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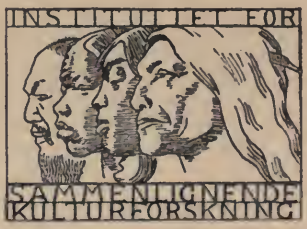

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KNUT LIESTØL:
THE ORIGIN OF THE ICELANDIC FAMILY SAGAS

OSLO 1930
H. ASCHEHOUG & CO. (W. NYGAARD)

LEIPZIG
OTTO HARRASSOWITZ

PARIS
SOCIÉTÉ D'ÉDITION
«LES BELLES LETTRES»

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BY

KNUT LIESTØL

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20.7.53

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DET MALLINGSKE BOGTRYKKERI

TO

ANDREAS HEUSLER

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In a passage in his memoirs[1] Edward Gibbon, the English historian, says: "A lively desire of knowing and of recording our ancestors so generally prevails, that it must depend on the influence of some common principle in the minds of men. We seem to have lived in the persons of our forefathers; it is the labour and reward of vanity to extend the term of this ideal longevity. Our imagination is always active to enlarge the narrow circle in which Nature has confined us. Fifty or an hundred years may be allotted to an individual; but we step forward beyond death with such hopes as religion and philosophy will suggest; and we fill up the silent vacancy that precedes our birth, by associating ourselves to the authors of our existence."

This desire for information about our forefathers may be stronger in one nation than another, in one family than another, in one individual than another, or in one class than another. It may vary in its intensity at different times. But wherever we go, the people we meet have something to tell us about the generations that are dead and gone.

[1] Memoirs of my Life and Writings (Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, 1814, Vol. I, p. 2).

To begin with the family traditions of primitive races, research has established the fact that the genealogical trees go back to between four and twelve — in a few cases to fifteen — generations. These genealogies, and the traditional stories of European explorers (Cook and Tasman), show that the recollection of historical events persists, on an average, for a hundred and fifty, or at most two hundred, years in the case of peoples unacquainted with writing. But certain kinds of events which have been specially significant in the history of a people, may be remembered even longer.[1]

In the case of peoples at a higher level of civilisation, the memory of events may be more tenacious. In this connection the Abyssinian traditions, collected by Johannes Kolmodin in certain villages of the province of Hamasén, are particularly interesting and instructive. The people there had a great deal to tell about olden times; their family histories went very far back, and, in certain cases at least, these records may be relied upon as far back as the fifteenth generation. Although the tradition can be checked by written sources, it is purely oral and independent of any written notes. On various practical grounds it was considered important to know the family history. This was one of the first things a child had to learn, and it was so well hammered into him that mistakes scarcely ever occurred and variants had little chance to arise. Then there were the men who had a bent for historical research. These men went a step farther, by collecting all the

[1] See A. van Gennep in Internationale Wochenschrift für Wissenschaft, Kunst und Technik, 1909, p. 130 ff., and in La formation des légendes, p. 163 f.

traditions of the particular tribe to which they belonged; and they came to be looked upon as authorities in matters historical. With regard to these family traditions Kolmodin writes: "On the whole my impression of them agrees with that which Conti Rossini, the well-known student of North Abyssinian traditions, formed of the examples he was able to investigate in the same way, namely that this oral tradition is, generally speaking, more reliable *(exacte)* than the axioms of historical science would lead us to expect." [1]

It would lead us too far afield, were I to enter fully into the subject of family tradition as a whole. For our present purpose we must try to ascertain what qualifications the Icelandic settlers had for developing an art of saga-telling; and here we naturally begin by looking for evidence of family traditions and an art of story-telling among the ancient Teutons.

Unfortunately the mediaeval writers give us little assistance. Gregory of Tours made very considerable use of oral tradition, and his writings afford traces of narrative art of a distinctly high order. But, although Gregory lived among Teutons and compiled a "Historia Francorum", he himself was a Latin, preoccupied in the main with the history of his own times. Paulus Diaconus, on the other hand, was actually a Teuton; his writings both contain family histories and show a pride in the past of his race. As we should expect in an author keenly absorbed in his subject, he depicts the olden times with a profusion of detail and

[1] Traditions de Tsazzega et Hazzega in Archives d'études orientales 5: 1—3. See esp. the introduction to 5: 2 and 5: 3. The quotation is taken from 5: 3, p. VII.

colour which speaks well for the Lombard tradition. Evidently the legends of the Lombards were, on the whole, similar to those current in the countries of the North; Paulus even reminds us in some ways of the Icelandic skalds and saga-writers. W. P. Ker remarks that he had it in him to write a Lombard prose Edda, Lombard sagas not much inferior to those of Iceland.[1] The legends concerning the migrations of the Lombards have persisted with great vitality, as such legends commonly do. But with the Lombards, as with the Icelanders, the legendary memories of their new home are fuller and more coherent. No doubt there are occasional fragments in saga or heroic style, relating to times before the migration (e. g. Rumetrud and the Battle of the Heruli I, 20); but it is only when we come to Alboin that the narrative assumes the fullness of epic. Even if Paulus may sometimes have borrowed from heroic poems we can easily see that much of the heroic colour represents a Latin adaptation of Germanic narratives in artistic prose.[2]

As commonly happens in countries where ancient traditions live on, visible memorials of the old times were treasured in the Lombardy of Paulus' day. The weapons forged in the days of Alboin were accounted the best. Paulus had with his own eyes seen Prince Ratchis show his guests a bowl that Alboin had made from the skull of King Kunimund (II, 28). Moreover it was in his time that Giselpert had opened Alboin's tomb and taken his sword and other valuables; and

[1] The Dark Ages, p. 167.

[2] See Heusler on Alboin in Hoops's Reallexicon, and A. Bugge in Edda, Vol. XXIII, pp. 41—50.

Giselpert prided himself on having seen Alboin (II, 28).

Had Paulus any family traditions of his own? He gives his genealogy back to the time when the Lombards overran Italy. In connection with the war between the Avars and Lombards he relates what befell his great-grandfather when the latter escaped from the Avars. The whole story reads like a supernatural folktale. A wolf accompanies him for a long distance, acting as his guide, but runs away when the starving man is about to shoot and eat him. Thereafter a being who appears in his dreams shows him the way. On his return to his birthplace he finds his home in ruins, roofless and overgrown with brambles; within its walls an ash-tree has grown up, and he hangs his bow on one of its branches. Clearly the evolution of family tradition followed the same lines then as in later times: in certain circumstances, and especially when recounting events in foreign lands, history was soon mixed with the miraculous. I need only refer to the highly romantic stories of the famous Pastor Sören Schive of Bjelland related by his grandson,[1] and the mass of fictitious information that the descendents of Peder Claussön give regarding him after the lapse of a century and a half.[2]

But the aim of Paulus was to record the history of his race; it was only when the thread of history happened to be closely bound up with incidents in his own family, that he saw fit to give extracts from the

[1] See my paper in Norske Bygder II, Vest Agder, p. 132.

[2] Illustrert Nyhedsblad 1859, p. 33 f.

family saga.[1] We have no means, therefore, of knowing how extensive his family traditions really were. In view of his intimate knowledge of events in Friaul, where his family lived, we may surmise that his own family sagas originally formed the nucleus of the historical knowledge which this learned man afterwards widened so greatly in scope.

Nor are family traditions given by Monachus Sangallensis, a writer who shows us how the memory of a powerful prince was preserved among common people of the next generation. The tradition is confused, but contains a few small pearls of literary art. He chiefly gives us scattered anecdotes of the kind that are apt to become increasingly disconnected, until they are finally forgotten. But both Monachus Sangallensis and the North German Presbyter Bremensis (15th century), as well as what is known as *die sagenhafte Sächsische Kaiserchronik* (12th century), are more valuable for the study of the sagas of the kings.

In this connection *Récits d'un ménestrel de Rheims*[2] (13th century) deserves mention, though it takes us rather outside the Germanic field. The forty-four tales all bear the mark of having been told many times before they were written down, and evidently they were meant to be recited. They are stories of the Crusades cast in an artistic form. Literary skill has bridged over gaps in the history and enlivened the narrative with dialogue; the style is easy, flowing and rhyth-

[1] Exiget vero nunc locus, postposita generali historia, pauca etiam privatim de mea, qui haec scribo, genealogia retexere (IV, 37).

[2] N. de Wailly's Edition. Paris 1876.

mical. Historically, this work is extremely unreliable, like that of Presbyter Bremensis, but it shows us how historical legends were treated in the Middle Ages by a professional bard and story-teller.

Denmark furnishes us with a work which in some respects reminds us of Paulus Diaconus. This is Sven Aggesön's Danesaga. Sven derived his material almost entirely from oral narratives and personal reminiscences; in dealing with more recent times he obviously relied upon family traditions. He must have had, in Axel Olrik's words, "splendid sources of information, *fróðir menn*, of the right sort".[1] He records detailed legends with some dramatic episodes — concerning Uffe, the captivity of Swein Forkbeard etc. In particular the Uffe legends seem to show that the art of story-telling had attained a high standard in twelfth-century Denmark. As Axel Olrik truly observes, the legends of Uffe developed beyond the customary scope of the folk-legend and along lines which remind us of the Icelandic family sagas. But we notice that at times Sven relies upon a different kind of tradition, when he gives us dry facts, lists of kings, genealogical tables, and so forth. Like Ari Frodi's Íslendingabók, his work is somewhat unequal. To a certain extent this was due to his knowledge that the same subject was being treated by Saxo — the famous writer in whom Danish and Norse traditions flow in an ample stream, mingled with strong currents of his own rhetorical and learned phraseology.

The Guta Saga has been held up as an example of the Gothlandic story-teller's art. In reality, however,

[1] Nordisk Aandsliv, p. 99.

it merely gives a kind of recension of certain legends, arranged with a special purpose in view, and with certain aspects of the tradition placed in the foreground. Gothlandic saga-tellers would have told the story in a different way.

In the works mentioned above, family traditions are, as we shall see, never the main theme. The authors set themselves to record the history of nations and kingdoms, the story of their princes and leading men. But for this purpose personal reminiscences and family traditions were frequently used; and they furnish us with examples of the story-teller's art applied to subjects which closely resemble those of the Icelandic family sagas. A number of passages testify both to the intrinsic merit of the legends and to the high standard attained in point of style — as, on other grounds, we should naturally expect.

Instead of quoting sporadic examples, I will endeavour to give a brief survey of some aspects of the Norwegian tradition, which it may be useful to bear in mind in studying the evolution of the Icelandic saga.

Before entering upon this survey, it may be well to remind ourselves that our knowledge of Norwegian tradition in ancient times is extremely fragmentary and incomplete. In the Middle Ages, and even in later times, entire groups of tradition might, apparently, exist for centuries without being mentioned in literature; either because they dealt with subjects which were not considered worth writing about, or because they had not come to the notice of the class of people who were accustomed to write. The man of letters, tied to his texts, is always prone to rely solely upon the

written word. But the folklorist, who is aware that an enormous body of tradition must have existed without being committed to parchment or paper, knows that the argument from silence is untrustworthy when applied to mediaevel oral traditions. Out of all the South Germanic heroic poetry, in the old metre and dealing with subjects from the days of the great migrations, only one or two fragments survive; but we can infer the existence of this poetry from later, derived sources. Or take the Edda poetry: how much should we have known about it if the Icelanders had not written down these lays in the thirteenth century? We have, of course, a wealth of historical literature which depicts life in the Norse countries and constantly quotes skaldic poems. But we are only told of a single occasion when a heroic poem was recited — when Thormod Kolbrunarskald declaimed the Bjarkamál on the eve of the battle of Stiklestad. Only occasionally is there any allusion to Eddic poems. Yet this poetry must have flourished and thrown out new offshoots during a period extending over several centuries. How little, again, was known of the Norwegian popular ballad till nearly the middle of the nineteenth century. Here was an imposing list of very remarkable lays (e. g. Ivar Elison, Venill Fruva and Drembedrosi, and the Draumkvæde)which had come down from the Middle Ages without any intimation of this fact either in local records or in collections of songs. Thus Wille could write his comprehensive account of Seljord without even mentioning the ballads, although Seljord was a district particularly rich in them. From Telemark and Sætesdal we have specimens of folk-songs copied from

Danish broad-sheets, and also of religious songs and local poetry, but scarcely any Norwegian popular ballads. Henrik Wergeland, in spite of his national sympathies and knowledge of literature, knew nothing about these songs in 1840; and when Jörgen Moe first came across Norwegian popular ballads in Telemark, he thought they were merely translations or adaptations from the Danish.

I mention these cases because they enforce a fact which cannot be gainsaid: they show that we must not infer that a tradition, recorded in writing in one place but not in another, was not current in the latter locality. In Iceland many old traditions were committed to writing in the thirteenth century — *fornaldarsǫgur*,[1] family sagas, and Norwegian history. Of Norwegian *fornaldarsǫgur* and family traditions none are extant; but we cannot infer from this that none were current in Norway at that epoch. Heusler's observation, made in another connection, that *das Fehlen urkundlicher Belege nötigt doch noch nicht zum Glauben as das Unwahrscheinlichere*, deserves to be borne in mind in the study of oral tradition.

Nor, indeed, is direct evidence lacking that the Norsemen of bygone days were acquainted with many old traditions in poetry and prose, which they valued highly. As far back as Bragi the Ancient's Ragnarsdrápa, in the ninth century, we read of *fjǫld sagna* painted on a shield; the skald sings of these pictures and alludes to subjects taken from mythology (Gefjon, Thor's fight with the Midgard Serpent) and heroic poetry (Jormunrekk, Sorli and Hamdir, Battle of the

[1] Sagas concerning events in Norway before the discovery of Iceland.

Hjadnings). Bragi seems to have lived somewhere in South-west Norway.

Again we have Thjodolf hinn hvinverski's remarkable poem Ynglingatal, which is concerned with the Yngling family. Here we find a knowledge of history and historical legend which is most surprising; and which rightly earned for Thjodolf the surname *hinn fróði* (the Learned) in later times. Moreover, his knowledge is not limited to the Ynglings. He alludes to other legends, e. g. Hagbard and the Sons of Jonakr. His other great poem, Haustlǫng, deals with a subject from mythology (the Thjassi-myth, Thor's struggle with Hrungnir) and is also a shield-song like the Ragnarsdrápa. Thjodolf lived in the ninth and the early tenth century.

We have an imitation of the Ynglingatal in Eyvind Skaldaspillir's Háleygjatal, which is concerned with the Ladejarla family; only a portion of this, however, survives. It dates from the tenth century.

In the following century we have the remarkable Bravalla Lay, evidently the work of a native of Telemark. Recent researches leave little doubt that it is Norwegian.[1] As Axel Olrik remarks, "it embodies a knowledge of history and historical legend, quite exceptional for its time".[2] Departing from the terse style of the Eddas, the skald tries to compose a grand epic dealing with the highest exploits of the heroic life, comparable to those internecine struggles of old, when mighty armies challenged each other to combat, and

[1] See D. A. Seip, „Det norske grunnlag for Bråvallakvædet hos Saxo" in Norsk Tidsskrift for Sprogvidenskap, III pp. 5--20.

[2] Danmarks Heltedigtning II, p. 126.

Odin conducted his favoured ones to Valhalla. For this purpose the poet marshals a mighty host of heroic names — real heroes or 'reflections' of heroes and historical personages, or pure creations of fancy".[1] The poem shows "a saga-like sense of the many-sidedness of life, reinforced by Nordic saga-telling and possibly by Irish Nordic historical and heroic sagas".[2]

Of somewhat later date are other poems about Starkad which are probably Norwegian, all possessing the common feature that they give a survey of the exploits of a hero: Starkad's Death Lay, Víkarsbálkr, and probably a "Song of Youth" by Starkad.

Earl Rognvald Kali (Kali Kolsson) of Orkney was born soon after 1100. His family lived in Agder, where he grew up; and he spent the greater part of his life in Norway, only settling in the Orkneys in 1136. He was killed in 1158. Rognvald was a man of parts and a very prominent skald. He wrote a verse about his 'sports' or pastimes:

Tafl emk ǫrr at efla,
íþróttir kank níu,
týnik trauðla rúnum,
tíð er bók ok smíðir,
skríða kank á skíðum,
skýtk ok rœk, svát nýtir;
hvártveggja kank hyggja:
harpslǫtt ok bragþǫttu.

The lines may be rendered: "I am a ready dice-thrower — I am expert at nine sports — I have a

[1] Idem, p. 125.
[2] Id., p. 127.

good head for runes,[1] am quick at book-learning and smith's work, can run on ski, shoot and row tolerably well, and am fond of harping and composing a song."

