

# Islandica

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The Sagas of Norwegian Kings (1130–1265)

*An Introduction*

THEODORE M. ANDERSSON



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Kings (1130–1265)*

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ISLANDICA LIX

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## Preface

The purpose of the present volume is to provide the nonspecialist with a first orientation on the category of Icelandic sagas known as “kings’ sagas.” They are so titled because they typically, though not exclusively, recount the lives of the Norwegian kings from ca. 900 down to the thirteenth century. Two short Latin histories of these kings were written by Norwegians in the twelfth century, but the more extended vernacular histories, with one possible exception, were the work of Icelanders in the period 1130 to 1263. They reached their fullest and liveliest form in the three so-called “compendia” between ca. 1220 and ca. 1235.

After 1200 the extended kings’ sagas were in competition with the sagas about early Icelanders (“family sagas”). The latter are much better known and more easily available in modern translations. The kings’ sagas are less well known outside of Scandinavia, where there is of course a living interest in the earliest native kings. The interaction between kings’ sagas and “family sagas” has not been much discussed but is touched on in several chapters below. The “family sagas” have, on the other hand, elicited a large critical literature and avid appreciations for more than a century. This introduction is part of an attempt at correcting the imbalance. It is intended for general readers and does not presuppose any linguistic skills. As a consequence quotations appear only in (my own) English translation. The bibliography nonetheless includes studies in other languages for those who wish to pursue the subject further.

Though small in compass, my orientation is heavily freighted with obligations. Most importantly it was carried out under the auspices of a fellowship from the Mellon Foundation. That sponsorship allowed me to venture well beyond the confines of academic libraries in the United States. It enabled me to spend July of 2012 in Iceland and benefit from the expertise of my Icelandic colleagues Ármann Jakobsson, Gísli Sigurðsson, Guðrún Nordal, Gunnar Karlsson, Helgi Þorláksson, Sverrir Jakobsson,

Torfi Tulinius, and Úlfar Bragason. I am particularly indebted to Helgi Þorláksson, who drove me to the site of the most important western harbor site at Hvítá, and to Gísli Sigurðsson, who gave me the use of his office in the Stofnun Árna Magnússonar while he was on summer vacation. One of the following chapters was drafted there. The study of medieval Iceland is more than ever centered in Iceland, and the opportunity to consult with these colleagues was of great value to me. My Mellon grant also allowed me to attend the Fifteenth International Saga Conference in Aarhus in August of 2012. I read a paper related to the first chapter in the present book and profited greatly from the lively discussion that ensued. Most of all a week's attendance at a broad range of papers kept me more up to date on saga matters than I would otherwise have been.

Before the onset of the Mellon grant I had treated myself to a month's stay in Ithaca, New York, where I could avail myself of the wealth of materials in Cornell's Fiske Collection, which has a long history of fostering Icelandic studies in the United States. Patrick Stevens and the particularly kind staff of the Kroch Library patiently accessed journal after journal on a daily basis, and that material figures prominently in what follows. I am also indebted to the staff of Green Library at Stanford, especially to Mary Louise Munill, who procured a seemingly endless stream of books and papers from at home and abroad, and to Chris Matson and his reference colleagues for sharing the tricks of their trade and making Green such an agreeable center of learning. They make academic work not only possible but delightful.

In addition, I am much indebted to Patricia Carbajales and her staff of Geographic Information Systems in the School of Earth Sciences at Stanford. They gave me many patient lessons in computer mapmaking and enabled me to produce, however imperfectly, the maps of medieval Icelandic harbors that appear at the end of Chapter 1. Finally, I am beholden to my colleagues Anthony Faulkes and Alison Finlay, who sent me a preprint of the second volume of their new translation of *Heimskringla*, which made it possible to include page references. They also kindly allowed me to use the map of medieval Norway in their first volume, which is now reproduced at the beginning of this book.

At the last minute, when my manuscript was ready for production, I made the acquaintance of two colleagues, whose dissertations intersect to some extent with the present book: Verena Höfig ("Finding a Founding Father: Memory, Identity, and the Icelandic *landnám*") and Ann Marie



Long (“The Relationship between Iceland and Norway *c.* 870-*c.* 1100: Memory, History and Identity”). Both generously gave me access to their dissertations, and I have added them to my bibliography. On the other hand, since both are important contributions and will hopefully appear in print before long, I have refrained from detailed references that would anticipate their results and have included only a couple of general references (with their permission) in Chapter 1.

