good use for it (chapter 12). Accordingly he dispatches a man named Ketill to kill one of Hafliði's men (chapter 13). Hafliði finds that the corpse of the victim has been improperly buried and prepares a legal case, while Þorgils counters by preparing a case for the killing of Óláfr Hildisson. At the *alþingi* Hafliði offers Þorgils the price of eight cows out of deference to his standing, but not as a legal fine. As a result no settlement can be reached (chapter 15).

One morning, as the contending forces confront one another, Þorgils has half a mind to attack, but Þoðvarr Ásbjarnarson urges him to refrain out of respect for St. Peter's feast day. Later it emerges that this is a purely rhetorical appeal, the real reason being that Þorgils is hopelessly hemmed in and therefore in imminent peril (chapter 16). Back at Reykjaholt Þórðr Magnússon has a prophetic dream that suggests there will be great dissension at the thingmeeting (chapter 17). In a press of people the next day Þorgils sees Hafliði's ax raised and reacts with a blow that severs Hafliði's middle finger. As a result he is outlawed, but makes no move to go into exile. Instead he gathers four hundred men to block access to the district and prevent Hafliði from convening a confiscation court (chapter 18). Accordingly the confiscation is thwarted, and Hafliði is able to seize only part of a timber cargo that Þorgils fails to secure (chapters 19–20).

In the remaining twelve chapters the focus shifts to the culmination of the quarrel at the meeting of the *alþingi* in 1121. Hafliði arrives first and destroys Þorgils's thingbooths, then lies in wait for his arrival with a force of twelve hundred men, despite the remonstrations of the priest Ketill Þorsteinsson and Bishop Þorlákr. Þorgils approaches with a body of seven hundred men but is urged to exercise reason and is finally deflected by a dinner invitation. The impression arises that Þorgils's advance scouts may have been captured by Hafliði's forces, and Þorgils refuses to abandon them. Two of the scouts return to report on the destroyed thingbooths and the hostility in Hafliði's camp, but Þorgils persists in his advance. Bishop Þorlákr gains a day's reprieve and Ketill Þorsteinsson delivers an exemplum on humility from his own experience, by which Hafliði is deeply moved. A huge monetary settlement is finally agreed upon and is funded by Þorgils's friends. Thereafter Þorgils and Hafliði live in good harmony.

The narrative outline of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* is quite straightforward: three chapters of introduction, six chapters on the troublemakers Már and Óláfr, eleven chapters on the mounting tensions between Hafliði and Þorgils, and twelve chapters on the climactic confrontation at the *alþingi*. The simple outline is enhanced by a radically simplified cast of characters. There are a few more names than can be retained in the first three chapters, but thereafter the action concentrates on Már, Óláfr, Hafliði, and Þorgils. Other characters are clearly arranged on one side or the other of the contest. The consequence of this simplification is that the reader has little difficulty in keeping the *dramatis personae* and the drift of the plot in mind. Another principle brought into play is relevance: no loose ends and no incidents tangential to the central conflict burden the reader's memory. The reader expends no energy in a fruitless effort to relate a particular detail to the plot as a whole.

The details are furthermore ordered hierarchically, with the lesser characters and incidents accounted for first and then cleared away to make room for the emergence in high relief of the protagonists Hafliði and Þorgils. Any lack of clarity or direction at first is only for effect, because it is later understood that whatever the reader is told has explanatory force in leading to the outcome. There is in addition a regular progression from matters of lesser to matters of greater import. The mockery of Þórðr at the wedding feast and Grímr Snorrason's rough treatment by Óláfr in a game do not seem like insurmountable frictions, although a reader of the classical sagas knows from experience that such things are often more fateful than they appear at first. It is therefore not a complete surprise when they lead to the killing of two relatively insignificant men, Óláfr Hildisson and Steinólfr (chapter 14). The experienced reader also knows that, once the killings have begun, the plot is on an irreversible course. The next phase involves the elaborate preparation of cases and a direct legal confrontation between the principals. When one of them is actually wounded, the climax has been reached, and it requires an almost superhuman effort to restore peace.

The building of the climax makes obvious use of certain symmetries, killing and counterkilling, case and countercase, but also a regular shifting of narrative focus from one camp to the other. This last feature becomes increasingly emphasized in the final phases as the contending parties gather intelligence from one another, view each other from afar,

then close in on each other. These are practices abundantly attested in the classical sagas, and they are supplemented by hints of foreknowledge. When Þorgils suggests in chapter 12 that he cannot make a gift of his ax because he may have use for it, we may be sure that armed conflict is in the offing. When a man at a great distance from the *alþingi* has a foreboding dream about dissension, we know that calamity is in store. The architecture of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* is thus more self-conscious, more compact, and more conceptual than that of *Sturlu saga* or *Guðmundar saga dýra*. The transition has been made from loose chronicle to contrived narrative.

