

The *Fornaldarsögur*: Stephen Mitchell's Contribution

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The *fornaldarsögur* (literally, “sagas of antiquity”) have long been relegated to the status of “poor cousins” within the family of Old Icelandic literature. To a large degree this downgrading has occurred because the *fornaldarsögur* are often fantastic narrations that read very differently from the more sober and worldly *íslendingasögur* [family sagas]. Written in the period from roughly the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, the *fornaldarsögur*, a mixture of tradition and invention, often recount legendary and mythic events from the recesses of Scandinavian folk memory. Sometimes a tale follows its hero or heroes into the supernatural world and also recounts quasi-historical memories of events that can be traced as far back as the migration period. In general, the *fornaldarsögur* focus on Scandinavia; southern Germanic matters and events are less evident and usually only enter the tales in connection with stories built on, or sharing motifs and traditions with, Eddic material, as they do in the *Völsunga saga*.

Both the family and the kings' sagas, as well as other Norse sources, offer a good deal of evidence suggesting that the *fornaldarsögur*, or similar prose narratives, were told orally by Icelanders both before and after writing became common in the twelfth century. *Sturlu þáttr*, from the *Sturlunga saga* compendium (1946), contains a description of such oral storytelling. It records the following tale about Sturla Þórðarson, who journeyed to Norway in the mid-thirteenth century. Sturla undertook his trip hoping to restore his standing with the king, to whom he had been slandered. As fate would have it, Sturla, though gaining access to the royal ship, found the king displeased with him, and the Icelandic was lodged in the forward part of the vessel away from the king (vol. 2:232-33).

And when the men lay down to sleep, the king's forecastleman asked who should entertain them. Most remained silent at this. Then he asked: “Sturla the Icelandic, will you entertain us?”

“You decide,” says Sturla. Then he told *Huldar saga*, better and more cleverly than any of them who were there had heard before.

Many thronged forward on the deck and wanted to hear it clearly, so that there was a great throng there.

The queen asked, “What is that crowd of men on the foredeck?”

A man says, “The men want to hear the saga that the Icelandic is telling.”

She said, “What saga is that?”

He replied, “It's about a great troll-woman, and it is a good story, and it is being well told.”

The king told her to pay no heed to this but to sleep. She said, “I think this Icelandic must be a good man and much less to blame than he is reported to be.”

The king remained silent. People went to sleep for the night. The following morning there was no wind, and the king's ship was in the same place. When the men were sitting at table during the day the king sent to Sturla some dishes from his table. Sturla's messmates were pleased at this, and said, "Things look better with you here than we thought, if this sort of thing goes on."

When the men had eaten, the queen sent a message to Sturla asking him to come to her and have with him the saga about the troll-woman. Sturla went aft to the quarterdeck then and greeted the king and queen. The king received his greeting shortly but the queen received it well and easily. The queen then asked him to tell that same story that he had told in the evening. He did so, and told the saga for much of the day. When he had told it, the queen and many others thanked him and understood that he was a knowledgeable and wise man.

Although individuals like Sturla Þórðarson may have been famed as raconteurs of fantastic stories such as the lost *Huldar saga*, much remains unclear about the provenance and the transmission of the *fornaldarsögur*. Even the naming of this group of texts has caused confusion. The term "sagas of antiquity" was coined by the first scholarly editor, presumably because the tales are set mostly in the ancient pre-Viking and early Viking past, that is, from the fifth to the tenth century. What the medieval Icelanders called these sagas is not known, but, in modern times, there have been numerous attempts to name and categorize all or parts of the *fornaldarsögur*. Groupings have alternately been referred to as "legendary sagas," "mythical-heroic sagas," or "legendary fiction," and other rubrics, such as "Viking romances" and "Viking sagas," have been proposed. These latter suggestions reflect the fact that many of the texts deal with Viking forays; some of them are set in the west, as far away as Ireland, but most take place in the East (including Finland, Bjarmaland, and Garðaríki-Russia).