T.M.A.  
Palo Alto, CA  
January, 2015



## Abbreviations

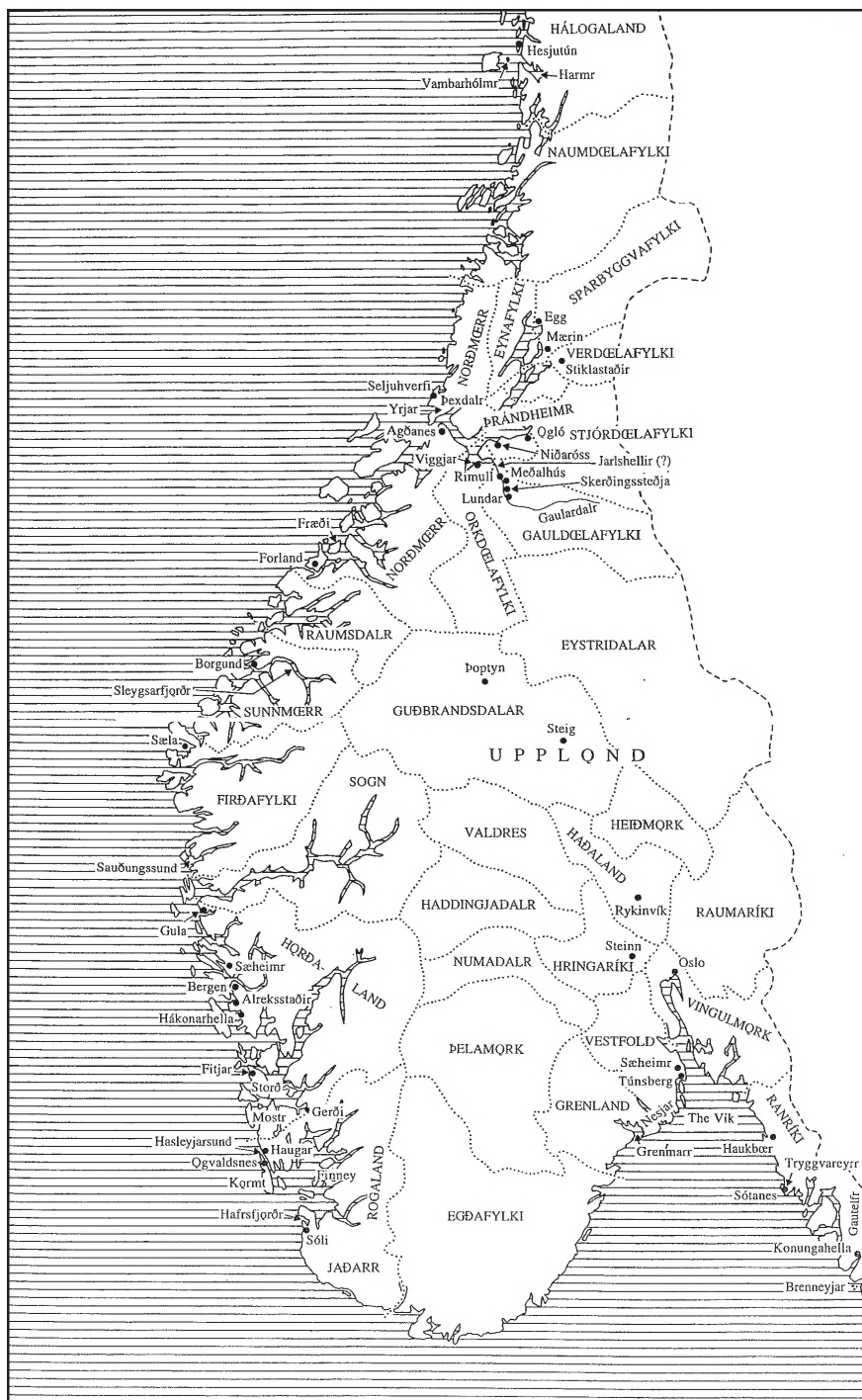
- ANF    *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*  
BA    *Bibliotheca Arnarnaganaeana*  
Bps.    *Biskupa sögur*, gefnar út af Hinu íslenzka  
          bókmenntafélagi (Copenhagen, 1858)  
ÍF    *Íslenzk fornrit* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag)  
      Vol. 1 (pts. 1 and 2): *Íslendingabók; Landnámabók*.  
      Ed. Jakob Benediktsson (1968).  
      Vol. 2: *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*.  
      Ed. Sigurður Nordal (1933).  
      Vol. 3: *Borgfirðinga sögur*. Ed. Sigurður  
      Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (1938).  
      Vol. 4: *Eyrbyggja saga*. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson  
      and Matthías Þórðarson (1935).  
      Vol. 5: *Laxdæla saga*. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1934).  
      Vol. 6: *Vestfirðinga sögur*. Ed. Björn K.  
      Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (1943).  
      Vol. 7: *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*. Ed. Guðni Jónsson (1936).  
      Vol. 8: *Vatnsdæla saga*. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1939).  
      Vol. 9: *Eyfirðinga sögur*. Ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (1956).  
      Vol. 10: *Ljósvetninga saga*. Ed. Björn Sigfússon (1940).  
      Vol. 11: *Austfirðinga sögur*. Ed. Jón Jóhannesson (1950).  
      Vol. 12: *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1954).  
      Vol. 15 (pts. 1 and 2): *Biskupa sögur*. Ed. Sigurgeir  
      Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, and Peter Foote (2003).  
      Vols. 23–24: *Morkinskinna*. Ed. Ármann Jakobsson  
      and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson (2011).  
      Vol. 25: *Færeyinga saga; Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir*  
      *Odd munk Snorrason*. Ed. Ólafur Halldórsson (2006).