The differences of form are not limited to matters of narrative architecture but apply equally to portraiture. It is a common feature of *Sturlu saga* and *Guðmundar saga dýra* that they reveal almost nothing about the character of their protagonists. There is one startling moment at the burning of Langahlíð when Guðmundr professes that it would make no difference to him whether his daughter, who is married to one of his enemies, is in the house or not, but the moment is so isolated that we do not know whether it is characteristic of Guðmundr or not.

By contrast, *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* is quite revealing about personality. When Þorgils's ally Þoðvarr seeks to deter him from an attack by arguing that it is a holy day, we learn that Þorgils has a religious streak and that he may be susceptible to religious arguments. When Þoðvarr later admits that religion was not the issue at all and that the real reason for not attacking was Þorgils's imminent peril, we learn further that, however susceptible Þorgils is on the score of religion, he is not susceptible to intimidation or a threat to his personal safety, and he would not have responded to representations on this front. In the same sequence we learn of his loyalty to his followers, whom he categorically refuses to abandon. Hafliði shares Þorgils's religious scruples, as he demonstrates when he is deeply affected by Ketill Þorsteinsson's parable on humility. In addition, Hafliði is prescient, foreseeing that a man is about to be killed and may turn out not to be properly buried. In short, the narrative episodes in this saga are not exclusively selected with an eye to registering tradition but also with a view to revealing the character of the protagonists.

Þorgils saga ok Hafliða thus offers a more complex view of the characters that populate its pages. They are people with ingrained

principles and sentiments, who act on the basis of abstract convictions. The saga does not simply state what people do but explores how and why they do it. An inner life comes into view behind an otherwise neutrally observed sequence of events. That is tantamount to replacing an observation of events with an observation of the people who motivate the events; such a shift produces a moral backdrop.

The moral stance is not necessarily complicated. In *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* in particular there is a rather simple opposition between the villains (Már and Óláfr) and the principled gentlemen (Hafliði and Þorgils). It is tempting to think of the opposition as a social statement contrasting commoners and chieftains, but Már is after all Hafliði's nephew and therefore in a chieftainly family. The issue is not social but moral, as is illustrated by the occasion on which Hafliði heaps reproaches on his nephew (chapters 5–6). Here too there is a larger and more abstract issue on the author's mind: the notion that trouble is caused by bad character and resolved by good character. There are to be sure a number of villainous characters in *Sturlu saga* and *Guðmundar saga dýra* as well, but there is no thematic contrast between them and their betters. Nor are the villains invested with a capacity for evil that threatens to engulf the social order.

This understanding of *Þorgils saga* has sometimes been associated with a religious vein, and, as we have seen, both Þorgils and Hafliði exhibit religious principles. The hardened saga reader might be tempted to regard Ketill Þorsteinsson's sentimental *dæmisaga* (exemplum) at the critical final stage of the negotiations as intrusive and superimposed on the feud action, but it might also be understood as the logical culmination of a conflict not so much between Þorgils and Hafliði as between good and evil. It abstracts the principle that some concession in the interest of peace is superior to an uncompromising pursuit of personal honor. That too is a feature quite often found in the classical sagas, not infrequently as an underlying moral of the story.

To sum up the contrast between *Þorgils saga* and the two preceding sagas, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the former is for all intents and purposes a classical saga, while the latter two are not. If the action of *Þorgils saga* had been set in the Saga Age (930–1030), there is no doubt at all that it would have been classified among the classical sagas. Only because it postdates the Saga Age by a hundred years and is transmitted in *Sturlunga saga* has it been classified among the

contemporary sagas. In point of fact it is located at almost the exact midpoint between Saga Age and the age of saga writing. It therefore occupies a crucial position and may provide hints about the nature of the transmissions from both earlier and later times.

Implications

We have referred to three subtypes of the sagas written about events in medieval Iceland: two sagas of the late twelfth century, a saga of the early twelfth century, and the sagas of the Saga Age. The first were written in all probability between twenty-five and perhaps sixty years after the events they describe; the second was written about a hundred years after the fact; and the classical sagas were written anywhere from two hundred to four hundred years after their historical setting.