Among his poems Háttalykill is especially important for our purpose, as its aim is to present *forn fræði*. He composed it in collaboration with the Icelander Hall Thorarinsson. In the words of the Orkneyinga Saga[2] "þeir ortu báðir saman Háttalykil hinn forna ok létu vera fimm vísur með hverjum hætti; en þá þótti oflangt kveðit, ok eru nú tvær kveðnar með hverjum hætti". This poem mentions a number of legendary heroes who are also met with in the *Norwegian* tradition. Stanza 2 b indicates that Sigurd slew Favne. This incident was common knowledge in Agder in the Middle Ages, as may be seen from the carving on the Hyllestad portal from Sætesdal (circa 1200). 3 b tells of the slaying of Hogni, which is also represented in a carving in Austad church, Sætesdal. 4 a speaks of Gunnar throwing the gold into the Rhine, whereas the Norwegian ballad about Sigurd Svein, current especially in Agder and Telemark, takes it for granted that the gold was already in the water. 4 b relates that Gunnar was thrown into the snake-pit, and there he may be seen in the pictures carved on the portals of the churches at Hyllestad, Austad and Uppdal (in Numedal). He lies there playing a harp with his toes; which agrees with the statement in the

[1] In this connection we may note that the runic poem (Skjaldedigtning A II, p. 229) is Norwegian. It is a jingle with two lines to each rune, and allusions to legendary history and mythology (Regin, Frodi, Tyr, Loki).

[2] Nordal's edit. p. 205.

ballad that "Gunnar struck his harp". Then we have the allusion to Ragnar Lodbrok. The theme of his saga is found in the ballad known as Lindarormen and in ballads and legends about Aslaug Kráka of Spangereid (Vest Agder). Hagbard, mentioned in 15a, is the subject of many legends both in the south and north of Norway, from mediaeval times to our own day. Possibly the ballad about Hagbard and Signe is also of Norwegian origin.[1] Further, there are heroes taken from the Qrvarodd and Hervarar sagas, which happen to be among those upon which the Norwegian ballads most frequently draw.

Altogether one gains the impression that Rognvald preferred the heroes he knew from the stories current at home in Agder. It can scarcely be a matter of chance only that most of his heroes are the very ones who figure in the *later* traditions of Agder. So Finnur Jónsson seems to be right in saying that it was Rognvald who "conceived the idea of composing this kind of song and decided what its subject matter should be".[2] Then the Icelander would have seen to the versification, in which he would be more expert; for Rognvald's verse never shows much artistry elsewhere. The whole poem exhibits close acquaintance with historical legend and history, and we can detect echoes of the Eddic poems in more than one of its phrases.

The question as to where the Eddic songs were composed is an old bone of contention. We may safely assume, in my opinion, that some of them rest on a

[1] As to this, see Sverker Ek, Norsk kämpavisa i östnordisk tradition, pp. 12—51.

[2] I Litt. hist.[2] II, 38.

South Germanic tradition (Brot af Sigurðarkviðu, Atlakviða, Hamdismál); some are Norwegian, others, again, are Icelandic, while one (the Atlamál) comes from Greenland. The problem of their place of origin is, however, of little importance in this connection. The main point is that these poems were known in Norway, and aroused interest there; of this there is evidence from several different quarters.

A Norwegian, Gisli Sursson, who migrated to Iceland and is the hero of the Gísla Saga, must have been acquainted with the old Gudrun Lay and probably also with other heroic songs of the same cycle of legends.[1] King Sverre quotes, about 1200, some lines of the Fáfnismál, and possibly of a song about Sigurd which has been lost.[2] In the hall of Olaf the Holy hung a shield *en þar var á markat hvar er Sigurðr vá orminn*, and Thorfinn Skald recited a stanza which tells how the sword pierces the breast of the serpent and how the chieftain *ferr við steik at leika* (the oldest saga of Olaf = leg. saga, ch. 62). From the time around 1200 we have the previously mentioned carvings on church portals, particularly in Aust Agder and Telemark; these cover, so to say, the whole extent of the Sigurd poetry. The same is true of the ballad about Sigurd Svein, which was found in the same parts and probably existed, at first, in the form of several separate songs. But it is difficult to say whether ballads like Sigurd Svein and Tore-Kall derive direct from the Eddic poems or from other sources in prose.

[1] Magnus Olsen, in Festskrift til Finnur Jónsson, pp. 6—13.
[2] See S. Bugge, Norrœn fornkvæði, p. XXXVIII.

One Eddic poem which in some ways resembles the Bravalla Lay, is the Hyndluljóð. This, as Heusler observes, is a Norse parallel to the English list of heroes known as *Widsith*. It gives, in a mythical setting, the genealogy of a certain Ottar, and the author seems to be familiar with the usual epic heroes and Hordaland genealogies. The aim of the poem is to *telja niðja*, to *bera upp ættir manna*, and to *dœma um ættir jǫfra*. It is evidently Norwegian, probably composed somewhere in Hordaland.

The ballads of the succeeding centuries prove conclusively that there must have been a whole series of fornaldarsagas current in Norway. These Sagas underlie one or more ballads:

Orvarodds Saga
Hervarar Saga
Ragnars Saga
Hrólfs Saga Gautrekssonar
Hrómundar Saga Greipssonar
Illuga Saga Gríðarfóstra.

It is noteworthy that the ballads not only show an acquaintance with portions of the sagas, but appear to have borrowed features from entirely different episodes, thus proving that the tradition upon which they rest embraced a large amount of material; but it is hard to say how much of this matter existed in true saga-form. In some cases this tradition seems to have diverged very considerably in its content from the Icelandic tradition known to us; in other cases the ballads evidently derive from prose traditions which have been lost.

It is true that several of these songs have survived

in Sweden and even in Denmark. On closer inspection, however, they invariably appear to be traceable to Norway.[1] Norway was the home of the sagas which furnished the material for such compositions. Both native and foreign (romantic) 'literary' subjects were turned to account in Norwegian ballads; just as the Icelanders took their own old stories and put them into verse (*rímur*).

Other investigators have arrived, on other grounds, at the same conclusion regarding the existence of a body of Norwegian fornaldarsagas. Axel Olrik argues in "Sakses Oldhistorie" that a large number of Saxo's Norse sagas must have come from Norway. Jan de Vries, in his studies of Ragnars Saga and Haddings Saga, arrives at the conclusion that both are connected in a special way with South Norway, and that an extensive body of legend developed there.[2]

Elements of these *fornaldarsǫgur* occur in the earliest Neo-Norwegian historical legends concerning Harde-Aslak. Here we have a familiar motif, found alike in the Icelandic *fornaldarsǫgur* and in the Norse sagas in Saxo, the hero being a giant's foster-son. But with these legends we pass from the domain of historico-legendary, romantic tradition into one that is historical. We have dwelt at considerable length upon the legendary history because it was so closely related to the history proper. In early times, indeed, there was no hard and fast line of demarcation. Legend and history lived side by side and influenced each other.

[1] See Sverker Ek, Norsk kämpavisa i östnordisk tradition.

[2] See his papers in Germ.-Rom. Monatschrift 15, pp. 81—100, and in Zs. f. deut. Phil. 53, pp. 257—302.

Records of the one are to some extent records of the other. And both testify that the taste for prose tradition was widespread.

How large the body of historical legend brought to Iceland by the settlers may have been, we do not know with any certainty. We only possess the Icelandic tradition of much later times, and, as we shall see, the period of settlement must have been, in many respects, an unfavourable time for the old local traditions that the emigrants brought with them. But the Landnámabók relates a great deal that happened in Norway before Iceland was colonised, and occasionally the genealogies go very far back, to a date considerably earlier than the settlement. Since such matter is unlikely to have been invented, it must have been culled from the lore that the Norwegians carried with them to Iceland. The traditions naturally came from those parts of the country from which the colonists "sailed out". From Telemark there are the stories of the chieftain Asgrim Ulfsson of Fiflavellir in Tinnsdalen — his feud with Harald Fairhair, his death, and the vengeance that was taken. Proceeding westwards to Agder, we have the stories of Ǫndótt Kráka (in the Landnáma and Grettis Saga). Geirmundar Þáttr Heljarskinns, (in the Landnáma, Halfs Saga and Sturlunga) is concerned with Hordaland. The scene of the first chapters of Gísla Saga is laid in Nordmöre.

Of accounts of events in Norway after the time of Harald Fairhair few can be assigned with confidence to a genuine Norwegian tradition. Since we are mainly dependent upon Icelandic accounts of events in Norway, and since Icelanders often took part in the events

of which the sagas tell, it is difficult to know when we are dealing with a story of originally Norwegian composition. And of course the Icelanders did not care to transcribe Norwegian family histories.

It is only by chance, as it were, that we get an inkling, in some evidence given before the court at Sveig in Herjedal, of the kind of lore that was handed down in Norwegian country parishes in the thirteenth century.[1]

When the frontier was being traced between Norway and Sweden about the year 1270, Tord of Trosavik and *tolf ellimenn með honum* stated in their evidence that Herjedal was first settled by Norwegians. Herjolf Hornbrjot was a man of note at the court of Halfdan the Black. Having incurred the king's displeasure he fled east to King Anund in Sweden. There he was well received, but got into trouble on account of Helga, a kinswoman of the king. On this account he was forced to flee to Norway again, and settled in an uninhabited valley, now called Herjedal. Here he and Helga made their home in the place known as Sliarosvellir. "Their son was Hakon Val. His son, Frode. His son, Herlaug Hornstige. His son, Thorir Droge. His son, Thorbjorn Markarkalv. His son, Thorbjorn Gamle. His son, Dag. His son, Ljot, who built the first church in Herjedal. His son, Thoralde. His son, Rafn. His son, Eilif Tæppemaðr. His son, Bjorn. His son, Thord. His son, Hafthorir. His son, Asulf". Altogether sixteen generations.

H. Schück is of the opinion that these notes "are obvi-

[1] Norges gamle Love II, p. 490.

ously quoted from a Norwegian saga".[1] But that is not so sure; matter of this sort may easily have been embodied in one of the ordinary short legends concerning the first inhabitant of the valley, similar to many Norwegian 'pioneer' legends. The interesting thing, however, is that the Herjedal men "kept the family tree of the first clearer", as was sometimes done in Sætesdal in later times.[2] However untrustworthy the older parts of these genealogies may be, they seem to have held an esteemed and permanent place in family tradition, as links, however incomplete, between the remote past and the contemporary history of the countryside. From the above-mentioned lawcourt records we learn also that the same persons were acquainted with legends relating to feuds between neighbours in the earliest Christian days; they were aware, too, that Einar Tambarskjelve had erected the Brostnarhella stone.

Norwegian tradition is clearly recognizable in several Icelandic works on the history of Norway, e. g. in Ágrip and the Norwegian interpolations in the Fagrskinna. But of genuine family traditions in saga form none have come down to us from mediaeval Norway. Still we can see that some of the matter written down in the nineteenth century must have been put into shape in pre-reformation days, e. g. the Harde-Aslak legends.[3] In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there is no lack of family traditions. The form of these Neo-Norwegian family sagas, and their value in

[1] Sveriges förkristna konungalängd, p. 29 (Uppsala Universitets årskrift, 1910).

[2] Skar, Gamalt or Sætesdal I, p. 5.

[3] See my paper in Maal og Minne 1927, pp. 49—61.

relation to the study of the Icelandic family saga, will be discussed in a later chapter.

From this survey of Norwegian poetry and Norwegian traditions it will be seen that the people of Norway in every age took a special delight in old semi-historical and historical traditions. Another proof of this is that we find traces of saga-telling in their colonies in the west — so much so, that some authorities hold that the art of saga-telling originated, or at any rate derived its inspiration, from there. The Færeyinga Saga shows that traditions must have been current there concerning the feuds of the chief families in the islands. From the Orkneys we have a great deal of Orkney tradition, embodied in the Orkneyinga Saga. As Meissner has pointed out,[1] there are several passages in this saga which clearly exhibit a consistently Orkneyan point of view — a way of looking at things which could only have developed as time went on in the Orkneys, and differs from the standpoint in other Norse accounts of the same incidents. The wealth of detail, the compact structure of the narrative and the sequence of the character-sketches attest the existence of a circumstantial, well-established form of story-telling. To the northern inhabitants of Ireland may be attributed the accounts of the battle of Clontarf in Njála and Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar. Ireland is indicated not only by the subject, but by the close connection with the Irish book Cogadh Gaedhal re Galaibh.[2] In Northumberland the life of Earl Siw-

[1] Arkiv for nord. fil. 41, p. 156.

[2] See S. Bugge, Norsk Sagaskrivning og Sagafortælling i Irland, and Heusler, Anfänge der isl. Saga, p. 15.

ard the Stout (d. 1055) was related in a manner which in many respects resembles closely the style of the Icelandic sagas.[1] Various details in the Norman chronicler Dudo's account of the viking Hasting seem to go back to saga-like stories. And the same may be said of a number of traits in Galfrid of Monmouth, the romances Havelok, Horn, etc.[2] Again, in the case of the Waeregs in Russia, there are features which indicate that interest was taken in historical and historico-legendary records.[3] Wherever Northmen are found, there is sure to be evidence of story-telling,[4] something or other which one naturally associates with the saga. The Icelandic saga, as Axel Olrik remarks, is "always bound up with men of Scandinavian nationality, one may even say with men of Norwegian nationality, in the widest sense."[5] The districts in Norway from which the colonists came are the same that have always been remarkable for their wealth of poetry and saga. It will be sufficient to refer to some that have been mentioned already. Thjodolf hinn hvinverski must have been a native of Agder, as was Rognvald

[1] Axel Olrik in Arkiv 19, pp. 199—223.

[2] See Neckel's article „Saga" in Hoops's Reallexicon IV, pp. 70—71.

[3] A. Bugge in Zs. f. deut. Altertum 51, p. 24, Neckel, op. cit. pp. 71—72.

[4] Cf. Fabliau du sacristan de Cluny:

„Usage est en Normandie,
Que qui herbergjé est qu'il die
Fable ou chanson die à son hoste."

See P. A. Munch, Det Norske Folks Historie I, 1, pp. 681—82, and my book Trollvisor og norröne sogor, p. 78 note.

[5] Nordisk Aandsliv, p. 84.

Kali. The Bravalla Lay was probably composed by a native of Telemark, and the same is true of Starkad's Death Lay. The Víkarsbálkr may come from the Bergen district; the Hyndluljóð from Hordaland; while several Norwegian historical ballads were evidently written at Bergen somewhere about 1300. The major part of the mediaeval ballad poetry was discovered in Telemark and Agder. The legends and songs about Ragnar Lodbrok are specially connected with Spangereid, and the legends about Orvar-Odd with Dalane. From Agder and Telemark, too, come the majority and the best of the Neo-Norwegian family sagas.

Other parts of the area from which the colonists came have yielded, in recent times, evidences of a wealth of family tradition, even if these sagas were never written down. Pastor Hertzberg tells us with regard to Hardanger (Hordaland), that "the aforementioned Iver Klokker, who had a particularly good memory and so could remember several legends of the olden days, concerning the exploits of our forefathers and their family trees, especially in the case of his own ancestors ... told me that in his forefathers' time (he died in 1815 aged 79) and particularly in very early days, when the old people of Hardanger met at convivial gatherings, their conversation nearly always turned on the number of their relatives and ancestors, with anecdotes about them."[1]

[1] MS. in Bergen Museum (MS. No. 188 a). Cf. Koht, Norsk Bondereisning, p. 211; *inter alia* there is a quotation from Erik Pontoppidan which states that the best Norwegian peasant families "preserve very carefully any information they may possess *per traditionem* about their family tree, making use of the same more especially in their obsequies; for on such occasions one may sometimes hear a peasant's sixteen ancestors rehearsed in the funeral sermon."

Peder Claussön was a native of Agder. The wealth of legends found in Sætesdal in the nineteenth century cannot be rivalled by any other district in the country. The gift of making verse, with which the Icelanders are still endowed, is also very common in Telemark and Sætesdal. It will be enough to mention the enormous number of new 'pennills' (*stev*) that have been unearthed there. Aasmund Vinje once said that he could provide half of Europe with poets from Telemark. And that great poet took a curious pleasure in the jingle of unusual words and difficult rhymes. Even in such comparatively dry matter as the old records of evidence in murder cases the same story-telling talent shines through, and most of the records with a lively narrative and racy dialogue emanate from Telemark and Agder. They testify to a literary sense both in the witnesses and in the writers.

From these parts (Hordaland—Telemark), the majority of the colonists set out. Among the emigrants were many great peasants, who had the best reasons for cherishing their spiritual heritage. The interest taken in history in the motherland must have been intensified and concentrated, as it were, in the new country; for the colonists were picked men.