Stephen A. Mitchell, in *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (1991), chooses to stick with the term *fornaldarsögur*. To this end he delineates (in chapter 2, "Definitions and Assessments") five traits that contribute to a definition of the texts: grounding in traditional heroic themes, their fabulous nature, inclusion of verse, distinct temporal and spatial frames, and a tendency toward monodimensional figures. Traditionally, scholars in search of ancient mythic and historical information have been the primary investigators of these texts. Such an exploration is a time-honored pursuit. The *fornaldarsögur* have supplied numerous pieces of information crucial to the unfinished jigsaw puzzle that forms our understanding of early Scandinavia. Mitchell, however, is not seeking still more clues to the earliest cultural and historical past of the northern regions; in fact, his goal is altogether different from an exploration for motifs and sources. Instead, Mitchell sets his sights on opening this large body of often ignored texts to modern narrative inquiry, bringing the hard-won lessons of oral theory to the study of the *fornaldarsögur*. He regards the texts as constituting a genre that is the product both of conscious literary innovation and of the medieval Icelanders' use of traditional, oral narrative forms and techniques. For Mitchell, the *fornaldarsögur* "are a cultural hybrid, a constellation of (primarily) folkloric and traditional materials and of (secondarily) literary materials, the interpretation of which must depend on the methodological tools of both fields" (43). Mitchell's intent in combining these methodological approaches is to shift the focus of the discourse to an analysis of the underlying generative elements, that is, the cultural, social, and narrative forces responsible for the creation and centuries-long maintenance of this Icelandic form of storytelling.

Mitchell has thus set himself an ambitious task, but in pursuing it he is, to his credit, highly successful. His success is due in a large part to his ability to concentrate on significant social and historical issues while introducing current concepts of narrative structure and oral theory. Mitchell distinguishes his work from earlier studies in several innovative ways. On the social and historical front, he purposely chooses to draw only occasionally on Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*. Similarly, he does not depend on the other more fragmentary attestations to preexisting legendary traditions. Passing over these frequently used sources of events and traditions of the eighth and ninth centuries, Mitchell breaks new ground by exploring the *fornaldarsögur* within the contextual framework of thirteenth-, fourteenth-, and fifteenth-century Iceland, that is, within the realm of the society and culture that produced and used these texts.

Throughout his book, Mitchell is steadfast in his contention that the *fornaldarsögur* are best understood in connection with the later period of writing rather than in light of the ancient settings of the stories themselves. Although legendary narratives were popular before the thirteenth century, Mitchell argues that the distinctive nature of the extant texts is a result of their connection with the Icelandic Middle Ages. At that time—the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries—the island society was experiencing decisive changes. The older order of the Free State was adapting to the constraints of foreign overlordship and perceptions were changing with the importation of new cultural influences. To Mitchell's list of shifting cultural factors might be added the significant economic and social alterations induced by the large-scale exportation of stockfish that began in the third decade of the fourteenth century.

The introductory section of *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* reviews the current state of saga studies. The core theoretical issues unfold in four long chapters, followed by an Epilogue and an Appendix. The latter lists the mostly prose *fornaldarsögur*, linking them with examples of related ballads and *rímur* (metrical romances). The bibliographical apparatus is extensive, listing translations and editions and then presenting a comprehensive listing of secondary literature. By focusing on the sagas, the first three chapters form the comparative groundwork for the final chapter, which offers a new paradigm for the relationship between the *fornaldarsögur* and the versified texts. In the past most scholars have argued that transmission between the genres flowed in one direction, from saga to ballad and *rímur*. Mitchell, however, takes a different view, arguing that “the relationship between the *fornaldarsögur* and the versified texts cannot be characterized by transmutation in a single direction” (137). He observes that there was considerable movement back and forth between the genres, noting that some of what we regard as *fornaldarsögur* are in reality prose reworkings of *rímur*.

Firmly grounded in modern folklore analysis, Mitchell addresses the conviction that in critical scholarship there is no text without context. Stating his goal of exploring the nature of literary transmission in medieval Iceland and the attitudes of the medieval audience, Mitchell, in his introduction, carefully lays out the theoretical background of his study. As a result, his clear and concise assessment of previous theories reaches far beyond the often narrow confines of traditional studies of the late heroic texts. He notes that whereas “the question of orality as a matter of scholarly debate has attached itself more to the *íslendingasögur* than to other saga genres,” the influence of the orality question “colors virtually every discussion in the area of Old Norse literature, and the issues seem to me to be of the utmost importance in the case of the *fornaldarsögur*” (6).