In terms of origins, the first category is least mysterious. There can be little doubt that the narrative material is taken fresh from oral tradition. The critical literature offers no speculations on the use of written genealogies or written narrative sources. These sagas seem to be written for readers and listeners who might still be familiar (at least by hearsay) with some of the events that are told. The material itself is arranged chronologically and gives an overview of the political dealings of a particular individual. The narrative is primarily a record of events, although these events are certainly formulated in such a way as to redound to the protagonist's credit. Such sagas do not formulate larger problems or moral perspectives, nor do they develop character sketches.

In the absence of any indications to the contrary, we may assume that *Porgils saga ok Hafliða* also capitalizes on living traditions, but the events lie in the more distant past. And yet, when it comes to an analysis of literary characteristics, *Porgils saga*, which reports events a hundred years or more later than the Saga Age, is clearly aligned with the classical sagas. How should we explain this alignment?

One explanation might be that the author of *Porgils saga* had the same sort of tradition available as the authors of *Sturlu saga* and *Guðmundar saga dýra* but was literarily more skilled and imaginative. The religious undertone could suggest a cleric with a habit of moral reflection; however, the religious perspective does nothing to explain the structural and dramatic affiliation of *Porgils saga* with the

classical sagas. We could perhaps imagine that the author of *Porgils saga* was familiar with oral versions of the classical sagas and imitated their style, but we are not as comfortable as we once were with the supposition that there were full-blown oral precursors to the written classical sagas. It seems more likely that the author of *Porgils saga ok Hafliða* and the authors of the classical sagas drew their compositional practices from a common tradition of oral narrative. The rhetorical devices appear to be more a matter of inherited style than of literary imitation. If there was such a style, it had not yet been elevated to a literary plane at the time *Porgils saga* was written around 1220. At that time there were relatively few classical sagas on parchment. The narrative practices must therefore have been oral.

Our task is, as it has been for more than a century, to assess the oral antecedents from which such a saga style might derive. *Sturlu saga* and *Guðmundar saga dýra* surely tell us much about the nature of the tradition in the short term. They tell us that there was an extraordinary knowledge of names and family relationships, that half a century after the events people (at least in the same region) knew the genealogies well and even knew the names of lesser persons connected only marginally with the action.

To know so many names implies a knowledge of the events in which the persons were involved, and indeed these sagas suggest a quite intricate knowledge of such events. They also suggest that the events could be ordered in roughly chronological fashion, that people in a given region knew the sequence of local events. But the material at hand, though abundant, was also somewhat chaotic. There is no indication that it was cast in literary form. It looks rather as though the incidents were strung together with very little sense of narrative economy. Such is not the case in *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*. If we choose not to explain the compositional superiority of *Porgils saga* by resorting to the argument of literary genius, what are the alternatives?

The three sagas under study were probably written at approximately the same time as nearly as we can tell. The difference of style is therefore not accounted for by a difference in the time of writing or the stage of literary evolution. The more significant difference seems to be the date of the events reported, the events in *Porgils saga* being forty to seventy-five years older than the events in the other sagas. The stylistic discrepancy may therefore be a matter of transmission rather

than literary refinement. The transmissions from the early twelfth century seem to have passed through some preliterate filter that reorganized and focused a particular tradition, simplified the genealogies, narrowed the antagonisms, and dramatized the conflict.

That traditions could be shaped by transmission is no new insight into the operations of oral narrative. The process was outlined by Liestøl and accepted by Heusler.²⁹ But these scholars did not see that we have such an accurate measure of the evolution—that traditions only fifty years old remain disorganized, whereas traditions a hundred years old have acquired form and depth. What does this transformation suggest about a possible long form at the oral stage? There is not much doubt that Clover is right to think that individual incidents could be told separately; the so-called *þættir* are a sufficient warrant of this option. But is she right to believe that the “immanent saga” was not realized until a writer gathered the incidents together on parchment? *Porgils saga ok Hafliða* certainly makes it appear that the whole story of the conflict between these chieftains was known and could be reproduced. A number of the rhetorical devices—such as unity, symmetry, alternation, relevance, and dramatic intensification—are contingent on the whole story rather than individual episodes. They could not be learned and practiced by singling out this incident or that. They constitute an art of the whole—an art of the saga, not just of the episode. Hence there is reason to believe that the assembling and organizing of incidents began at the oral stage and that the “immanent saga” was not merely potential; it was also practiced.