CHAPTER II

STYLE AND VARIANTS

We have now reached our actual subject, the Icelandic family saga.

The history of Iceland during the epoch with which we are dealing is usually divided into several periods. First there was the *time of settlement* (about 870 to about 930), in which the country was colonised. Then followed the *saga time* or *söguöld* (about 930 to about 1030), in which most of the events occurred that are described in the family sagas. Next there was the *time of peace* or *friðaröld* (about 1030 to about 1120), so called because the country enjoyed peace during that period. This was succeeded by the *writing time* or *ritöld* (about 1120 to about 1230), when the Icelanders began to write down their sagas. At the close of the troublous *Sturlung time* (about 1230 to 1262) the free state collapsed and passed under the sway of Norway.

Most of the Icelandic family sagas are concerned, as already stated, with events in the *söguöld*. But none of the manuscripts of the sagas is older than the thirteenth century, and it is generally held that the

practice of writing down sagas dates from the beginning of that century or somewhat earlier.

There was thus a long interval between the time when the events happened and the time when they were recorded in writing, between the time when the sagas were 'made' and the date at which they became 'literature'. It lasted for 6—10 generations, or from two to three centuries; in other words, for the whole of the *friðaröld* and the greater part of the *ritöld*.

Everyone agrees that there must have been a body of oral tradition during this lengthy period. But here the unanimity of the experts practically ceases; as soon as we embark upon the vexed subject of the *form* of this tradition, their opinions differ widely.

Let us tackle the problem at once. On the one hand, at the point of departure, we have the historical events and the form in which they were related by the people who lived at that time; in other words, the immediate impact of these events upon contemporary tradition. On the other hand, *at skeiðsenda*, we have the sagas in the shape they had acquired at a much later time. What occurred in the interval?

The first question to be discussed is whether the Icelandic family sagas are to be looked upon as oral narratives *written down*, or as *compositions* in writing, merely based on oral traditions which have been utilized in various ways.

In reading the Icelandic family sagas one cannot fail to be struck by the similarity of style; by what N. M. Petersen[1] calls "the interminable monotony of the style, without any relief or division into periods".

[1] Bidrag til den oldnorske literaturs historie, p. 220.

Although this may be putting the case too strongly, there is no denying that the style of the sagas has a tolerably uniform ring which is apt, in the long run, to become rather monotonous. Often we encounter the same phrases every time situations of the same kind recur. When a person first appears in a saga the invariable introduction is: So and so *hét maðr.* When there is no more to say about him we are informed: *ok er hann ór sǫgunni*, or words to that effect. If a saga is finished there is usually some such sentence as *ok lýkr hér sǫgu Gunnars Þiðrandabana, ok lýkr svá þessi sǫgu er frá Þorsteini er sǫgð.* If there is a break in the continuity of the action, the saga-writer apprises us of the fact by saying: *nú er at segja frá, nú skal segja frá, þar er nú til at taka, etc.* If a man often visits a woman we are always told that *hann vandi þangat kvámur sínar, gerir hann þangat kvámur sínar jafnan, Þorgeirr venr kvámur sínar til Ormhildar.* When two or more persons part company, we frequently have the expression: *ok við þat skildu þeir.* When Ofeig in the Bandamanna Saga relates what the Bond-men (Confederates) did to his son, he says, on the first occasion: "*Þó at þér hafit þetta með fádœmum upp tekit meirum, en menn viti dœmi til*" (p. 45, 21–23); and later on: "*Þo at þetta hafi með meirum fádœmum upp hafit verit, en menn viti dœmi til*" (p. 51, 5–6). In ch. XIX, 16 of the Ljósvetninga Saga we read: "*Þorkell lét sem hann sœi engan nema Guðmund*", and again in ch. XXIV, 111—112: "*Ótryggr lét sem han sœi engan mann nema Eyólf.*"

Of such passages there are many,[1] and they are sometimes introduced rather mechanically. We can trace the regular transition from an idiom of the language to a special phrase which, originally connected with some epic situation, is reflected in the description of similar incidents, or even unblushingly passed on from one episode to another and one saga to another. Not only so, but the process of assimilation may affect the epic features in such a way as to create a certain parallelism in the depiction of the incidents themselves, a development to which we shall return later.

All this is the natural outcome of oral tradition. A writer tries to vary the wording; but in oral narration there is always a tendency to use the same words when referring to the same or similar events and descriptions. The peasant life described in the Icelandic sagas was somewhat lacking in variety; consequently the same incidents show a tendency to recur in several sagas. Moreover, the sagas made a selection of certain aspects of life; some things were *sǫguleg* (worth telling), others were considered unsuitable. Often a story-teller knew several sagas. As these sagas, which were so similar in content, lived side by side in his memory, the phraseology used for an incident in one saga would insensibly react upon the form given to a similar incident in the same or another saga, owing to some association of matter and form in the mind. The more perfectly a phrase has been assimilated, and the more often it is used, the more easily

[1] Björn K. Þórólfsson in Festskr. til Finnur Jónsson, pp. 58 and 60.

will it rise into consciousness, the more rapidly will it lend its colour to other episodes. This is true of all old oral tradition. The popular ballad, the legend, the folk-tale (*Märchen*) — each has its characteristic, rather monotonous style, with stereotyped phrases that recur again and again in depicting the same, or similar situations. Everyone knows the standard opening of the folk-tale: "once upon a time . . . . . "; and its closing "they lived happily ever after", or, to take some Neo-Icelandic instances: *Það var einhverju sinni, einu sinni var kóngur og dróttning í ríki sínu og karl og kerling í garðshorni eins og í flestum sögum segir, og nú er sagan úti, þarmeð endast þessi saga, þá er sagan búin, og lýkur svá sögunni af Bángsímon.* Or take the phrase: "he went far and farther than far", used when some long journey is described in a Norwegian folk-tale; or the almost exact repetition of the wording when the same incident occurs three times.

But such monotony of style is not due solely to the fact that several stories of the same kind live side by side in the story-teller's mind. It is the result of *many persons telling the same story.* For this eliminates individual peculiarities of style. Eventually a common style is evolved, a form which suits every taste, and is looked upon as the normal and proper form for stories or lays of a particular kind. To tell something in the 'right' way, means to tell it in more or less the same words. The stronger the tradition is — i. e the more frequently the same thing is told — the more easily will it be learnt almost word for word. But this naturally helps to fix the traditional style.

Such a style becomes universal, bound up with subjects of a certain kind, or with certain forms of poetry. A representative example is the easily recognizable style of the ballad, with its well-marked syntactical features; this conventional garb of the popular ballad can readily be assumed by newer compositions based on ballad themes (e. g. the Norwegian song about Olav Storegut, dating from about 1800).

There are, moreover, other stylistic peculiarities of the Icelandic family sagas, which reflect their oral origin. I am not thinking so much of the smooth diction, the parataxis, the natural sequence of the words, the rhythm and music which can only be appreciated to the full by reading them aloud; these may be achieved by a skilful writer. But much that is uneven — the anacolutha, and other apparent stylistic deficiencies — can be most naturally explained as results of oral narration.[1] When properly *recited*, these traits become more intelligible and fit in better with the rest. Similarly the well-known objectivity of the Icelandic sagas must be partially due to the 'polishing' to which the matter was subjected in the mouths of the people. Of course it is no easy task to decide how much of this objectivity reflects a cool, impartial and sober attitude, and how much is the results of a kind of artistic detachment in regard to good and evil, right and wrong. That the objectivity is, however, partly inherent in the stereotyped style and in a kind of impersonal, collective way of looking at the subject, may be seen from the contradictory and biased vers-

[1] See Heinzel, Beschreibung der isländischen Saga, p. 300 and 287 ff.

ions which exist separately and without becoming mixed, but are all distinguished by the same objectivity of outlook.[1] Similar objectivity is found, for the same reason, in the literature of the people, e. g. the folk-tale, in modern times. Jörgen Moe has pointed out that the Norwegian folk-tale has "this true epic feeling, and one aim only, the spectator's enjoyment; it dwells, therefore, with the same sympathy upon things sad and terrible, or bright and joyous, seldom or never betraying the narrator's own attitude in regard to the course of events." [2]

Moe sees the resemblance to the Icelandic sagas and considers the folk-tales to be "a continuation and development of the style of the sagas". Now it is quite true that we are dealing here with the ancient art of story-telling as practised by two very closely related peoples; it is evident, too, that their national character played a certain part in the development — a fact easily tested, for comparison with the narrative art of other nations reveals great differences. But, in reality, a great deal of this "true epic feeling" must be the result of parallel development under conditions which were in many respects similar. When many people tell the same story, the tradition will, as we have seen, express certain things regarding which a number of people agree. If, therefore, the narrator wishes to hold his audience, he must refrain from emphasizing his personal standpoint and feelings. This is doubly true, in the case of historical accounts, for a new way of telling the story will be regarded not

[1] This will appear later when discussing the variants.

[2] Norske Folkeeventyr, 1852, Indledning p. LXVI.

only as a departure from the right, i.e. the traditional way, but in all probability, as a departure from the truth itself.

The inherited objectivity and stereotyped form of the narrative did not prevent individual story-tellers from leaving their mark upon what they recited. But such marks of individuality had to be kept within certain, in some ways rather narrow, bounds, and did not readily crystallize; they varied with the teller, and seldom affected the main tenor of the style. If one story-teller had infused a certain amount of individual colour into a story, the next would probably find that it did not suit his temperament and style of recitation, and would make alterations. Finally, when the story came to be written, the taste of the last story-teller would be committed to parchment. That which is merely ephemeral may thus became permanent; and any reader who has not closely followed the living stream of the tradition, may easily mistake such features for an integral part of the style. When Asbjörnsen and Moe 'told' the Norwegian folk-tales, they left their own impress upon them and certain peculiarities in the style of these editors have been imitated in the mistaken belief that they were ordinary Norwegian idioms. Jon Árnason's "Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri" are largely based on versions written down by others, and one is often conscious of the personal touches in them.[1] The same thing has happened in the

[1] Sometimes writers have been influenced by other models of style; e. g. Bolú-Hjálmar when he wrote down „þáttur af Grími Skjeljúngsbana" (I, p. 247), which shows a marked tendency to copy the mediaeval saga style.

family sagas. In spite of the general similarity of style, we can detect certain characteristics of the saga-writer both in the form and the matter. Naturally this is most noticeable in the works which are conspicuous for their literary taste, those, for instance, which we are inclined to associate with an author (Njála,[1] Laxdœla, Egils Saga); but we are conscious of it in the smaller, less "personal" sagas as well (Reykdœla, Hrafnkels Saga). Nevertheless, we must not regard these indications of an 'author' as evidence of any disagreement between the written sagas and the oral narratives upon which they rest. Whether a work is in writing or merely handed down by word of mouth, the traditional and the new personal elements always blend in some degree. But the personal element will generally appear in inverse proportion to the strength and fixity of the tradition.

Accordingly the uniformity and the objectivity of the saga style testify to a long period of preservation in the memories of men, and to the existence of a well established form. Moreover, we have other evidence besides that of style. The sagas themselves refer to the oral tradition upon which they are based. Over and over again we find them saying: *þat er sagt, svá er sagt, frá því er sagt, er svá frá sagt, svá segja menn, þat segja menn, þat er sumra manna sǫgn, sumir segia, er þat flestra manna sǫgn, þess er getit;*

[1] This saga shows marked indications of an author who had his own way of looking at persons and events. His view of Gunnar of Hlíðarendi and Hallgerd has been assailed by several writers in recent times; see Sigurður Guðmundsson in Skírnir 1918, p. 63. ff. and 221 ff., and Hans E. Kinck in Mange Slags Kunst, p. 35 ff.

er þat eigi sagt, ekki er í frásǫgn fært, ekki er þess getit. And other expressions of the same kind. Of course this may, in time, have become a mannerism. But the appeal to an oral source is so frequent in the sagas that it must be securely rooted in the distant past. Several times we have references to named sources of tradition — a point to which we shall return. As an example of the frequency with which the allusion to tradition may occur, we may quote the following passage from Reykdœla Saga: "*Svá er sagt*, at nú brast niðr spǫngin undir þeim Steingrími. *Sumir vilja þat segja*, at Vémundr skyti til Steingríms með spjóti, þá er hann vildi upp ór vǫkinni á ísinn, ok yrði honum þat at bana. En *sumir segja*, at hann drukknaði þar í vǫkinni. Tveir menn drukknuðu aðrir en Steingrímr; tveir menn váru ok drepnir af hans fǫrunautum, Helgi mágr hans, ok einn maðr annarr. *Svá er sagt*, at Áskell bað þá nú hvata í brott, sem þeir mega. *Ekki er þess getit*, at hann týndi neinum manni í bardaganum." [1]

From this quotation we see that different stories of the same incident were current; some said one thing, others said another. And here we come to grips with a problem common to all oral traditions: the splitting up of the same story into forms which differ more or less from one another, i. e. into what are known as *variants*. Moreover, there are the *textual* variants. Before the discovery of printing, every copy made of a book meant a fresh transcription, and such manuscripts varied, in a greater or less degree, from one another. In studying the Icelandic family saga we have

[1] Íslenzkar fornsögur II, pp. 80—81.

to reckon with both oral and textual variants. Before being written down, the sagas were related for many generations, and this, judging from analogous cases, would mean that they split up into variant versions. The manuscripts we possess are, as a rule, far from being originals — they represent copies of copies several times over. We can distinguish between different groups of manuscripts, and attempts have been made to ascertain their mutual relation and to reconstruct a more original form of the text by comparing the mss.

The question which is of interest at the moment, is whether the variants of our manuscripts will help us to discover the original form of the oral traditions. They should do so if the manuscripts go back to *several* original manuscripts, that is, if a saga was several times independently written down direct from the oral tradition. And they should also do so, if the same episodes are to be found in several sagas, each of which goes back to an oral source. But can we tell that all the manuscripts go back to the same original manuscript, and that several written versions have been made direct from the oral source? This would appear to be possible if there is one distinct category of oral variants, and another of textual variants. The question has never, so far as I am aware, been properly investigated, in spite of its great importance. Nor can we embark upon the whole problem here; but we can consider it in so far as it will help to settle the point with which we are dealing.

In Icelandic manuscripts we can see that the copyist follows his original pretty closely. But he does not invariably copy it word for word or sentence for

sentence; he sometimes alters a word or phrase. His perfect knowledge of the language enables him to do this without in any way altering the sense. Now and then, after reading a shorter or longer passage, he writes it down from memory. He forgets or adds something; he changes the order of words or sentences. He may even take it upon him to reshape and fill out and make interpolations in the text upon which he is working. A copyist may do this because he is acquainted with other sources — oral or written — which he can use to modify or expand the story. Thus the 'editing' done by the copyist may be a mixture of copying, reshaping, and recording at first hand.

Still, we recognize that it is the work of a writer, not of a speaker. There are mistakes due to misreading words which look alike, but sound quite different when spoken. There are countless small divergencies, yet the action remains unchanged and the episodes succeed each other in the same order. The copyist does not skip a passage, and afterwards look back, note the omission, and insert the passage in another place. If something is added, one can often see that it is an addition by comparing the manuscripts; or the interpolation may be in a different style from the rest. If the matter is abridged we may discover that a considerable section — sometimes a whole book — has been purposely and methodically compressed. The same thing applies to the stylistic expansions. And these alterations not infrequently betray a certain bias.

Oral variants are recognizable in other ways. One or two characteristics may be mentioned. Words and

names which *sound* alike are often confused. Whole episodes may be forgotten; or added from other sources, because different stories have got mixed up in the story-teller's mind. In a story with no clearly defined sequence of events the various episodes show a tendency to change places; an incident may be equally telling in one place or another, and different narrators may associate it with different things. We remember best the things which are of special importance, which are expressed in telling and pithy language, or are invested with special interest for some particular reason. Thus it is the *kind* of resemblance, and not the comparative *greatness or smallness* of the resemblance, which enables us to judge whether we are confronted by an oral or a textual variant.

Most of the textual differences in the Icelandic family sagas are evidently due to the copyist; they include recasting, interpolation, abbreviation and expansion. But in a number of cases, where the alterations cannot be due to the ordinary work of the copyist, there must have been two independent texts.

These independent texts are of two kinds; either we find more than one form of a saga or part of a saga, or else the same episode occurs in two different sagas.

