

Reconstructing Old Norse Oral Tradition

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The written residue of oral tradition from the medieval Nordic world encompasses a wide variety of pan-national genres, including charms, legends, and genealogical lore, but modern scholarly attention has generally focused on two areas: (1) the prose (and often prosimetrical) Icelandic sagas and (2) traditional poetry in its two dominant forms, eddic and scaldic.

Many factors play into this somewhat restricted image of what constituted oral tradition in the hyperborean Middle Ages—obviously, manuscript preservation and the issue of what materials have come down to us are key elements, but so too are, among others, the effects of early modern nation-building, nineteenth-century nationalism, and contemporary aesthetic tastes. Certainly one important aspect of the emphasis on saga literature is the broad appeal the Icelandic sagas hold for modern audiences, a fascination easily apprehended in that they are characteristically complex narratives exhibiting sophisticated literary portraiture and realistically detailed events. The topics of the sagas vary from historical, legendary, religious, and contemporary themes to the completely fantastic, and as such they offer an inclusive and panoramic view of medieval Nordic cultural life, narrative imagination, and attitudes toward the past and the heroic. Whether these marvelous medieval texts are to be seen as (1) reflections of a vibrant oral culture absorbing and codifying elements of the world around their authors, or (2) merely reflexes of written texts borrowed from abroad, or (3) some compromise between the two extremes, borrowing freely from available foreign models but also incorporating much native tradition, has historically dominated perceptions and scholarly debates about the sagas (Andersson 1964), and although occasionally new models emerge (Lönnroth 1976), it is clear that the weight of the nativist—anti-nativist arguments remains a powerful influence on academic treatments of the topic. Eddic poetry principally concerns itself with mythological and heroic themes, whereas scaldic verse tends toward praise, memorial, and occasional poetry, but it should be noted that scaldic panegyrics also take up, for example,

Christian religious themes. The frequently noted performance contexts of such poetry have played a particularly prominent role in discussions of oral composition and delivery of such works in medieval Scandinavia (Bauman 1986; Harris 2000).

Perhaps the greatest change in the study of medieval Norse saga literature and lore over the past 100 years has been an enhanced appreciation for the cultural context of these materials—not just how were they formulated, but with what patronage? Under what circumstances? With what audience in mind? With what expectations? Declaimed? Read silently? and so on. Once such wonderful works had been wrenched from the hands of a desiccating formalism dedicated to a fixed text and an equally alkaline literary criticism that saw only words on a page, an understanding of the Norse materials' potential as ethnic textual photograph *and* literary wonderwork was available, a synthetic view that exhibits allegiance to neither extremist position but understands the potential for developing a much-needed symbiosis between them. The works of Lars Lönnroth have been of special importance in this regard (e.g., 1980), and have had a marked impact on several generations of scholars in North America and Europe. A recent work by Gísli Sigurðsson (2002) challenges many assumptions concerning our (in)ability to reconstruct medieval orality from surviving documents and offers new insights into the character of the sagas' oral background.

If the trend in saga scholarship has been one of increased contextualization, modern consideration of Norse poetry has likewise been marked by an enhanced appreciation for “performance contexts,” that is, an increased understanding for how an “ethnography of speaking” assists us in reading such texts (e.g., Mitchell 2002). Alongside such performance-oriented approaches, sophisticated considerations employing codicology and literary criticism in new ways (e.g., Harris 1983; Quinn 1992), have led to important re-evaluations of the poetic corpus and its potential relationship to oral tradition.

Far from exhausting the possibilities of spiritual culture in the Nordic Middle Ages (see, for example, the overview in Mitchell 2000), the Icelandic sagas and poetic materials give us a glimpse into how rich the nature of oral narration must once have been in that world, as do other components of Iceland's “learned lore,” such as Snorri Sturluson's thirteenth-century *ars poetica* (known as *Snorra edda*). Medieval Icelandic antiquarianism, which has so happily preserved these phenomenal texts, also suggests what happens when such interest is lacking: the demographically much larger and politically more powerful cultural areas of medieval Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, each of which also boasted a substantial

court culture lacking in Iceland, have preserved nothing like the prose and poetic works we have from that insular nation.

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Sigurðsson 2002

Gísli Sigurðsson. *Túlkun íslendingasagna í ljósi munnlegrar hefðar: tilgáta um aðferð*. RIT / Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 56. Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi. [English translation to be published as *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*, Publications of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.]