We need not assume that every saga was orally preconditioned, as *Porgils saga ok Hafliða* seems to have been. Some sagas (e.g., *Egils saga*) subscribe to a more biographical pattern (and therefore also to a chronological pattern) that lies closer to the kings’ sagas or the bishops’ sagas. Other sagas partake of the chronicle style we have observed in *Sturlu saga* and *Guðmundar saga dýra* (e.g., *Eyrbyggja saga* or *Vatnsdæla saga*). But the preponderant style among the classical sagas is dramatic and akin to what we find in *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*. This style is likely to have been cultivated in the oral transmission of whole sagas such as those of Gísli, or Kjartan and Bolli, or Hrafnkell, or Gunnarr and Njáll. The style of the written plot that eventually emerged was in all likelihood preconditioned by a well-articulated oral plot.

The study of oral rhetoric has for the most part been confined to matters of phraseology in the “oral formula” and the construction of individual “type scenes,” although the more overarching principle of “envelope structure” has also been invoked.³⁰ What I suggest here (as in 1967) is that the saga as a whole was characterized by rhetorical features that are so pervasive in the written sagas as to imply oral precedents, not just of the individual scene but of the total composition. Thus the saga as a whole is more often than not constructed around a dramatic high point that all the preliminary scenes are designed to profile. The preliminary scenes do not have independent or evenly weighted status, only a subsidiary function in pointing toward the climax. That climax may be the killing of a hero (Björn Hítöelakappi, Kjartan Ólafsson, Gísli Súrsson, Grettir Ásmundarson, Þorgeirr Hávarsson, Helgi Droplaugarson, or Gunnarr Hámundarson). It may be the burning in of a protagonist (Blund-Ketill Geirsson or Njáll and his family), the unexpected expulsion of a chieftain (Hrafnkell Hallfreðarson or Víga-Glúmr Eyjólfsson), or the execution of a long-deferred vengeance (as in *Heiðarvíga saga* or *Hávarðar saga Ísfrðings*), but in each case there is a central event that focuses the action of the remaining narrative and guides the reader’s attention. That attention is not randomly dispersed over a series of scenes or episodes but is controlled by a dénouement that lends meaning to all the lesser episodes. This persistent pattern suggests that readers (and, by extension, listeners at the oral stage) were accustomed to a dénouement highlighted and set in relief by a greater or lesser series of episodes, all contrived to underscore the central drama.

The preliminary episodes can be managed in several ways. They can be ordered as independent occurrences that have no immediate connection with each other but are all prefatory to and suggestive of the central conflict. Or they can be carefully linked in a chain of causation that leads inexorably to the climax. The exact relevance of a particular incident may not be apparent at first but becomes increasingly clear as the sequence unfolds. In this arrangement each link presupposes the previous one and provokes the following one, a technique that produces a pleasing narrative tightness. Finally, the preliminaries may be structured as a sequence of miniature dramas, with points of departure that are separate from but always anticipatory of the major conflict and understood to be adumbrations of the outcome.

Typically these opening sequences intensify the conflict gradually. Minor tensions yield to more perilous confrontations and ultimately to overt collisions. Verbal encounters give way to deliberate provocations, which in turn give way to hotly contested litigation, armed conflict, and bloodshed. The sequence is spread over time and shapes the eventual climax with calculated deliberateness. The paradoxical effect of this deliberateness is to retard the action artificially and, at the same time, to quicken the reader's interest as the outcome comes into view with increasing clarity.

The most traditional anticipatory device is the dream, which reveals the outcome quite explicitly. Other foreshadowings take the form of portents, predictions, or premonitions. Such signals are apt to occur quite early in the story. Akin to the dramatic buildup of the plot, they serve to fix the end point of the action firmly in the reader's mind while at the same time exciting interest in the details that lead up to the foreordained end point. In addition, the culmination of the plot is also signaled by a manipulation of pace, a marked deceleration and an accumulation of detail as the end approaches. For example, if the end takes the form of an armed confrontation, the dramatic moment is framed with details on the gathering of men, the route leading to the battle site, and the words spoken by the protagonists. The effect can be doubled when both parties are tracked as they proceed to a showdown, with the focus sometimes shifting between the two.

What these narrative devices have in common is that they are predicated on a long story, not a brief episode. Foreshadowing, gradual intensification, and the manipulation of narrative pace and density are rhetorical tricks that presuppose the "long prose form." These devices are so ubiquitous from the very outset of saga writing in Iceland—most prominently in the native sagas but also in the kings' sagas—that they must have been part of the preliterate oral repertory of story techniques. There is no latitude for foreshadowing, retardation, or an alternation between two armed camps in the episodic short form. Thus the fully evolved presence of these strategies suggests that they must traditionally have been put to use in longer stories. Exactly what narrative length they imply is hard to calculate, but even the shorter or middle-length sagas (such as *Hœnsa-Póris saga* or *Gísla saga*) make full use of such strategies. It is therefore not impossible that oral tellings may have been equivalent to forty- or fifty-page written sagas.