Let us first consider the cases in which the same matter is found in two sagas. Here we must not expect the agreement to be as close as it is in the case of variants of the same saga, for the matter in question occurs in different contexts, plays a different rôle, and is regarded from different points of view. Nevertheless the number of facts *common* to the two variants serves

as a guide, helping us to judge how far the oral narrative was a circumstantial one.

1. The Eyrbyggja and Gísla sagas both tell how Thordis, the sister of Gisli, tried to avenge her brother (Gísl. ch. 36, Eyrb. ch. 13, 7—12). The episode is of approximately the same length in both sagas — 25 lines in Gísl. and 27 in Eyrb. In Gísl. there are two speeches in 3½ lines, in Eyrb., one speech in half a line; but the emphatic words spoken by Thordis in Gísl.: "*Gráta man ek Gísla, bróður minn" segir Þórdís; "en mun eigi vel fagnat Gíslabana, ef grautr er gǫrr ok gefinn?*" appear again in Eyrb. in the third person: "*Þórdís segir, at þá var vel fagnat, ef grautr er gefinn Gísla-bana.*" The characters are the same in either case, and in all essentials the story is identical, except that in Gísl. Thordis proclaims her separation from Bork at once, whereas in Eyrb. this happens later. There are, however, many small divergencies. In Gísl. Thordis drops a spoon-trough; in Eyrb. she drops a spoon. In Gísl. Bork catches hold of Thordis and takes the sword from her; in Eyrb. he strikes her, whereupon Snorri steps forward and pushes him away, places his mother beside him, and says that it is hard enough for her anyhow, without being struck into the bargain. There must have been two oral variants; but it is noticeable that in one or two points the longer text of Gísl. approximates more closely to Eyrb.

2. The incident in Eyrb. ch. 28, describing the death of the two berserks, is also found in the Heiðarvíga Saga. In the latter saga the episode in question is unfortunately only extant in Jón Ólafsson's re-

narration. Nevertheless one can easily see that the stories were substantially the same in both sagas.

3. Ch. 24 in Eyrb. deals with the same subject as part of Eiríks Saga Rauða. But it looks as if a piece of Eir. has been interpolated into Eyrb.; this passage, therefore, is of no use for our purpose.

4. Stories which relate how Gunnar Thidrandabani attended the wedding of Gudrun Osvifsdottir and Thorkell Eyolfsson at Helgafell are to be found both in Gunnars saga Þiðrandabana, ch. 7, and in Laxdœla Saga, ch. 69. In the former the story is given briefly (28 lines in Austfirðinga Sǫgur) without any speeches in the first person. In Laxd., on the other hand, the story is long and circumstantial (64 lines in Saga-Bibliothek), and between one-quarter and one third is in the first person (nine speeches). But the action is very much the same in both sagas, and sometimes the agreement is striking, as in the passage where Gunnar is recognized; in both stories this happens in the evening while the people are washing, and Gunnar, who has his hat on, refuses to say who he is, and gives an assumed name. A comparison of these texts shows very clearly the difference between literary editing and a more simple and artless style of story-telling.

5. Ch. 16 of Víga-Glúms Saga and ch. 26 of the Reykd. contain the story of a feud between Víga Glum and Víga Skuta. The resemblance between these chapters is unusually close, and the connection has been a good deal debated. Lotspeich thinks they had a common written source.[1] Finnur Jónsson holds that

[1] Zur Víga-Glúms und Reykdœla saga (1903).

each version rests on a separate oral tradition. The question is a very difficult one, and I am unable to contribute a solution, so we cannot make use of these interesting variants.

6. Ch. 6—7 in the Fóstbrœdra Saga and ch. 25—27 in Grettis Saga relate the events which made it necessary for Thorgeir Havarsson to leave the country. The two versions of the story are idential in content, but there are important formal divergencies and certain differences in the action as well. As, however, Gretla is later, it may contain borrowed features and have been subjected to revision. So this parallel also, is unsuitable for our purpose.

7. Ch. 1 of Fóstbr. and ch. 52 of Gretla tell how Thorbjörg Digra saved Grettir's life on a certain occasion. Fóstbr. is much shorter, but the matter is the same in both sagas. Gretla contains long dialogues; Fóstbr. has only a single conversation, consisting of four speeches, which is not in Gretla. Boer and Finnur Jónsson consider that Fóstbr. borrowed from Gretla, but this seems doubtful.

8. The slaying of Thorgeir Havarsson is described in Fóstbr., p. 112 ff. and Ljósvetninga Saga, ch. XXXII, p. 250 ff. In form and content alike these variants differ widely; there can be little doubt that there were two different oral traditions.

9. In Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu, ch. 15, and Hallfreðar Saga, (Fornsögur, p. 113) we are told of a feud between Hallfred and Hrafn Onundarson. Evidently Hallfr. borrowed the incident from Gunnl., as B. M. Olsen suggests;[1] but the divergencies leave us

[1] Om Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu, pp. 38—39.

in doubt as to whether its source was the written Gunnl. or the oral tradition.

10. The incident of Ingolf Thorsteinsson the Fair and Valgerd Ottarsdottir comes in Hallfr., ch. 2—3, and Vatnsdœla Saga, ch. 37—38. The passage is approximately of the same length in both sagas (about 50 lines in Fornsögur). In Hallfr. the case is finally judged by Thorstein, while in Vatnsd. Ingolf and Jokul prevent the court from pronouncing judgment, and the case is dropped. In other respects the stories agree well, and there are dialogues in the same places, but the wording is often entirely different. Here we evidently have an example of oral variants.[1]

11. The stories in Hallfr. about Hallfred and Kolfinna, ch. 9, p. 104 [25],—ch. 10, p. 108 [6], and about the subsequent dispute at the lawcourt, ch. 10, p. 109 [5] —110 [1], are also given in Vatnsd., ch. 45, 2—10. The events are again substantially the same, with certain divergencies. In telling of Hallfred and Kolfinna at the sæter, Hallfr. is the more circumstantial; in describing what happened at the law-court the case is reversed (Hallfr. 15 lines, Vatnsd. 27 lines). The divergencies in these variants indicate an oral source for both.

12. Stories describing how two berserks were slain in Haukagil are to be found in Vatnsd., ch. 46, Kristni Saga, ch. 2, 7—9, and Þorvalds þáttr ens Víðfǫrla, ch. 3. In Vatnsd. the passage is 38 lines in length, one-quarter of it being in the first person (7 speeches). In Þorv. þ. it occupies 37 lines without any speech, and is embellished with legendary touches. Kristn. agrees

[1] See W. H. Vogt, Vatnsdœla Saga, p. XXIX.

perfectly with Vatnsd. in content, but only gives an abridged account (10 lines). Þorv. þ. is based on Gunnlaug Monk, and his narrative is a highly legendary version of a story told in Gunnlaug's hearing.[1] Vatnsd. seems to have undergone some literary editing, so it is difficult to tell what the oral source was like in this case.

13. At the end of Þorsteins saga Hvíta and at the beginning of Vápnfirðinga Saga we have the same story, telling how Brodd-Helgi obtained his surname. The passage does not belong to Þorst. s. Hv. and must have been transferred from Vápnf.[2] The exact correspondence of the wording in the account of Brodd-Helgi shows that a written source was used. Consequently the extra details, which appear in Þorst. s. Hv. but not in Vápnf., must have been added as an embellishment.

14. Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar and Njála both describe the battle of Brján (the battle of Clontarf, near Dublin, in 1014). In Þorst. s. S.-H. there is a reference to Njála, so Þorst. s. S.-H. in its present shape must be later. Nevertheless we have to do here with two independent traditions, for Þorst. s. S.-H. contains things which are not found in Njála. The passage about Dumazbakki in Þorst. s. S.-H. must, as the name shows, be original; it is inconceivable that all the extant manuscripts of Njála should omit this remarkable feature, if it was really included in the manuscripts of an earlier date. Moreover there are indications of oral variants: in the middle of a story

[1] Fms. I, p. 266 = Þorv. þ. III, 9 (in SB).

[2] Jakobsen, Austfirðinga sǫgur, pp. X—XI.

which exhibits various differences there is a remarkable correspondence when we come to Thorstein's and Hrafn's replies to the earl (in Þorst. s. S.-H.: "*Ber sjálfr krák þinn, jarl!*" and in Njála: "*Berðu sjálfr fjánda þinn!*"). This answer is so striking and pithy that it impresses itself upon the mind; it is not the sort of thing to be easily forgotten. Both Njála and Þorst. s. S.-H, must be based upon Icelandic traditions concerning the battle of Clontarf.[1]

The variants mentioned here are sufficient to give an idea of the state of things. There are various other passages of the same kind, e. g. the account given in Njála of the introduction of Christianity into Iceland and the corresponding passage in the Kristni Saga; the conversion of Hallfred Vandrædaskald in Hallfr. and in the Heimskringla. Grettir and Björn Hitdœlakappi in the sagas about them; and the stories of Berg hinn Rakki and Ingemund's sons in the Vatnsdœla and Finnboga sagas.

We have seen that these parallel texts raise various problems; and in dealing with such late manuscripts we naturally suspect a mixture of oral and written variants. A manuscript of a saga may have been used for reading aloud or as a sort of prompt-book when reciting, and its contents may have become oral tradition again through the medium of the hearers. Much the same thing has often taken place in the case of cheap printed copies of popular ballads, or of single

[1] I cannot enter more fully into the numerous debatable points in these variants. See S. Bugge, Norsk Sagaskrivning og Sagafortælling i Irland, p. 52 ff; Heusler, Anfänge, p. 15; Finnur Jónsson, Norsk-isl. kultur- og sprogforhold, p. 124 ff.

folk-tales, or collections of folk-tales. A saga-writer could borrow from these new oral versions of a written saga, using the material for other sagas as occasion offered. Even if this was done it would not greatly affect the question of the form of the oral saga, for in any case we must assume the existence of an oral narrative which was capable of retaining its richness of detail and fixity of form. If we suppose that traditions were written in order that they might be read aloud for entertainment, and that the audience not only remembered the sagas but retold them to others in great detail, we must also suppose that the art of story-telling was much cultivated and highly developed. But there are no particular reasons for assuming, in the case of dual versions of the family sagas, any intermediate written stage. On the contrary, several of the parallels are of such a nature that the passages in question must have formed part of both sagas from very early days; they are necessary for the sequence of the narrative, and they differ from each other in such a manner that they must have existed for a long time separately and in different contexts. Either of two alternative texts may contain information which is not in the other, but which is, nevertheless, original; they may take a different view of a man's character and of the part played by him. Altogether there are so many typical oral variants that they give us a tolerably accurate idea of the form in which the sagas were current before they were written down.

Let us look a little more closely at some of the differences in the parallel texts which have been mentioned.

The passage which is common to Eyrb. and Gísl. contains only one incident: the account of what happened at Helgafell on the evening when the tidings of Gisli's death were brought to his sister. From an author's point of view such a situation is interesting, and the whole scene is of the sort that invites embellishment. How will Gisli's sister take it when she hears that her brother has fallen — the brother who killed her first husband? In securing vengeance she loses her brother. Her second husband has now avenged his brother, but at the expense of his brother-in-law. And supposing Thordis and Bork take the news in different ways, how will Snorri, the son of Thordis, act when he hears that his father has been avenged, but his mother's brother slain? The resemblance between the sagas shows conclusively that they agree regarding the external circumstances of that evening; not only so, but their view of the psychological aspects of the dilemma was the same from the first, or at any rate from the time when the separate variants came into existence. In both sagas the narrators dwell upon Thordis' significant words, when she asks whether porridge is not good enough food for Gisli's slayer. We see here that both the versions may exhibit perfection of form, psychological insight, and a firmly-knit structure, which retains not only the main features, but numerous details as well.

In the passage which describes how Gunnar Thidrandabani attended the wedding at Helgafell (Laxd. og Gunn. s. Þiðr.), we find a variant of a different kind. Here, as we have seen, a straightforward story is contrasted with a literary adaptation. In all essentials the

two versions agree. But where there are divergencies in Laxd., they all tend in the same direction, being embellishments of the more concise narrative. These embellishments, moreover, are added with a special object; they are meant to exhibit more clearly Gudrun's magnanimity and generosity in word and deed. There is a conscious reshaping of the material in accordance with the general tendency throughout the Laxdœla Saga. The two texts stand on very different literary levels; but notwithstanding the reference in Laxd. to *sǫgu Njarðvíkinga,* the author cannot have made use of the form of tradition that we meet with in Gunn. s. Þiðr.; this may be seen from various dissimilarities which are not embellishments (e. g. the speeches, or Snorri Godi's behaviour).

The passages about Hallfred and Kolfinna at the sæter and the subsequent dispute at the law-court (Vatnsd. and Hallfr.) again agree as to the main features of the story, while showing certain divergencies in detail. But in this case the two sagas take a different view of the same persons and actions. Vatnsd. portrays Thorkell as faithful and shrewd; in Hallfr. he is untrustworthy. In Vatns., Thorkell is the leading character, whereas Hallfr. sets out to describe Hallfred's lawsuit.[1] This produces many internal discrepancies. It is, therefore, all the more remarkable that even here the chief speeches show a strong resemblance in content, though the wording is apt to be different. This indicates that the dialogue is an ancient feature of the story, antedating the division into two versions produced by the difference of context.

[1] See Vogt, Vatnsdœla saga, p. XXVII.

The story of the two berserks killed in Haukagil exhibits yet another variation. Vatnsd. is interested in psychological problems: Thorkell's doubts and evasions are brought into the foreground. This version delights in everything that is vivid, in an artistic sense; it allows the persons to speak for themselves. Þorv. Þ., on the other hand, concentrates upon all that is legendary and mysterious, relegates the characters to the background, and does not record a single speech. Here we can see what happened when a tradition was utilized in different contexts in several sagas, and when the sagamen had different interests and aims.

Dissimilar as these passages are, they all show the same thing; they have so much in common as regards the incidents, the dialogue, and the types of character, that the variants must be based upon very full and detailed accounts. We have seen that a tradition may be expanded in the more literary sagas, but there could never be the close correspondence that we find in the variants, if they were based upon tradition that was thin and meagre in detail.

The study of dual forms of the same saga leads to a similar result, except that the resemblance is greater, as we should expect, and that longer portions of the narrative can be compared.

In the family sagas proper there are only four or five examples:

1. The Bandamanna Saga exists in two forms, which differ in such a way that Andreas Heusler,[1] who has studied them very carefully, holds that they rest on distinct oral versions. There is much to be said

[1] Zwei Isländergeschichten (1913), p. XLIII.

for this hypothesis; yet the correspondence is so remarkable that others, including Finnur Jónsson [1], regard the case as one of written variants only.

2. The middle portion of Ljósv. exists in two forms, which must be different records of the oral tradition. We will return to this later.

3. The first portion of Gísl. exists in two forms. But the longer seems to have been prefixed as an introduction to a manuscript of which the opening pages were missing. Oral traditions were evidently used in the new introduction; but they have lost a great deal of their original colour, and the new introduction has such a pronounced literary style that it is on quite a different plane.

4. The first chapters of the Harðar Saga exist in two forms, an earlier and a later one. The remainder of the saga is only extant in the later form. Whatever the relation between the two forms may be, they belong to such different stages of literary development that a comparison would furnish no results of any value for our study of competing forms of oral tradition.

5. There are two forms of the Hallfreðar Saga, one being a third longer than the other. But the longer form is apparently no more than a literary expansion of the shorter.[2]

The only reliable example is the Ljósvetninga Saga, and a very interesting and instructive example it is.

[1] Litt. hist.[2] II, p. 464.

[2] W. H. Vogt is of opinion that several of the separate songs (*lausavísur*) exist in such different forms that they must go back to oral variants (Arkiv 41, p. 68—80).

Of this saga there are several paper manuscripts, all going back (through a connecting link) to a vellum ms. of the fifteenth century, of which three sheets only survive. The end is missing in all the paper mss., so the vellum book must have been defective at the time the copies were made. In addition we have 10 sheets of another vellum manuscript (dating from about 1400), which contain three separate passages. The first and the last portion of this vellum ms. belong to the same original written form as the paper mss.; in other words, all the extant forms of these passages go back to the same manuscript. But the middle part of the vellum ms. has so little resemblance to the corresponding part in the paper mss. that it must be of different origin. Dr. Adolfine Erichsen, who has made a thorough study of the problem in her "Untersuchungen zur Ljósvetninga Saga", shows that the two forms of the middle portion cannot come from a common written source; they must be derived from different oral variants. She marshals a number of strong arguments, which certainly appear to prove her case.[1] But other good arguments can be adduced, and the whole position appears in a clearer and more convincing light if we group the differences between the manuscripts in their relation to the distinguishing characteristics of oral variants. If we do this, we find:

1. That lapses of memory have played a part, resulting in the omission from one form of passages which are found in the other.