- Vols. 26–28: *Heimskringla*. Ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (1941–51).  
 Vol. 29: *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sögum; Fagrskinna—Nóregs konunga tal*. Ed. Bjarni Einarsson (1985).  
 Vol. 30: *Sverris saga*. Ed. Þorleifur Hauksson (2007).  
 Vols. 31–32: *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar; Bøglunga saga; Magnúss saga Lagabætis*. Ed. Sverrir Jakobsson, Þorleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset (2013).

- JEGP *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*  
 MHN *Monumenta Historica Norvegiae: Latinske kildeskrifter til Norges historie i middelalderen*  
 NHT (Norsk) *Historisk Tidsskrift*  
 NVAOA Avhandlingar utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo  
 NVAOS Skrifter utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo  
 SI *Scripta Islandica*  
 SUGNL Samfund til udgivelse of gammel nordisk litteratur

## Approximate Dates of Reign of the Early Norwegian Rulers

Haraldr hárfagri (Fairhair)  
(late ninth century through the early tenth century)  
Hákon góði (the Good) (934–60)  
Haraldr gráfeldr (Graycloak) (960–75)  
Hákon jarl (975–95)  
Óláfr Tryggvason (995–1000)  
Eiríkr and Sveinn (sons of Hákon jarl) (1000–1015)  
Óláfr Haraldsson (Saint Olaf, Óláfr helgi) (1015–30)  
Knútr inn ríki (Canute or Cnut the Great) (1028–35)  
Magnús góði (the Good) (1035–47)  
Haraldr harðráði (Hardrule) (1046–66)  
Óláfr kyrri (the Quiet) (1066–93)  
Magnús berfœttr (Bareleg) (1093–1103)  
Eysteinn Magnússon (1103–23)  
Óláfr Magnússon (1103–15)  
Sigurðr Magnússon (1103–15)  
Haraldr gilli (1130–36)  
Magnús blindi (the Blind) (1130–39)  
Sigurðr Haraldsson (1136–55)  
Ingi Haraldsson (1136–61)  
Eysteinn Haraldsson (1142–57)  
Sigurðr slembir (1136–39)  
Hákon herðibreiðr (Broad Shoulders) (1157–62)  
Magnús Erlingsson (1161–84)  
Sverrir Sigurðarson (1184–1202)  
Hákon Hákonarson (1217–63)



## Central and South Norway