Residues of an Oral Saga

One of the passages sometimes cited in connection with oral saga telling is found in *Fóstbrœðra saga*.³¹ The scene is set in Greenland, where Þormóðr Bersason has arrived on a secret mission to take revenge against the killers of his foster brother Þorgeirr Hávarsson. One day during a thingmeeting Þormóðr is asleep in his booth but is awakened by a certain Egill to be informed that he is missing out on something:

At that moment Egill rushed into the booth and said: “You’re really missing some good entertainment.” Þormóðr asked: “Where are you coming from and what’s up in the way of entertainment?” Egill replied: “I was at Þorgrímr Einarsson’s booth, and most of the people at the thing are there too.” [Þorgrímr Einarsson is one of Þorgeirr’s killers.] Þormóðr asked: “What is the entertainment there?” Egill replied: “Þorgrímr is telling a saga (i.e., a story).” Þormóðr asked “Who is the subject of the saga he is telling?” Egill answered: “I’m not quite sure whom the saga is about, but I do know that he is a good and entertaining teller. A chair has been set out for him by the booth and people are sitting around listening to the saga.” Þormóðr said: “Maybe you can name a character in the saga, since you seem to think it affords so much amusement.” Egill said: “Some Þorgeirr is a great hero in the saga, and I get the impression that Þorgrímr himself was somewhat involved in the story and cut quite a figure on the attack, as might be expected. I wish you would go there too and listen to the entertainment.” “I might do that,” said Þormóðr.

This brief passage tells us rather a lot about oral delivery. In the first place, storytelling is not just a matter of casual conversation but something approaching a formal exercise. The teller is seated apart, presumably in front of a crowd of listeners, perhaps seated in a semicircle. They constitute an official audience, not unlike a modern audience for an author’s reading. In the second place, the passage is quite insistent in emphasizing how well the story is told and how entertaining it is. The word *skemmtan* (entertainment) or *skemmtiliga* (entertainingly) is used five times and the word *gaman* (fun) once. In fact, the style of telling seems to overshadow the content, because

Egill is not quite sure who the characters in the story are. The effect of the story is correspondingly great since almost everyone at the thingmeeting crowds around to listen, to the extent that Þormóðr is conspicuous by his absence.

The subject matter is also defined to a certain extent. Þormóðr asks not “what” the saga is about but “whom” it is about, suggesting that such a story might typically center on a particular individual. The incident reported by Egill is by no means indifferent but centers on the famous warrior Þorgeirr, presumably the circumstances of his death and the events leading up to that moment. If there were no preparatory narrative, the incidents would not be substantial enough to constitute a story. Indeed, the narrative dimensions seem to be considerable because Egill is able to absent himself for a time with no apparent concern that he may lose the thread of the story. The nature of the tale is clearly martial, a tale of heroic confrontation. Þorgeirr is described as a *mikill kappi* (a great champion) and Þorgrímr credits himself with having cut quite a figure on the attack (“gengit mjök vel fram”).

The actual killing of Þorgeirr has been recounted earlier in the saga (ÍF 6:206–10), though clearly more to Þorgeirr’s advantage than to Þorgrímr’s. It forms the first high point in *Fóstbræðra saga*, and Þorgrímr’s retelling illustrates how such a dramatic moment, no doubt set off with some account of the prefatory conflict, could have been perpetuated in oral tradition. A separate question is whether an episode such as Þorgrímr’s storytelling could have been maintained in tradition. It may well have been, because it too is part of a dramatic high point, the revenge taken by Þormóðr for Þorgeirr’s killing, which plays out as follows.

Þormóðr proceeds with Egill to Þorgrímr’s booth, the site of the storytelling. We must understand both that he has kept his vengeful intentions secret and that he is fully aware of the identity of the Þorgrímr who is telling the story. As Þormóðr arrives, the sky begins to cloud over, and he forms a plan of attack. Inspecting the sky above and the ground under his feet, he warns Egill that something momentous is about to happen and that if Egill should hear a great crash, he should take to his heels as fast as he can. At this point the rain begins to come down and the audience scatters. Þormóðr approaches Þorgrímr, gives him an oblique intimation of what is about to happen, and buries his ax in his skull. When Egill hears the crash, he duly runs off, and

Þormóðr calls back the scattering crowd with the fiction that some unidentified man has killed Þorgrímr. They see Egill running at top speed and, assuming that he is the unknown culprit, they set out in pursuit, thus giving Þormóðr time to escape.