2. We find several times that a particular episode is differently placed in the two forms. Every time

[1] See Finnur Jónsson in Litt. hist.[2] II, p. 494.

this happens, it turns out that the episode is one which does not form a necessary part of the epic action, but can readily be associated in the mind with other episodes. Gudmund the Mighty is a party in two lawsuits, and before one of these he endeavours to ensure that his brother Einar will not be against him. Now one of the texts puts his conversation with Einar before the first lawsuit, while the other puts it before the second lawsuit, where the case was more critical. The passage fits in equally well in either context, but a copyist who had seen it in one place in a manuscript would have no reason to transfer it to another. On the other hand it might easily be transposed through a lapse of memory.

The anecdote which relates how Gudmund and Einar became suspicious of each other refers to a time long before the events of which the saga tells. Accordingly it can be inserted anywhere, so far as the action is concerned, provided, of course, that it is put in a place where there is an allusion to this suspicion, or to its effects. One text gives the anecdote in a place where Gudmund, in spite of his suspicion, tries to win his brother's friendship and help; the other introduces it in a place where the mistrust is shown to be so deep-seated that there has never been any real friendship. This again is a discrepancy which cannot be attributed to any revision of a written source, for there would be no reason to transfer the anecdote. But it is a typical instance of transposition in the memory, because the anecdote is as appropriate in one connection as the other.

3. The difference between the two versions of the

story appears most conspicuously where the matter is of minor importance and can thus be more readily altered or forgotten. The chief persons have the same names in both forms; but several, who are only mentioned in passing, or play subordinate parts, appear under different names. The Norwegian merchant is called Ingjald in one text, Helgi Arnsteinsson in the other. The spy in one of the texts is Thorbjorn Rindill, while in the other his name is Thorstein Rindill. One of Thorir Helgason's members of the court is called Thorir Akrakarl in one text and Thorgils Akrakarl in the other. The man who tells about the hidden goats is a nameless servant of Gudmund in one text, while in the other he is called Odd, and is Thorir's servant.

4. In this connection it is particularly interesting that the only international migratory legend [1] found in a comparatively unchanged form in a family saga is the one which occurs in the middle portion of Ljósv. This legend is the above-mentioned account of how Einar and Gudmund came to mistrust each other. Although the story is by no means a long one (121 words in one text and 155 in the other), we can see at once that there are two oral variants. In such a simple and easily grasped anecdote, having no particular connection with the main narrative, and showing all the compactness of an old folk-legend, we should expect the agreement between the two texts to be closer than elsewhere if the variants were oral. And this proves to be the case. In Dr. Erichsen's book,

[1] A man (or an animal) will strike at a fly sitting on someone else, but will hit so hard that he kills or injures that person.

where the words and sentences which are common to both the forms of the middle portion of Ljósv. are italicised, we can see at a glance that the italics occur more frequently in this legend than elsewhere (as Dr. Erichsen herself points out).

This is not all the evidence, but it is sufficient, and we are bound to conclude, with Dr. Erichsen, that there were two oral variants.[1] The saga-writer must for some reason or other have used two sources; probably his manuscript was defective and he made use of another to fill it out.

In Ljósv. we see the same thing that we noticed in the case of the parallels in independent sagas, namely that the oral narrative had an abundance of detail and a fixed form. The dissimilarities occur in minor points; the chief occurrences remain the same, the two texts some times agreeing almost word for word. The narrator knew not only the substance of the story, but to a large extent its precise wording; as we may see from

[1] As this difference between the two texts of the saga is only found in the middle portion, one might suppose that the piece is merely an oral repetition of another ms. Somebody might have had a manuscript with this middle portion missing. Coming upon another manuscript elsewhere, he might have read it and noticed the part that was omitted in his own version. On returning home he might have filled out his manuscript from memory. This is possible, but it cannot have happened in the present instance, for the nature of the differences is incompatible with a subsequent rearrangement of the material in the way suggested. There are points of dissimilarity of just the kind that enter gradually through many oral repetitions. Notice, in particular, the description of Thorir Helgason concealing the goats. Not only is there a discrepancy in regard to the persons who were with him; there is also a difference in the interpretation of Thorir's character and rôle.

the fact that the same sentences occur in different places in the two texts.[1] The actual phrases and sentences ring, as it were, in the ears of the tellers; but they may be put in a wrong place through a lapse of memory or for some other reason, as we saw in the case of longer episodes.

A study of the form of the Reykdœla Saga brings us to the same conclusion. We can see that the author set himself to record the tradition as he had heard it told. The composition is so loose that he cannot have taken much pains to unify the disconnected incidents of the oral narrative. At times the story is full and circumstantial, at other times it is short and fragmentary; on several occasions the author says that he does not know this or that, and he takes no trouble to fill out or round off the tale. Some things are obscure, not, however, because the author is lacking in grasp of his subject, but obviously because the tradition he is using does not supply the necessary information. Where there are incompatible variants, he allows them to stand side by side; he has no wish to conceal anything. Once or twice, when narrating something supernatural of which he evidently has his doubts, he shields himself behind his informants with the formula "*svá er sagt*"; indeed he has an exceptional number of references to tradition. All this, coupled with certain characteristics of style, shows that he was not so much an artist as a student. His method proves that the fuller passages, containing dialogue, must have existed in that form in the oral tradition; and that the

[1] See Erichsen, Untersuchungen, p. 53.

long continuous sections must have been closely knit together before he began to write his book.

The results at which we have arrived, by various routes, agree with the view so strongly urged by Meissner and Heusler, that not only the contents of a saga but the wording — the very form in which the contents were presented — might be tolerably fixed even in the oral stage of tradition, and that this oral form might be committed almost *verbatim* to parchment. In other words, the oral and written forms of a saga, or of large parts of a saga, were often practically the same.

CHAPTER III

FROM CONTEMPORARY TRADITION TO FAMILY SAGAS

A study of certain characteristics of the style of the sagas, and a comparison of the variants, has given us an idea of the form in which the underlying oral tradition must have existed, at any rate in many cases. The next point to be considered is the question how it came to assume that form. We must return to the problem of the development from *söguöld* to *ritöld*, that is to say, the problem of the transition from the contemporary account of an historical occurrence to the oral saga as it was current at the time when it was finally fixed by being written down.

In studying the Icelandic family sagas this problem is, for various reasons, a difficult one. We have no means of ascertaining the historical point of departure, as we can in the case of several of the Norwegian family traditions. As a rule the Icelandic sagas are the sole source of our knowledge of the events upon which they are based. The cases where we can check the tradition are so few that the collateral evidence is inconclusive.

Still, there is no way open to us but that of comparative research. And if we set ourselves to compare

the Icelandic family saga with other forms of oral tradition, we must obviously compare it with matter of a similar kind; family traditions must be compared with family traditions. Further, we must include more recent tradition in our researches, for the general conditions which govern oral tradition are more easily studied when the subject matter is modern, when the records are scientifically reliable, and when the materials for comparison are extensive. The method is much the same as that which is employed in linguistic research: the study of living languages and linguistic conditions as they subsist to day throws light upon older forms of language, and reveals general laws and tendencies in the languages studied.

Our point of departure is the story which was told at the time of the event. Assuming that there is historical matter in the family sagas, it must go back to a contemporaneous tradition. It must, as Axel Olrik observes, have originated "in a contemporary account"; "while the story of the opening scenes is still being told, life goes on shaping the destinies of the chief characters".[1] Of this we have evidence in the sagas themselves. The family sagas tell us more than once how information was sought far and wide; how such and such persons, who had been present on some important occasion, came to this or that place and described their experiences; or how someone or other made careful inquiry as to what had occurred at a certain time. The Orkneyinga Saga describes how some Norse crusaders who had taken a dromond afterwards talked over what had happened. Each re-

[1] Nordisk Aandsliv, pp. 82 and 84.

lated what he had seen. They also discussed who had boarded the dromond first, and could not agree. "Þa mæltu sumir, at þat væri úmerkilegt, at þeir hefði eigi allir eina sǫgn frá þeim stórtíðendum. Ok þar kom, at þeir urðu á þat sáttir, at Rǫgnvaldr jarl skyldi ór skéra; skyldu þeir þat síðan allir flytja".[1] Then the earl chanted a lay which declared that Audun the Red was the first man on board the dromond. Here we have a version crystallized in the form of a verse which people remembered.

Harald Hardradi's Icelandic saga-teller recited Harald's *útferðarsaga* to Harald himself; the Icelander had learnt it in his own country from Halldor Snorrason, who had accompanied Harald.[2]

Fóstbr. describes how Thorgrim Einarsson, sitting in a law-court in Greenland, tells a story about the murder of Thorgeir, one of the foster-brothers. Then the other foster-brother, Thormod Kolbrunarskald, comes and avenges his friend.[3] Even if these episodes are not historical in their details, they prove, at any rate, that story-telling was quite a common thing.

[1] Then some said that it was foolish that they should not all have one story about these great tidings; and the end of it was that they agreed that earl Rognvald should settle the dispute; and afterwards they should all back what he said (Nordal's edit., p. 251).

[2] Fms. VII, pp. 354—356.

[3] B. K. Þórólfsson's edit. pp., 157—161. First Gunnar Lambason, and then Flosi, in the Orkneys, tells about the fire at Bergþórshváll, of which they had been eyewitnesses. Similar situations occur in several of the sagas, and were evidently a familiar literary motif; see Kersbergen, Litteraire Motieven in de Njála, pp. 140—143.

The contemporary account need not be restricted to what a single eyewitness has seen and heard and can tell. It may be the sum of what several, or all, of the eyewitnesses relate; as the Orkneyinga Saga puts it: "sagði þá hverr þat, er sét þóttist hafa" (then each spoke of what he thought he had seen). After Aron Hjörleifsson has escaped from Grímsey, he comes with his followers to a peasant's house. They "settusk niðr brátt, því at þeir váru mjǫk farmóðir, en sumum helt en fleira til. Eptir þat spyrr bóndi at tíðendum vandlega, en þeir segja honum af hit ljósasta" (ch. 9). In due course, as a narrative is passed on from man to man, the tradition crystallizes as the joint work of all the different story-tellers. Many independent features and individual points of view are gradually combined until they form a detailed and compact story. This process may be observed to-day in the formation of tales of the countryside, in modern newspaper reporting, etc. And the same thing happened in earlier times. We may illustrate this by an example. As previously mentioned, there is a very large number of mediaeval and later Norwegian records of evidence, i.e. documents describing the circumstances in various murder cases. The evidence was taken down from accounts given by eyewitnesses and others; and we come upon several saga-like episodes with an exciting plot and lively dialogue. As an example of such detailed dialogue we may take part of a deposition given in Röldal in 1501:

Then the aforementioned Olav Olavsson spoke to Jon Eiriksson and said: "Sell me a horse." Jon Eiriksson answered: "Nay, kinsman, he is not for sale." Olav

Olavsson answered: "Sell me the horse and I will give you a kettle which weighs a pound." Jon Eiriksson answered: "I sold you a horse before; I came off badly in that bargain, so I have no mind to sell any more horses." Olav Olavsson answered: "Perhaps you are sorry you sold that horse to my father?" Jon Eiriksson answered: "I don't think I can usually complain of being too well off, but I would sooner have no horse at all than the one your father gave me in exchange." Then Olav Olavsson answered: "If you are sorry about that horse, who knows but what you might get him home again, and on your backside, and ride to the devil on him too!" Jon Eiriksson answered: "God forbid that any man should ride thither."

Then the record goes on to describe how Olav Olavsson was killed. The conversation is reported throughout in the first person; we have no fewer than 14 rejoinders in this one document, which barely fills one and a half pages of the Diplomatarium Norvegicum.[1] The statements have been combined; and the record enables us to form a good idea of the way in which the story was told locally.

Legal documents are often valuable because they give us some idea of the art of the story-teller, and here again we have examples from Norway. About two hundred years ago there was a man named Thore Aaknes living in Vest-Agder. Stories about this man are still current, and several of his witty replies are

[1] II, 1016. Circumstantial narration and fullness of dialogue will also be found in Dipl. Norv. II, 123 (Telemark, 1315), I, 692 (Hjartdal, Telemark, 1424), IV, 827 (Froland, Aust-Agder, 1425), I, 961 (Sauland, Telemark, 1489?), and elsewhere. For more recent times, reference may be made to Qvisling, Övre Telemarkens historie i det 17de aarhundrede, pp. 265—269.

treasured in the popular memory.[1] In Tingbok 3 from Vestre Robyggjelaget (fol. 216—217), we come upon his name as a witness in a case, and he describes a meeting he once had with a man suspected of a murder (the incident was already several years old). As soon as Thore begins to speak, new life comes into these ancient depositions, and the whole scene rises vividly before us. Thore had come upon the murderer alone in the woods. Thorgeir said to him:

"Good-day Thore. You have two fine horses there." The witness answered: "They have seen better days." Thorgeir asked: "Did you row up to the north end of the lake?" The witness answered: "I came by the road, but you, Thorgeir, can get across on the logs lying in the water." Thorgeir said: "Will you show me the way, and where the logs are? I want to go to Östegaard and thence home." As they walked along together Thore said: "People are speaking ill of you on account of Björn Senum's daughter." Thorgeir answered: "What do you say! Blight and bane! The devil shall have him for that!" With that he leaped over the stream in a rage; whereupon Thore said: "God be praised, that is well."

Evidently Thore, unlike the other witnesses, told his story in such a lively and interesting fashion that a touch of art insinuated itself into the dusty law report.

Good examples of the way in which contemporary events are still narrated in Iceland may be found in Gráskinna I—II (edited by Sigurður Nordal and Þórbergur Þórðarson) 1928—1929. Here there are several stories with long and circumstantial plots, warnings,

[1] See Skar, Gamalt II, pp. 33—36. These stories about Thore ought not to be in their present place, but in Gamalt V (after Knut Mörk). They are not Sætesdal traditions.

prophecies, and various supernatural occurrences mixed up with everyday happenings, all taken down from accounts furnished by people living in our own day. Parts of Skar's Gamalt I and V, where the stories are based on personal reminiscences, illustrate much the same thing in regard to Norway.

All these, however, are written sources; one cannot help asking oneself in such cases how much belongs to the oral story, and how much is the result of more or less conscious editing and arrangement of the material when committing it to paper. As a research worker, one naturally prefers to start from the oral account.

In this connection an experience I had in 1923 was particularly instructive. I had an opportunity of listening to a famous peasant story-teller, Svein Hovden of Bykle in Sætesdal. When I met him he told me, among other things, what had happened to a man who was engaged in musical researches in the uplands a few years before. He remembered the story so well and told it in such a lively and thrilling fashion, that one was quite carried away. In his mouth the story was altogether different from what it was when related by others. On the same occasion Svein told me anecdotes about Hallvor Bjaai — things he remembered from his youth, or things he had heard from others, which had either happened in his young days or in the time immediately before. He narrated with true literary skill, and tried to imitate the voices of some of the persons in his story. One of these was a man from Tinn in Aust-Telemark, and he made him talk in the characteristic Tinn dialect. One of the women

was a native of Suldal in Rogaland, whose Suldal dialect he imitated in similar fashion. And he did the same thing in relating other stories. He told about the Hardanger man Sylfest Garatun's adventurous journey in wintertime across the Hardanger mountain tracts all the way from Mogen, in Telemark, to Sogn. The tale had been related to him by Garatun himself, and he made a point of repeating Garatun's own words, as far as he could, in the first person and in dialect.[1]

Svein Hovden's tales furnished concrete proof that the story of contemporary events may be told with genuine literary art, while still keeping its wealth of detail.

So much for the contemporary narrative. But how does the contemporary narrative fare as it passes from mouth to mouth and from generation to generation? Here we cannot appeal to any absolutely reliable written records of the same story at widely different dates, for the excellent reason that the methodical recording of folk-traditions did not begin until the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, we can obtain the guidance we require by comparing traditions which have lived for a long time on the lips of the people with stories of more recent date.

In the body of historical folklore two tendencies gradually emerge — tendencies which at first sight seem mutually inconsistent, but which to a large extent produce the same result.

A story which at the outset is thin, may acquire greater epic richness. It becomes fuller as dialogues

[1] See Agder Tidend, 1924, nos. 117 and 118, in which Knut Hoslemo records the narrative as told by Svein.

are inserted and various details added. This applies to legends founded on historical fact, whether the main theme is supernatural or of a more rationalistic type. Mythical legends which are comparatively young have little action or dialogue; frequently there is only a single incident and to this a supernatural interpretation is given. But the older *huldre* (fairy) legends have conversations with the *huldre* folk, kidnappings, marriages with *huldre* maidens, etc. Let us take a couple of these passages:

There was once a man who was going into the woods to cut timber. He took with him enough food to last for a week. He slept in a log-hut. One evening when he had had supper, an elf appeared.