The Introduction is a critical reassessment that will serve as a departure point for future analyses of saga story, whether concerning the *fornaldarsögur* or the family sagas. Mitchell has the analytical acumen to formulate the issues and the courage to stand up and say what has in the past few years become increasingly clear: we are now at a watershed where we can discern that several idiosyncratic approaches troubling contemporary saga studies are no longer viable. Focusing at first on the more than seventy years of debate over saga origins, Mitchell distinguishes three groups: “bookprosisists,” who advocate the late written, though mostly indigenous, origin of the sagas; “continentalists,” who embrace a form of bookprose, in which the genesis of the Icelandic texts lies in imported continental Latin/Christian or late vernacular literary models; and “traditionalists,” who believe that the texts originated in a native tradition of well-developed oral storytelling. Once the distinctions are set out, Mitchell refuses to be drawn into rehashing the old arguments about bookprose and freeprose. Instead, he concentrates on evaluating the work of the continental school by applying the critical eye of the comparativist. He astutely observes (4-5) that, like the old bookprosisists,

the modern Continentalists seem perfectly prepared to leave society out of the equation as well. And in their desire to make the Continentalist case, its adherents threaten to become locked into an arid search for “sources,” whether at the level of the individual motif or of the macrostructure.

Focusing on Carol Clover’s *The Medieval Saga* (1982) and Marianne Kalinke’s *Bridal Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland* (1990) as examples of continentalists’ work, Mitchell goes on to say (5) that

Source studies by the Continentalists would seem to be an intellectual cul-de-sac. Placed in contexts of this sort, literature begins to lack meaning, other than as a sterile warehouse of motifs and structures with which partisans may ratify such displaced concerns as the glory and influence of medieval France.

Tired of the hodgepodge logic and the aggressive but unconvincing argumentation of the continentalists, Mitchell chooses critical rigor. He rejects the basis of Clover’s review essay, “Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)” in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide* (1985). Pointing out the contrived nature of Clover’s conclusions, Mitchell notes (5) that her reasoning is

often based on a kind of negative analogic argument. The idea that the complex interweaving of saga style could not have developed from traditional oral forms, for example, is based on selectively culled evidence from non-European folk traditions: there are counterexamples from Irish and Serbo-Croatian oral traditions which make the point moot.

Having addressed head-on the outdated continentalist-bookprosisist views, Mitchell develops an analytic alternative. In the process he formulates the position (5) of

the modern-day traditionalists [who] believe in an oral literature that served a nonelite, as well as elite, constituency; in a significant oral impact on the written work; and in a healthy synergism between oral and written saga forms. Obviously, the modern traditionalist position little resembles what Andreas Heusler had in mind at the turn of

the century, when he could characterize the saga writers as something like stenographers accurately recording a fixed text word for word from oral narration; if anything, today's traditionalists probably resemble what his generation would have thought of as book-prosists, namely, believers in an individual saga writer employing inherited oral verse and indigenous traditions in the service of a written text.

Grounded in this moderate view, Mitchell moves his study forward, showing how Icelanders of the postclassical fourteenth- and fifteenth-century period worked with the elements of traditional narrative still alive in their culture. In the first chapter, "Definitions and Assessments," Mitchell organizes his critical perspectives in three categories: the *fornaldarsögur* and history, the reaction against the *fornaldarsögur* as history and as literature, and the connection between the *fornaldarsögur* and folklore and mythology. His historical review of the reception of these texts and their relationship to folklore studies is highly informative, preparing the reader for the analysis to follow. In chapter 2, "Origins and Influences," Mitchell takes up the issue of tradition, discussing key concepts of the idea of tradition, including continuity, variation, and communality. He considers the nature of the traditional and the learned lore that together form the semantic underpinnings of the *fornaldarsögur*. Mitchell's purpose is "to provide a more precise sense of what tradition is in the Old Norse context and of the extent to which we must think of these works as belonging to the late Middle Ages, rather than earlier periods" (48). In this effort he employs a model of saga communications developed by Lars Lönnroth in *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction* (1976) in order to link studies of the family sagas and the *fornaldarsögur* in the areas of tradition, innovation, literary borrowing, performance, sponsorship, and the creative process. While Lönnroth's model was applied only to the *íslendingasögur*, Mitchell extends this analysis to the *fornaldarsögur*.