This culmination of Þormóðr's mission is cast not so much in terms of heroic confrontation as in terms of an exaggeratedly ingenious stratagem. Þormóðr cannot merely face off against his antagonist Þorgrímr; he must kill him without allowing the crowd of people around them to realize what has happened. That he is able to do so on the spur of the moment by capitalizing on a change in the weather and a witless decoy is what makes the scene memorable and likely to have been fashioned in and preserved by tradition. Thus there is evidence that ingenuity, no less than drama, was a crucial factor in maintaining oral transmissions.

The use of this incident to shed light on oral storytelling in Iceland is of course problematical. Whether traditional or not, it certainly cannot be assumed that the incident is historical. If it were historical, it would have the disadvantage of shedding light only on how stories were told in the early eleventh century, not in the thirteenth century. But it is finally more credible that the storytelling scene in *Fóstbræðra saga* reflects contemporary practice familiar to the readers of the saga in the thirteenth century. Though the scene cannot be shown to be historically true, it must have been culturally true, because the author would not have devised a situation that contemporaries would have found implausible. The scene suggests therefore that stories about the Saga Age could still be performed orally in the era of the written sagas. How long such sagas might have been we cannot know, but they were long enough to induce a crowd to come together as a formal audience and listen attentively.

Conclusion

The present chapter returns to the long-standing debate on the oral antecedents of the Icelandic sagas. In her full-scale inquiry Carol Clover concluded, on the basis of analogous prose traditions around the world, that the prose performances of medieval Iceland are likely to have been episodic. On the one hand, a survey of the international evidence on prose transmission makes it improbable that there were

long oral performances with dimensions approximating those of the longer written sagas. On the other hand, the performers of episodic narratives in Iceland were aware of how their short recitations fitted into a larger narrative whole, which Clover referred to as the “immanent whole.” But she maintained that at the oral stage the “immanent whole” was only potential and was not realized until the saga writers of the thirteenth century undertook to assemble fuller narratives on parchment.

Most studies of the problem have confined themselves to the classical sagas, which deal largely with events in the Saga Age (ca. 930–1030) when the Icelandic state was newly established. The underlying assumption was that the record of events from this period must have been passed down orally through the generations and that at some point during the transmission the narratives took on a shape very similar to the written sagas as we know them. I depart from this precedent by shifting the focus from the classical sagas to three sagas that narrate events from the twelfth century, a hundred or two hundred years after the Saga Age. Two of these sagas (*Sturlu saga* and *Guðmundar saga dýra*) cover the period 1150–1212; both seem to have been written early in the thirteenth century. Both have a great wealth of personal names and genealogical information, quite beyond a modern reader’s powers of retention. Unlike the classical sagas, both report regional conflicts in a largely nondramatic, serial, chronicle-like narrative style. The narrative details are recapitulated in much simplified form but nonetheless at some length in this chapter in order to show to what degree the sagas in question differ from the dramatically stylized narrative of the classical sagas.

The third saga under study here, *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*, was probably written approximately at the same time as the other two (ca. 1220), but it relates events from a century earlier (ca. 1120). It is not overburdened with names and genealogical connections and is told very much in the economic and dramatic style of the classical sagas. The difference cannot be accounted for by supposing that the three sagas represent differing stages in the literary evolution of saga writing, because all three seem to have been written roughly at the same time. The argument advanced here is therefore that the stylistic difference should be explained by the differing length of time between the actual events and the time of writing. It appears that recent events, within the

memory of the listeners or readers, were set down in superabundant detail. On the other hand, older events that had receded in memory and had passed through a period of narrative refinement in the oral tradition acquired a leaner, simpler, and more dramatic style.

A number of the most prominent characteristics of this “oral” style—escalation, foreshadowing, contrived symmetries, gradually mounting tensions, expanded dialogue, and so forth—are appropriate not to brief, episodic tales, such as those envisaged by Clover, but to full-length, highly articulated, almost meditative narratives such as are exemplified in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* and the best of the classical sagas. The most likely source of this stylistic development is oral refinement over time—an oral refinement that presupposes the telling of a long prose form that provided the necessary latitude for practicing those larger rhetorical patterns and strategies, which define the style that ultimately emerged in the written sagas.