"What, all alone?" said the elf. "Don't you feel very dull?"

"It is a bit dull at whiles," the man said.

"We're having a wedding along at our place," the elf said; "you'd better come with me."

"That would be jolly," the man said, "but I'm afraid to go."

"Oh, you can safely come with me," said the elf. And go he did.

Before he knew where he was, he found himself in the house where the wedding was being celebrated. The room was full of people — fiddling, dancing and drinking. The fiddler had a seat up on the wall; the bridegroom had had his jaw knocked off. They were mighty hospitable — he kept on eating and drinking, and did nothing else, except sleep. He went on like this for a long time. At length he asked the elf to take him back to his house; and the elf took him home.

"How long do you suppose you've been away?" he asked.

"A week, I should say," the man answered.

"It's half a year you've been," said the elf.

The man was dumbfounded.

They had been looking for him everywhere; but there was neither trace nor track of him. At last they thought he had taken his life, or run away. So, when he turned up again, they could not believe their own eyes." [1]

Or take this passage from the legend of "the Elf and the Pastor of Byggland":

There was once a tenant on the pastor's glebe who had a great deal to do with elves. The pastor heard of this, but would never believe it; at last he heard it said so often that he went to see the man.

"Is there anything in what folk say about your keeping company with elves?" he asked.

"Why yes," the man said, "one looks in now and again, and if you can wait a while, he's sure to turn up. About twelve o'clock he'll be coming to return a loaf of bread he borrowed from me. He'll come, sure enough, you'll see. They are honest folk; when they make a promise they keep it. They never play tricks."

As the clock struck, there was a little knock at the door. "There he is," the man said.

"Won't he come in?" asked the pastor.

"I doubt if he will to-day," said the man.

"Why not?" asked the pastor.

"He knows very well that the pastor's here," the man said.

"How can he?" asked the pastor.

"Oh, he knows that just as well as you do," answered the man, and went out to the elf.

"I've come back with the bread I borrowed," the elf said, holding out the loaf.

"Why don't you come in?" the man asked

"No, I'd only quarrel with the pastor," said the elf; "he doesn't believe in me." But the man pressed him, and in he went.

[1] Skar, Gamalt III, pp. 89—90.

"Where do you come from?" asked the pastor.

"I live close by," said the elf; "but you never notice us. We belong to the *huldre* folk."

"Well I never thought they existed," said the pastor, "but now I see they do," etc.[1]

In similar fashion, we meet with things which can only be inventions in legends which are unquestionably historical. Here is an example. There are legends current in Sætesdal concerning men from those parts who served as soldiers or body-guards in Copenhagen. These men always had very successful careers in the sister country. They were on friendly terms with the king, and the queen sometimes became enamoured of them — just as we hear in the case of Icelanders who came to Norway in old days. Whole dialogues were invented in accordance with the best models, as in the story of a native of Sætesdal named Sigurd. This man, who was a body-guard in Copenhagen, accompanied the king to Kristiansand. Here:

The street was lined with soldiery on both sides. The king went on one side, and Sigurd went on the other with the queen on his arm, and they walked very quickly too. There were a great many dalesmen in the town looking on. Sigurd stepped up to one of them and spoke to ham.

"Do you know that man?" the king asked.

"Yes, he is my father," Sigurd said.

Then the king asked Hallvor (Sigurd's father) whether he would like his farm at Löyland to be exempted from taxes and dues.

"No," said Hallvor, "I am man enough to pay the king's taxes on my farm." Then the king asked Sigurd whether he should give him some money.

[1] Skar, Gamalt III, pp. 85—86.

"His woods are worth a lot;" answered Sigurd, "he has no lack of money."[1]

If, on the other hand, the material is rich and varied from the outset, with many little points of interest, many different characters, and a number of loosely connected incidents, some important, others quite unimportant, the story will soon begin to slough off various features and assume a more schematic form. Still keeping to Svein Hovden's tales, we can take, as an example, some reminiscences of his own youth. There is an amusing story about the lame old man Hallvor Bjaai, when he wanted to marry again. He had been courting many a long day and in many places, but had got nothing but refusals for his pains; at last he was accepted by two damsels at the same time, and both the prospective brides turned up at Bjaai — also at the same time. In Skar's[2] version this story has numerous effective touches, and one gets a remarkably clear picture of all that happened. The narrator could remember what this and that person actually said. He told the story to Skar a generation ago, and to myself in 1923. When Svein related it to me I knew the whole thing by heart, having read it many times. I noticed that its form had now become tolerably fixed. At times it was almost word for word the same as in Skar. But he included certain things which are omitted in Skar's book. On the whole, therefore, if I am not mistaken, the story was rather fuller than Skar's version of it. And still there was nothing schematic about it, though he could tell the

[1] Skar, Gamalt II pp. 112—113.
[2] Gamalt I, 120—122.

tale repeatedly with comparatively little variation. The epic laws had not come into play. Axel Olrik has pointed out that what he terms "the scenic binary law" holds good for the older legends. In such legends there are only two persons or two parties within the field of vision at the same time. But if we look at the story in Skar we find the following persons assembled in the house: the narrator and his father, old Hallvor, the two women, and four men who accompany them — nine people in all, and each mentioned by name, although three of them play no part in the story. The dialogue is commonplace, loose and casual; as it so often is in everyday life.

At times a story with a historical basis may, even from the first, have something schematic and almost conventional about it, because the reality was like that. This is illustrated in the evidence given at the inquiry into the murder of Germund Berge (of Telemark) in 1664 (Landstad, "Ættesagaer og Sagn", pp. 126—128); and other examples are mentioned by Rikard Berge in Norsk Folkekultur 1921, pp. 67—68. As a rule, however, there is not much of the kind in the later historical legends. In older stories of the same nature, on the other hand, the epic laws exert a much stronger influence. The number three occurs more regularly; stereotyped features, migratory legends, and supernatural motifs find their way in. We can take one or two pieces of dialogue which show how greater pithiness and pregnancy were acquired as time went on. The words which are said actually determine the course of the story. Before a legend has been current long we can actually see it becoming conventionalized.

The legends about Björgulv Uppstad, a mighty man of Sætesdal (born in 1789) belong to the first half of the 19th century. One of these tells how Hallvor Örnefjöll went to Björgulv to demand some money which was owing to him. Björgulv had previously sent Hallvor a message that he would not pay, and that Hallvor would get a hiding if he came to claim the money. But, the first time Hallvor was in town, he went up to Gautestad (Björgulv's farm). Sigrid (Björgulv's wife) was alone indoors.

"Is Björgulv at home?" Hallvor asked.

"Where may you come from?" Sigrid answered.

"I asked whether Björgulv was at home," said Hallvor, "I intend to find him."

"You are Hallvor Örnefjöll, I suppose?" said Sigrid.

"Maybe," said Hallvor.

"Well, he is at home," said Sigrid, "but he isn't up yet; he's in the inner room." So Hallvor seated himself on a stool and waited. But Björgulv showed no signs of coming.

"I must go in to him," Hallvor said.

"Here I am," said Björgulv, appearing in the doorway, and without a word of greeting; "have you come for your money?"

"That's what I had in mind," Hallvor said.

"You cheated me!" Björgulv said. "You will never get the money — I sent you word of that by Flateland."

"I never received that message," said Hallvor, "but I did get word that I was to come myself and get a hiding; so here I am, and one of two things I will have, either the money or the hiding."

"Well, you shall have the hiding," Björgulv said.

"Perhaps that is best," said Hallvor, "I sometimes earn a little money, but I have never yet had a hiding."

Sigrid, however, persuaded Björgulv to pay up. It was Hallvor who subsequently told about this encounter.[1]

Talleiv Kyrvestad (born in 1761) was going to pay tithe to the pastor, and took some of the best corn he had; but it was a bad year, and the pastor refused to accept corn that was so poor.

"All my hands have had the same," Talleiv said.

"I am not one of your servants," said the priest in a temper.

"Then I don't owe you any corn," Talleiv said.

"I am the servant of God," says the pastor.

"Then you must ask Him for your wages," says Talleiv.

We are told that the parents of this Talleiv had a spoilt daughter. "Come on, Bjug, we will run away," said Birgit, and set off up the hillside. Bjug followed. But it was frightfully steep and soon they sat down to rest.

"Why did we run away," says Bjug; "have we done anything?"

"No, we haven't," says Birgit.

"Then let's go home again," says Bjug. And home they went[1]

An example of a brief conversation which decided a man's whole future — like the conversation between Gunnar and Hallgerd at the Althing — occurs in the story of Thore Tveitaa of Byggland (18th cent.) Thore wished to go into service in the east of Norway. On

[1] Skar, Gamalt V, p. 28.

[2] Skar, Gamalt I, pp. 58—60.

the day he left he looked in at Dale to see the widow — Sigrid Dale.

"Where are you off to?" says she.

"I'am going into service," says he.

"You'd do better to marry," says she.

"Nobody wants me," says he.

"Then I'll have you," says she.

"Then I won't go into service," says he.[1]

We see the same thing in Neo-Icelandic stories. But it is rather difficult to feel certain in their case, because we seldom have the same accurate knowledge of the source from which the chronicler derived his information. Nevertheless such examples as we possess of stories recorded by experienced chroniclers show that the dialogue may be copious from the very first (see, for instance, Sýn Ingimundar Jónssonar, in Gráskinna I, p. 27, collected by Sigurður Nordal).

But an historical account could not be given an equally artistic form all the way through. The family traditions do not consist exclusively of lively descriptions of striking incidents. Part of the material usually existed in the shape of dry facts about relationships, marriages, the sale of farms, and so on. This material was put into the saga with the rest, and it forms a kind of mortar cementing the more carefully chiselled portions together, as may be seen, for instance, in various parts of the Skraddar tale.

If we turn next to the Icelandic family saga, and ask whether it exhibits the special characteristics usually

[1] Skar, Gamalt IV, p. 79. Many examples of circumstantial dialogue are given in Skar, e. g. II 20, 33, 35, 41, 80, 130, V 39, 102—103, 110—111, 158 etc.

acquired by historical tradition as time goes on, the answer is in the affirmative. We find episodes of artistic value, with copious dialogue, often in a conventionalized form. But what is commonly regarded as literary discrimination is lacking; a whole series of names and details stand out starkly from the lively, chequered exuberance of the main story, and to a modern reader they undoubtedly seem tedious. From an artistic point of view, in fact, there is not a little that strikes us as being dead matter. Before entering more fully into this subject, however, we must invoke the assistance of some materials for comparison which are no less important for this investigation. We are in the fortunate position of having other analogies besides those of modern times. The conclusions at which we have already arrived can be reinforced by comparing the old family sagas with the work known as the Sturlunga Saga, i.e. by comparing the earlier and later saga traditions of the Middle Ages.

The Sturlunga is a compilation of sagas written down in the thirteenth century — the century in which the bulk of the family sagas were put into book form. This work relates events of the kind met with in the ancient family sagas, except that these events did not happen two or three hundred years earlier, but for the most part within living memory, or at any rate not more than two or three generations back. The Sturlunga Saga is doubly valuable for our investigation in that it was written at a time when the saga style was immensely popular, and when all historical matter was presented in that style as a matter of course. We have the old saga technique in Sturlunga — visible

among other things in the sober objective attitude affected by the saga-writers, however much they may have taken an active part in the scenes they describe. This is the time-honoured art of the oral story-teller; whose detachment was imitated by the author, if it was not in his blood.[1] The differences, therefore, between the old sagas and Sturlunga must be due to the fact that the traditional sources had not had time to change.

The dissimilarity is at once noticeable. Notwithstanding all the similarity of style, the impression we get of Sturlunga as a whole is unlike the old family sagas, and an analysis of what is dissimilar reveals quite clearly the line of development followed by the old tradition. A few points may be mentioned.

The amount of detail in Sturlunga is so great that it is a matter of no small difficulty to understand the course of events. One must have an exceptionally good memory, or else read the book several times, if one is to grasp the enormous mass of material. And this applies not only to the portions which relate to the history of the country, but to the work as a whole. Þorgils saga ok Hafliða, which is the oldest, swarms with names and minor details. The events are too recent; everything is indiscriminately heaped up in the same plane; there are no vistas, there is no perspective. The art which has left its impress on the style has not been able to eliminate a thousand irrelevant little details and bring clarity into the picture. If we take the Reykjavik editions of the family sagas and Sturlunga, which are published in the same format, and count the number of persons in each saga, we

[1] See above p. 30 ff.

find that, proportionately, there are a great many more in Sturlunga. There are more than 3 000 people in about 1 200 pages of Sturlunga, whereas Hrafnkels Saga, for instance, has 28 in 39 pages, and Vatnsd. has 130 in 123 pages; even the circumstantial Njála, which always mentions every person by name and introduces fictitious characters, has only about 650 people in 435 pages.[1] The Sturlunga has between fifty and sixty per cent more characters than Njála. The 'casualties' during the period of oral narration must have been at least as many. But the survivors have all the better elbow-room, and we can see them more clearly.

In reading Sturlunga we feel at once that the events had happened recently. As Hans E. Kinck puts it, "We see battle and murder depicted just as such things were then, and had been in the past, in all their naked brutality, on a stage exposed to the unromantic, pitiless light of reality, bereft of the glamour of Valhalla, stripped of the poetic tinsel and the descriptive conventions of later times, and minus the scarlet tunics and gold-inlaid swords of the heroes." [2]

Sturlunga arranges the material artistically, so that we can see an incident vividly with the mind's eye; the author is master of the old saga technique by which we are kept in suspense, because we are unaware of the real significance of events until it becomes known to the actors themselves. The saga writer is a spectator, not an interpreter; the plot of the story develops as it does in real life. This comes out most

[1] Including genealogies.

[2] Storhetstid, p. 4.

clearly, perhaps, in the portions of Sturlunga which must have existed as unwritten stories longer than the rest, for instance in the passage in Þorgils saga ok Hafliða which relates how Thorgils went to the Althing and sent out spies to find out where Haflidi was.[1]

The Sturlunga Saga does not arrange its subject matter schematically, according to 'epic laws'. Yet this may frequently be seen in accounts of events which took place in the *söguöld*. No doubt it is difficult to tell whether the historical material existed from the first in a form which was recognized as art, or whether it subsequently acquired that form through being reshaped on artistic lines. But in certain cases we seem to have proof that such reshaping took place. Njála and Eyrb. both state that Gunnar, when he perished at Hlíðarendi, was the only man at home; and in reading Njáls Saga we realize the dramatic significance of this detail. But the Landnáma-bók tells us that he had one man with him, which is probably true, for though this man might easily have been forgotten, it is hardly likely that he would have been added. Íslendinga Saga says that Aron Hjörleifsson had Starkad Kjappi with him when he killed Sigmund; but Arons Saga, which is later, does not mention that anyone was with Aron, and the features connected with the companion have dropped out. The narrators have treated history as Vinje did in "Storegut". Vinje represented Grytebekken as being alone when he killed Storegut; in reality there were two men. Had Vinje included the second, however, the guilt would have been divided between two persons, and the whole incident would have been less

[1] Ker, Epic and Romance (1908) pp. 238—239.

effective from a literary standpoint. Again, when the Norwegian story of Tinnemannen describes how Olav Hovdejord's hand was cut off, we hear that the deed was done by the captain, and that nobody was present but these two; in reality, however, the captain was accompanied by a lieutenant, and after they had inflicted several wounds upon Olav the lieutenant cut off his hand. But the captain was the hero of the story, and tradition suppressed the lieutenant.[1]

Our chances of demonstrating that the story has been schematized are greatest when we are dealing with the epic number three. The 'trinary law' was formulated by Axel Olrik in his paper entitled "Epic Laws" (1908). "The legend (in Olrik's wide sense of the word) has a predilection for the number three: three persons, three things, three successive incidents of the same kind etc."[2]; and Olrik argues that "this trinary law is one of the fundamental principles of the architecture of the folk-tale."[3]

So long as we are dealing with imaginative compositions like the folk-tales we can easily trace the influence of the trinary law. But the problem at once becomes more complicated if the story rests on a historical foundation. It is true that some scholars have applied Olrik's law in the critical study of the sagas, and L. Alfred Bock has collected all the examples of *die epische Dreizahl in den Islendinga sǫgur* in vols. 37 and 38 of "Arkiv for Nordisk Filologi". He finds more than 600 instances, and comes to the conclusion

[1] Nordbö, Ættesogor, p. 325.
[2] Danske Studier 1908, p. 81.
[3] Op. cit. p. 83.

that all the sagas, with the exception of the short Ǫlkofra Þáttr, conform, more or less, to the trinary law.[1]

But the fact is that the number three is extremely common in real life; we must find out, therefore, how many of these triads are historical and how many epical. The frequency with which the number occurs may be judged, *inter alia*, from the aphorisms which embody the wisdom of by-gone generations: all good things are three; the third time decides it; three times is fully tried; the third time is either the best or the worst; and so on. Bock himself admits that what he terms *diese Neigung zur epischen Stilisierung* must have been to such a large extent bound up with the daily life of the ancient Icelanders that it is often impossible to draw any sharp line between epic and history.[2] A visit was not supposed to exceed three days, but this does not justify us in labelling as epic all the cases in which we are told that a visit lasted three days. Nor, as Björn K. Þórólfsson observes,[3] can we include three years' outlawry or three mark fines.