Although Mitchell's ideas and explications are excellent, the arrangement of *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* is at times clumsy and confusing. For example, chapter 2, with forty-seven pages, is too long for its purpose, and its length sometimes cloaks an analysis that thoughtfully weighs the competing influences of tradition and original composition. Understanding these competing influences is a critical factor of Mitchell's analysis since the *fornaldarsögur* as a genre are steeped in tradition, whether mythic, folkloric, or historical, while the individual texts are highly eclectic, frequently drawing on fresh literary impulses from abroad. In chapter 3, "Uses and Functions," Mitchell discusses the impetus for the composition of the *fornaldarsögur*. He analyzes the factors that influenced this activity, concentrating on overlapping and shifting issues that confronted saga audiences. These include literary merit, ability to entertain, and historical worth. Here Mitchell, following the lead of contemporary Icelandic scholars like Vésteinn Ólason (1982, 1983, 1985) and Sverrir Tómasson (1977), offers a redefinition of the cultural milieu of the later Middle Ages, a critical point that enables him to move beyond a consideration of the *fornaldarsögur* in simple evolutionary terms. This shift in emphasis opens the analysis to questions of audience participation, including a consideration of the popularity of these texts.

In the fourth and final chapter, "The Legacy Renewed," Mitchell considers the process by which traditional elements underlying the basic stories of the *fornaldarsögur* were transmuted into the new genres of ballads and *rímur*. He begins the chapter by reviewing the scholarship on Scandinavian balladry, comparing items in the ballad repertoire with analogues among the *fornaldarsögur*. As illustrations of the relationship

between the *fornaldarsögur*, Nordic balladry, and traditional legendary materials, Mitchell discusses *Norna-Gests Þáttr*, *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, and *Heiðreks saga*. He treats the relationship by building on Lars Lönnroth's saga communication model (163):

Like Lönnroth's model (and the biologist's concept of phylogenetic descent with reticulates), the relationship among traditional legendary material, *fornaldarsaga*, and ballad does *not* consist solely of a series of constantly branching binaries. Indeed, the relationship is much more one of dynamic reticulation, that is, frequent exchange between the various multiforms and their genres. The system of saga-ballad communications which thus begins to emerge, relevant both synchronically and diachronically, is one in which transmission (or "communication") takes place through both oral *and* written channels, the latter consisting of printed as well as of scribal copies, not on one occasion only but also over time.

Turning to Iceland and the uniquely Icelandic tradition of *rímur*, Mitchell continues to build on work by Vésteinn Ólason. He determines that the "transferral of the prosimetrical *fornaldarsögur* (or their traditions at any rate) into the multimetered *rímur* dictates not only the expansion of the existing text at one juncture and its contraction elsewhere, but also a new style of narration and the introduction of completely new material" (166). Having arrived at this determination, Mitchell concludes with a forward-looking discussion of the reinvigoration of the legendary materials, seen as a byproduct of the saga-*rímur*-ballad dynamic in the northern heroic tradition. Toward the end of the volume Mitchell illustrates his point with a diagram that proposes a model for *fornaldarsögur-rímur*-ballad communications. The model provides an important representation of the paradigm shift proposed by Mitchell and is a sketch of the dynamic by which texts were recycled and legendary materials renewed. Here the oral or written origin is not seen as a determinant, but only as an important factor (176):

Whether the contributing materials were heard from a traditional raconteur, heard while being read aloud from a manuscript, or simply read is an important issue with regard to contextualization and to other aspects of our understanding of the tales and their environment, but it does not significantly alter the path of generic transformation.

With this model, the study comes full circle. Mitchell has taken a skeletal saga communications structure originally meant for the *íslendingasögur* and recast it into a new communications model, reflecting the development of the legendary material. Unfortunately, here too the basic organization of the book detracts from the theoretical questions. The model, which challenges the reader to rethink relationships among *rímur*, saga, and ballad, appears only in the final chapter. Surely the analysis would have unfolded in a more cogent manner had it appeared at an earlier stage and thus enabled the reader to test Mitchell's analysis against the new paradigm that he is constructing. With the introduction of his new paradigm the book essentially comes to an end. The Epilogue is short, reinforcing the basis of analysis used in the study.

In light of the scope and originality of the book, the organizational weaknesses are distracting but minor. Mitchell has written an important study that challenges the basis of previous scholarly analysis of the *fornaldarsögur* and provides an essential tool for those seeking to understand the fundamental differences between the *fornaldarsögur* and the

Íslendingasögur. Future studies of the *fornaldarsögur*, as well as of the *Íslendingasögur*, will require significant reflection on Mitchell's work and conclusions.

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