But even if we exclude all such cases, we cannot safely use the number three in any given instance as a test by which to determine whether a passage is added, rewritten, or actually an historical reminiscence. Some of the things that are written about the epic triad remind one not a little of the evidence which proves, on so many conclusive grounds, that the lives of

[1] See Arkiv 38, p. 79.

[2] See Arkiv 37, p. 264.

[3] Festskrift til Finnur Jónsson, p. 57.

Napoleon the Great and Gladstone are solar myths. I will endeavour to show how little we can rely upon the triad alone as a test to distinguish fact from fiction. Many triads occur in the Skraddar tale:

1. Three beggars steal from the King's treasure-chest.
2. These beggars spend three days with a woman in the far north.
3. Knut Skraddar buys three out of seven farms.
4. Subsequently he buys the whole of Austegard, three hides of land in extent.
5. Knut Skraddar has three sons.
6. At Knut's funeral the hearse-horse makes three attempts to pull the coffin.
7. The hearse-horse neighs three times.
8. Lisle-Knut, the son of Knut Skraddar, has likewise three sons.
9. The girl under the cuckoo-tree dresses and undresses three times.
10. And she wishes for three things.
11. At one time three people — a brother and two sisters — each owned one of the three hides of land at Austegard.

Here we have no fewer than eleven triads in less than fourteen ordinary octavo pages. Such a large number is suspicious, and on studying the figures we are forced to conclude that they are epic. That the girl should stand under a cuckoo-tree, dress and undress three times, and wish for three things, is in accordance with a common popular superstition. The description of the horse pulling three times at the coffin, and neighing three times, must likewise be fiction.

That Knut Skraddar should have three sons, and that his son Knut should also have three, is not unlikely in itself, but a fictitious element seems to be present all the same; for not only have Knut Nilsson and Knut Knutsson each three sons, but one of Knut Nilsson's three sons gets killed, and the same thing happens to one of Knut Knutsson's three sons. It would be remarkable indeed if the father and son not only had the same name and the same number of sons, but each lost one of three sons in the same way. The explanation must be that, as both men were called Knut, they were confused.

We can also see the influence of the epic triad in the fact that yet another Knut, who is Knut Knutsson's grandson, has three children, each of whom eventually inherit part of three hides of land at Austegard — an improbable occurrence, since two of them were daughters, and therefore not entitled to share the inheritance equally with the odel-born son.

Surely all this is very simple and quite in accordance with the accepted methods of folklore research? But let us see how it agrees with the facts. To begin with, the old records show that Knut Skraddar did own three hides of land at Austegard — that being the real size of the farm. He had at least three sons,[1] one of whom was killed. Further, one of the sons was called Knut, and this Knut actually had three sons, one of whom was really killed. And it is also historically true that each of three children of one of the

[1] The story gives the number as three, and the record also mentions three, but there are various grounds for believing that the number was probably four.

Knuts subsequently owned a third part of Austegard, although two of them were daughters.

Several of the unhistorical epic triads turn out to be well-established historical facts. I have devoted so much space to this particular example because it brings out an important point. The number three is common in popular lore, and is found in company with regular epic motifs like the cuckoo-tree and the hearse-horse; but, so far as we can check this story, it has had no power to alter any of the facts in regard to family relationships, the sale of farms, the division of inheritance, etc. If this is so, we may expect to find the same thing in the Icelandic saga.

Even after deducting a considerable number of the 600 triads, we are left with more than enough to make out a clear case for the schematic arrangement of the family sagas. This indeed, judging from a remark which occurs in Gretla: *Þrisvar hefir allt orðit forðum* (ch. 88, 24), seems to have struck the ancient Icelanders themselves. Nothing shows better that the number three is not part of the historical matter, but a feature of the artistic arrangement, than the fact that it regularly crops up in episodes of the same kind. If people are looking for someone in a house or on board ship, they look three times; and if somebody is in hiding, he changes his place of concealment three times. Thus it is in Eyrb., when Arnkell and Thorarin are searching for Odd at Holt; his mother disguises him three times, and they cannot find him. But when Geirrid joins them, they discover Odd. Thus it is, again, in Njála, when Hakon Jarl is looking for Rapp on board Thrain's ship, and Thrain hides Rapp in a dif-

ferent place each time. Or in Odds þáttr Ofeigssonar, when the king looks three times for the Lapp merchandise on board, and the goods are hidden in a new place on each occasion. Or in Gunn. s. Þiðr., when Thorkell Geitesson looks three times for Gunnar in the house of Sveinki, but fails to find him because Sveinki helps Gunnar to change his hiding place. Or in Vatnsd., when Jokull, the brigand, searches the house three times without finding Thorstein.

We have seen in examples taken from Norway that there were dialogues in contemporary accounts of historical events; and that dialogue, in accounts which had been current for a time, became increasingly conventional in form, and was sometimes invented. Assuming that the Icelandic family sagas were current for a long period in the mouths of the people, we should expect a corresponding difference between the sagas with subjects taken from the *söguöld* and the sagas with subjects from the Sturlung time. And such is the case.

We are particularly fortunate in having variants in Sturlunga which independently go back to the time when the events happened. This enables us to see, more or less clearly, what the contemporary tradition was like, and we have thus a safer point of departure than we should have if we were dependent on a single version which had been preserved by one author only. Much of what is told about Aron Hjörleifsson is found both in Sturla's Íslendinga Saga and in Arons Saga itself. Most of the incidents took place in Sturla's childhood; some things he would remember, others he would have heard from persons who had themselves taken

part in the events (including several of his nearest relatives). Arons Saga was written later than Sturla's Íslendinga Saga, perhaps as late as the beginning of the fourteenth century, but it rests on oral accounts, apparently furnished by persons who were closely connected with the events. In regard to what happened in 1224 at Valshamri we read that: *hafa þeir menn þat sagt, er þar váru* (ch. 14). B. M. Olsen suggests[1] that no one is more likely to have been the author's source of information than Olaf Hjörleifsson, the brother of Aron and abbot of Helgafell. Olaf was probably born in 1210, or thereabouts, and lived until 1302. By the twenties of the former century he must already have been watching his brother's career with deep and thrilled sympathy.

Whenever these two sagas agree we may feel sure that it is because the narrators told the same story. The divergencies between them show clearly that we are dealing with oral variants, and that it is not a case of one story borrowing from another. If, for example, we take the events which happened at Grímsey in 1222, we find that there is a good deal of dialogue both in Sturla and in Arons Saga, and that the narratives are strikingly alike in one passage. In Sturla the story runs as follows:

Aron Hjörleifsson asked Eyjolf Karsson where Tumi's weapons were. "Hanging above my seat in the house," answers Eyjolf. "I suppose we shall want those too?" says Aron. "I doubt if anyone would care to use them against Sturla," answers Eyjolf. Aron gave his weapons tc one of their followers, went in to fetch Tumi's weapons, and girded them on himself. But when he returned home

[1] Safn til sögu Íslands III, p. 265.

to the churchyard the bishop came to meet him and asked whether he wished to confess. Aron said that there was no time. "Be good to the poor," says the bishop; "but we shall meet again." [1]

Arons Saga relates the incident like this:

And now Aron asked Eyjolf whether any man in his train was wearing Tumi's weapons. Eyjolf answered that they were at home; but few, he thought, were willing to wear them, and he himself did not need them. "Methinks father and son must both be incensed enough already without our provoking them in that way, when we have to meet such a superior force." But Aron answered that to his mind it was unseemly that his men should be exposed, unprotected and unarmed, to sword-cuts, and yet they were loth to carry such valuable arms — for they were passing fine weapons. "I suppose I shall live as long if I wear the weapons; and there is still plenty of time to go and fetch them." So he handed his own weapons to the men he deemed most likely to make good use of them. Then he went home and met Bishop Gudmund in the churchyard, and his clergy with him. Aron greeted the bishop, and he answered kindly, for Aron was dearer to him than other men, as it appeared later. Aron made haste now and donned a strong breastplate and a good helmet; the third weapon was a short sword that was wellnigh a long one, and was a passing good weapon. Aron was soon out again; the bishop was still there, and well content with this undertaking. "And now, my son, I would have you confess to me." "There is no time for that now, my lord," says Aron, "for the defenders seem to be none too many, and even *one* man's help is worth having." "Those are true words," answers the bishop, "but remain strong in the faith, my son, and be as good as you can to the poor." Then the bishop blessed him and said: "I have a foreboding that you will

[1] Sturlunga I, p. 255.

suffer at the hands of the Sturlungs; and yet I believe we shall meet at a later time." [1]

It will be seen that Arons Saga is much more circumstantial, but the action is the same in both passages, and in both we have, first a conversation between Aron and Eyjolf, and then one between Aron and the bishop. The two conversations are substantially the same in both passages, and in several places the wording is similar. They must have been historical and part of the story from the first. This is probably true of most of the dialogues in Sturlunga, and even if some of them, like the well-known conversation between Sighvat and Sturla (I, pp. 355—356), are very circumstantial and rather conventional, they seldom have the progressive interest or polish of the stories with subjects from the *söguöld*. There is nothing in Sturlunga which can compare in point of composition, compactness and brevity with the following dialogue from Ljósv.:

(Guthmund the Mighty is visiting Ofeig at Tjörnes and has seated himself on the seat of honour). Ok er borð kómu fram, þá setti Ófeigr hnefann á borðit ok mælti: "Hversu mikill þykki þér hnefi sjá, Guðmundr?"

Hann mælti: "Víst mikill."

Ófeigr mælti: "Þat muntu ætla, at afl muni í vera?"

Guðmundr mælti: "Ek ætla þat víst."

Ófeigr segir: "Mikit muntu ætla at hǫgg verði af?"

Guðmundr segir: "Stórum mikit."

Ófeigr segir: "Þat muntu ætla at saka muni?"

Guðmundr mælti: "Beinbrot eða bani."

Ófeigr svarar: "Hversu mundi þér sá dauðdagi þykkja?"

Guðmundr mælti: "Stór-illr, ok eigi munda ek vilja þann fá."

[1] Sturlunga II, p. 320.

Ófeigr mælti: "Sittu þá eigi í rúmi mínu."

Guðmundr segir: "Þat skal ok vera — ok settiz þórum megin." [1]

In great and decisive moments Sturlunga records many a memorable word. But its dialogue and description never have the intensity, the compression, the pathos, or the *ausseralltägliche* naturalness (to borrow Heusler's telling phrase) of the family sagas at their best. It is true, of course, that the dialogue acquired a certain amount of its literary finish when the sagas were written down. The writer had plenty of time to think of telling answers, to touch up the old dialogue and make it more forcible — if his bent lay in that direction. Evidently the author of Njála did something of this kind. But even such virtuosi in the

[1] Ch. XXI, 24—36. And when the table was set there Ofeig put his fist on the board, and spake, 'How big dost think that fist is, Gudmund?'

He spake, 'Very big!'

Ofeig spake, 'Thou wouldst think that there would be strength in it.'

Gudmund spake, 'Indeed I would.'

Ofeig answers, 'A heavy blow thou wouldst think it would give?'

Gudmund spake, 'Mighty heavy.'

Ofeig spake, 'What harm wouldst think it would do?'

Gudmund spake, 'Breaking of bones or death.'

Ofeig spake, 'How wouldst like that way of death?'

Gudmund spake, 'Very ill, and I should not wish it to happen to me.'

Ofeig spake, 'Then do not thou sit in my seat.'

Gudmund says, 'As thou wilt,' and he sat down on the other side.

(The translation in Origines Islandicae by G. Vigfusson and F. York Powell, vol. II, p. 424.)

saga style as the authors of Sturlunga could not give the dialogue the same vivid terseness that it gained by living for generations in the mouths of the people. The art of dialogue must have evolved in the process of oral narration. This, indeed, is indicated by several of the variants, especially the two versions of Ljósv. The Icelandic sagamen must have been exceptionally good story-tellers, who recited the sagas with vigorous realism.

There seems to be no doubt that the process in Iceland was the same as in Norway: the dialogue which belonged to contemporary tradition was preserved all the way through until the stories were written down, being merely conventionalized and polished as time went on. But we have seen that in the Norwegian tradition conversations might sometimes be invented, and in the Icelandic family sagas there are likewise plenty of conversations which are clearly fictitious. Dialogue can be used as a means of giving information, although what is told could not really have been said in conversation on the occasion. In Bjarnar Saga the sister of Björn's father says to him: "I have a son here called Thorfinn; him I offer to you as a companion." But she could not have used these words, for naturally Björn knew his own first cousin. Or again, dialogues may serve a purely literary purpose. They bridge over gaps between incidents, indicating and interpreting states of mind and feelings which are aroused by one action and lead up to another. In fact the dialogue helps to explain, account for, and knit together the events. Accordingly conversations often occur in places where it is necessary to tell what is in

people's minds; or where no action takes place on the stage, but events take a new turn in consequence of something said by two people to each other in private.

As we peruse the family sagas we cannot help being surprised at the number of important and decisive private conversations which are known to the chroniclers. Sometimes we can see from the context that no one could have known what was said, and that the conversation could not have been part of the contemporary tradition. In Bjarnar Saga we read how Thord Kolbeinsson inveigled Thorstein Kalfsson into an attempt to kill Björn. But Thorstein was killed instead; and Thord naturally kept the matter secret. Nevertheless the narrator pretends to know the very words that Thord and Thorstein said to each other in private.[1]

Nobody could possibly know what Olaf and Sigrid, in the Hávarðar Saga, said to each other on the morning when Olaf was killed, yet the story gives us the whole conversation in the first person.[2]

Sometimes there is external evidence that the dialogue is unhistorical. In the episode about Ingolf in Glúma, Ingolf and Glum go out alone late in the evening, and the story tells us what they talked about. Then Ingolf goes to Thorkell at Hamri, and again the story is able to relate what they said. When Ingolf returns to Glum there is yet another conversation. But all this happened in secret, as we see from the context. It is significant that, for these secret happenings at night,

[1] Boer's edit. p. 43, 4—26.

[2] Björn K. Þórólfsson's edit., p. 12.

the story-teller has had recourse to motifs derived from a familiar type of mediaeval legend.[1]

In Hœnsa-Þóris Saga Herstein and Thorkell Trefill went after bedtime to Gunnar Hlifarson. They took him outside and sat down on either side of him, on the skirts of his robe, so that he could not get away from them. Then follows the entire conversation which serves to explain why Gunnar is willing to accompany them to Thord Gellir. But this episode, in which two men take another out into the courtyard and seat themselves on the skirts of his robe, occurs again in Laxdœla, ch. 75, 11—23, and much the same thing is found in Eymundar þáttr (Flat. II, pp. 130—131). Hœnsa-Þóris Saga is late, and as a great deal in the passage concerning the wooing seems to be invented, it is possible that this feature of the private conversation was borrowed from Laxd. In other words, a literary motif was introduced — as was quite a common practice in the later sagas. Similarly we find dialogues in stories which, from the nature of their subject matter, must be mainly fictitious, for example the tale of Thorolf Sleggja and his twenty cats (Vatnsd., ch. 28); here we are informed what Thorolf said both when someone could hear him and when no one could possibly have done so.

In oral tradition it is a time-honoured trick of the trade to interpolate a piece of advice or a prediction which will throw light on what is to follow in the story, thus enabling the hearer more easily to grasp the bearing

[1] See Gustaf Cederschiöld, Kalfdråpet och Vänpröfningen; Finnur Jónsson, Litt. hist.[3] II, pp. 232—236; and my paper in Festskrift til von Sydow, pp. 207—214.

of the succeeding incidents. Sometimes the advice given will describe coming events in such detail, that the author is compelled, when he comes to them, to say that everything happened exactly as so and so foretold. We meet with this trait again in the family sagas. In Ljósv. Gudmund the Mighty gives the following advice to his wife as they depart from the wedding, where she has been simulating illness: "Now we will go home, and you must stay in bed for a week, but get better slowly. I will come and talk with you from time to time." Whereupon they ride home, "ok fór sem Guðmundr gerði ráð fyrir" (XIII, 114—118). In the Heiðarvíga Saga the foster-father of Bardi foretells in detail what will happen to them on the journey to Borgarfjǫrðr. Then there is Njál's long speech to Gunnar of Hlíðarendi before Gunnar's departure to Dalir to prosecute Hrut. Njál gives a highly circumstantial account of all that will happen, in a lengthy, continuous speech which has been described as a "monstrosity".[1] And when we come to the conversation between Gunnar and Hrut, "fóru orð þeira mjǫk sem Njáll ætlaði" (ch. 23, 5). There are several other cases (see Heinzel, p. 194), and now and then this traditional literary device is abused, as it is in Njála.

Now conversations are particularly difficult to remember correctly and repeat with accuracy. They are only too easily distorted and forgotten. Naturally many insignificant and pointless sayings included in contemporary tradition would soon drop out. One might infer, therefore, that dialogue would become scantier with the advancing age of the tradition. And this, no doubt,

[1] Heusler in Thule 4, p. 15.

would happen if tradition were capable of remaining strictly historical; for no new dialogue could then be composed in place of what had dropped out. The contrary, however, is the case. We have seen, in comparing parallel passages of the Íslendinga Saga and Arons Saga, that the latter, though further away from the events related, had more dialogue. And this is the usual state of affairs. Hvamm-Sturlu Saga has 15 per cent of dialogue. Þorgils Saga ok Hafliða, which is older, has 22 per cent, and the family sagas proper have a still higher percentage. Gunnlaugs Saga has 27 per cent, Hœnsa-Þóris Saga 36, Valla-Ljóts Saga 44, and Hrafnkels Saga no less than 53 per cent. The percentage is similar in the short stories about Icelanders, known as *þættir* (episodes).[1]

This shows the enormous importance of the part played by dialogue in the development of the Icelandic family saga. When we find that more than one-half consists of conversations, we understand that we are dealing here with the most telling stylistic expedient, known to oral tradition, for putting life into the narrative and giving inner coherence to the events related. Nevertheless the artistic use of dialogue eventually degenerated in the same way as most of the other features which raised the Icelandic family saga above the commonplace, and it ended by becoming a mannerism. One need only look at some of the later recensions of saga texts to see how the story was diluted by the interpolation of vapid conversations.

[1] Certain sagas have a lower percentage; Þorst. s. Hv. has 13—14% and Reykd. puts so much into indirect speech that there is only 6—7%.

Up to the present our investigation has been restricted to single episodes. We must now advance a step farther, and study the combination of episodes which forms a saga.

And here again, as in the study of isolated episodes, our method must be to take contemporary historical tradition as the point of departure and inquire how the subject matter was arranged.

In the accounts people give of contemporary events, material and immaterial things are usually mixed indiscriminately. Only what strikes the popular mind as remarkable or *sǫgulegt*, however, is likely to be remembered. So much drops away that in time nothing remains save a few fragments of the story as it was first told. Nowadays oral historical tradition quickly assumes the form of short anecdotes, remembered more for the sake of the point than for any historical information they may contain. But in early days, when there was no writing, oral historical tradition was the main source of information regarding the lives of one's forefathers. Even if much was lost, and such accounts were devoid of any natural epic continuity, there were often chronological, or preferably biographical and genealogical links, which kept the whole together and preserved the consecutiveness of the story. A number of episodes or facts were associated with a certain man or family, or else with events that had happened in a particular parish or at a particular epoch. According to the standpoint from which such events were viewed, they might turn up in different contexts, with the result that the same thing might be related in several sagas.

Here, however, there is an important distinction

between an historical account and a narrative composed by a literary artist or shaped in accordance with artistic principles and aims. For, as everybody knows, one of the great differences between history and fiction is, that history often gives us a number of disconnected events, without revealing their inner connection or the forces behind them, while a work of art calls for perfect lucidity, a full exposition of motives and causes, and a firmly-welded structure. Sir Walter Scott, who wrote both history and historical novels, saw this very clearly. In his preface to the Abbot he writes: "In life itself, many things befall every mortal, of which the individual never knows the real cause or origin; and were we to point out the most marked distinction between a real and a fictitious narrative, we would say, that the former, in reference to the remote causes of the events it relates, is obscure, doubtful, and mysterious; whereas, in the latter case, it is a part of the author's duty to afford satisfactory details upon the causes of the separate events he has recorded, and, in a word, to account for everything."

The Icelandic family saga shows many signs of being based upon an historical source of oral tradition, even in the matter of its composition.

In the first place it has the unequal character which shows that some things have been forgotten and that others have firmly impressed themselves upon the memory. At one time it will dilate upon a theme; at another it will brush aside an important event with a few words; sometimes, again, it will omit to furnish the information we expect. Reykd., for instance, tells us in detail how Thorleif Melrakki found out that

Hanef was a sheep-stealer, but can only spare two lines to say that the case was brought into court and that Hanef was sentenced to outlawry as a thief. There was nothing unusual to relate about the latter incident, and the saga-writer did not feel inclined to elaborate the account of an ordinary lawsuit as the author of Njála so often does. Reykd. does not explain how Skuta set himself to avenge his father and killed two men; evidently the details of these two murders had been forgotten in the oral tradition. Eyrb. does not tell us anything at all about what happened in the end to such an important person as Steinthor of Eyrr. In Ljósv. it is difficult to see what part the frequently named spy Rindill plays in Gudmund the Mighty's expedition to avenge himself on Thorkell Hákr. This obscurity was inherent in the oral tradition, for we find it in both of the versions. Similarly it is not clear why Gudmund died so suddenly. And there are many things of the same kind.

Even the circumstance that the sagas frequently take it for granted that something is common knowledge, although it has not been mentioned before, seems traceable to oral tradition; here such omissions were of regular occurrence, and the author would not always be conscious of the need of an explanation when a fact was mentioned for the first time. Steinolf in Gull-Þóris Saga is anxious to buy "the good sword." There is no previous allusion to any sword; but we have other reasons for knowing that the oral tradition had no doubt as to which sword was meant.

In the next place we see in the family sagas, as in other forms of historical tradition, that the subject

matter is so diverse, even in carefully harmonized sagas, that we can distinguish different sources. We can recognize a difference between things that happen in Iceland and things that happen in other countries, the latter being frequently stereotyped and miraculous. In the Icelandic matter we can distinguish between dry genealogical information and other information presented in a fuller and more finished form. In this latter material it is possible to trace a number of popular legends which must have lived independently in the mouths of the people, not always in association with the more biographical family traditions. In Hrafnkels Saga there is one of the common legends which explain the origin of a place-name (ch. I). Legends of this kind survived through their association with the place and the name; and we can see that the legend in Hrafnkels Saga existed as an independent story by comparing it with the Landnáma, where we encounter it in a somewhat different form which does not fit in with Hrafnkels Saga (at any rate in its present shape). In Egils Saga we have allusions to several forms of the story which tells where Egil hid his treasure. These are variants of one of the usual treasure legends; we can see from the context which variant the author follows when he enters into the details of the hiding of the treasure.[1]

In addition we must reckon with the *lausavísur* (single verses), which in virtue of their fixed form may have kept alive episodes of various kinds, and may

[1] Axel Olrik has clearly demonstrated the different sources in Egils Saga; see Nordisk Aandsliv, pp. 85—87. Cf. also Neckel in Mitteilungen d. schles. Ges. f. Volkskunde XI, pp. 42—44.

sometimes have been of extreme importance in sagas where the hero was a skald.

The subject matter of the family sagas is not only unequal and diverse, but episodic, like all other family traditions. At times it hangs together so loosely that portions could be cut out without being missed. In regard to Bjarnar Saga, Finnur Jónsson writes that "it represents a sort of anecdotal accumulation of separate occurrences"; [1] and W. H. Vogt has distinguished a number of separate independent stories in it.[2] The first part of Reykd. does not fit in at all well with what follows, and is all the more inappropriate in this place inasmuch as the next part resembles it closely both as to the motif and the characters. That it is included does not betoken lack of imagination on the part of the author, but fidelity to the tradition he found current in the countryside. And the only connection between the first portion and the rest of the story is the fact that several of the persons in it reappear later on.

In the case of the Eyrbyggja Saga it has more than once been suggested that certain parts have been lost. Gudbrand Vigfusson holds that chapters 13, 14, 17, 25, 28, 29, 40, 47, 50—55, 63, 64 are interpolations. Finnur Jónsson considers that several of these chapters are original; on the other hand he argues that ch. 24 and a number of shorter passages in several other chapters are later additions. Blöndal is of opinion that the book was originally much longer, but that most of the

[1] Litt. hist.[2] II, p. 418.

[2] Arkiv 37, p. 42 ff.

later portion has been lost.[1] The Ljósvetninga Saga, again, may be termed not so much a saga as a conglomeration of sagas, and it looks as if one version lacked three of the episodes. All this is so familiar that we involuntarily ask ourselves, if the construction of a saga appears to be exceptionally good, whether literary invention has not played a larger part than usual — as, for instance, in the case of Gunnlaugs Saga or the Bandamanna Saga.

If we inquire what it is that welds together all this episodic and heterogeneous matter, we discover that the medium is the same as in other forms of family tradition. First and foremost, we have biography and chronology; events group themselves round a person, a family, a community; certain things happened before, others after. Legends, again, can be employed to explain moods and incidents. Gudmund the Mighty's mistrust of his brother is explained, as we have seen, by the old migratory legend about striking at a fly on someone and injuring or killing the person in doing so; and the legend of Polycrates' ring is used in the Skraddar tale to account for the poverty of Olav Austegard. Conversations, also, serve to bind the material together; the remarks which are put in the mouths of the various characters prepare the way for subsequent events, or furnish an explanation of them. This artifice is found in its most primitive form in predictions, warnings and admonitions; in dreams which

[1] Festskrift til Finnur Jónsson, p. 15 ff. See also Björn K. Þórólfsson's observations on the Droplaugarsona Saga, pp. 53—54 of the same publication.

are related and come true; or in the giving of advice which looks far ahead. In a more artistic form the dialogue often serves to reveal traits of character which account for the behaviour of the person in question as the story proceeds.[1]

Lastly an entire saga may be subordinated to a destiny-motif or a luck-motif (*hamingja*). This will give a definite colour to the whole narrative, maintaining the continuity from first to last, as in Glúma and Vatnsd. Here, however, the research worker must walk warily, lest he imagine that he can detect a point of view or a connection which is not really there, but can only too easily be read into the text.

In speaking of the language and style of the sagas we noticed that the influence of the oral story appears in stereotyped expressions and idioms which crop up every time the same, or similar, features occur in the narrative. But this form of assimilation is carried still further. Not only is the language used in one episode assimilated to the language in another; even the content — the action itself — in one part of the story will leave its mark on another, making the resemblance greater than it was before. In ordinary popular legends this process may be carried so far that a historical legend loses all its own individuality and is completely assimilated to the type. In the case of the Icelandic family saga we have no means of proving that this has taken place. It is sometimes easy, however, to see when the close correspondence between two series of events is due to assimilation. We may take a couple of examples. In Bjarnar Saga (ch. 33)

[1] See Nordal on Björn úr Mörk (Skírnir 1919, p. 141 ff.)

we read how, after the death of Björn, his slayers arrive at Holm:

Kalf entered the women's room where Thordis, Björn's wife, was, and told her that Björn had been killed: "Here," says he, "take this chain that Björn was wearing." She took the chain, and asked whether Thord was there. Kalf said that he was there too. "Then I must see him," says she. She went out of the women's room, went up to Thord, and, throwing him the chain, bade him take it to Oddny his wife as a keepsake. Afterwards they rode down the valley to Husafell; there Dálk stayed, but Thord rode to Vellir. Arngeir, the father of Björn, had come home. Thord told the tidings to him and his wife. She was outside washing a child's head. Thord untied Björn's head from the straps of his saddle and, throwing it towards Thordis, Björn's mother, bade her see whether she recognized this head, which, said he, stood in no less need of washing than the one she had been washing before. To that she made answer: "I recognize the head, and so do you; many a time did you go in fear of this self-same head when it was on the body. Go and take it to Oddny! She will esteem it more than the miserable little thing which is dangling on your neck."

Doubtless contemporary tradition had something to say about the manner in which the two women took the news of Björn's death. But no one can seriously believe that there can have been such a similarity in their behaviour. On the other hand it is very likely that the anecdote about one Thordis affected the anecdote about the other.

In Gisl. there is a complete correspondence between the story which tells how Vestein was killed and buried and that which tells how Thorgrim was killed and buried, including the assassination with a javelin in the chest, the extraction of the javelin, the conver-

sations when the news of the murder reached the neighbouring farm, the interment beneath a barrow, the brothers' conversation about the arrangements for the games, the fight on the ground where the games were held, and the verses which were composed, alluding to the murder. All this we get in duplicate.

The influence of oral tradition is often noticeable in the contrasting characters. In folk-tales we regularly have these 'opposites': the faithful and the faithless, the shrewd and the foolish, the poor and the rich, and so on. Several of the sagas show signs of the same tendency. In Gísl. the brothers Gisli and Thorkell are contrasted, and so are their wives. At Gisli the servants are foolish Thord and shrewd Gudrid; whereas at the neighbouring farm we have shrewd Geirmund and foolish Rannveig. Brothers are often opposites: Kormak and Thorgils, Grettir and Atli, Thorolf and Thorstein (Svarfd.), Thorstein and Jokul.[1] Olrik's "law of opposites" is evidently at work here, as in so many similar cases. In Egils Saga the antagonisms in the Kveldulf family are raised to a higher plane, being obviously regarded as inherited differences. But as a rule there is no such explanation, and probably they were created by the same forces which were responsible for the correspondences. Tradition always endeavours (if one may put it in that way) to secure the best psychological conditions for its survival among the many things which compete for a place in human memory. The easier a tradition is to remember, the more chance will it have in the struggle for existence. It is easier to keep two brothers apart in one's mind

[1] Heinzel, p. 257.

if they are unlike than if they are alike. It is easier, in a folk-tale, to remember three episodes of the same kind in an ascending scale, than three episodes which are quite dissimilar. It is easier to remember the incidents connected with the assassination of Vestein and of Thorgrim, when we are able to arrange these incidents in pairs.

Moreover, we frequently find that what is easiest to remember is also what is most valuable and effective from a literary point of view. Antagonism creates dramatic tension and sharp outlines; correspondence gives internal harmony and external balance. Thus there is a tendency to conventionalize in the composition, just as there is in the separate features of the narrative; but conventionalizing sometimes produces artistic effects of the highest order. In the case of composition we can see the same law at work that we observed in studying the episode: the artistic element tends to increase in the historical matter, or, to put it in another way, history tends to acquire the characteristics of fiction after it has lived for a time on the lips of the people.

It is quite true that the sense of literary unity and perspective was not highly developed in the Middle Ages. But to my mind several of the characteristic features of the Icelandic family saga are inexplicable, unless we are entitled to assume that it rests on contemporary historical tradition, and that this tradition has undergone the process of development ordinarily followed by oral records of history. On any other assumption, the astonishing blend of what is, artistically speaking, dead matter, with living masterpieces,

remains an insoluble problem. It is useless to found any theory upon the several episodes (*þættir*) which go to make up each saga; for as a rule it is impossible to explain the very points which stand in need of explanation, namely, why the episodes have become sagas, and why this or that episode has been included when it might have been — and indeed ought to have been — omitted precisely on grounds of composition.

But we are still confronted by several other questions. The first which calls for an answer is this: how could so vast a body of historical tradition survive for so long? For nowhere but in Iceland have such extensive family traditions been preserved. Before answering the question we must review the conditions in which these traditions lived on, and see what the people were like who kept them alive.

CHAPTER IV

THE STORY-TELLERS

It is well known that Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm drew a distinction between popular and literary composition. Popular composition (*Volksdichtung*) was, in some inexplicable way, the work of the whole people, while literary composition (*Kunstdichtung*) was the work of an individual author. This romantic theory has now been abandoned, but traces of it still remain. Thus a distinction is sometimes made between folklore and art; but in reality they overlap, for popular composition, which is one department of folklore, is itself a form of art. If the meaning of the distinction is that popular composition is unconscious, this seriously underrates the conscious art which has given us such masterpieces as the best of the popular ballads, folktales and legends.

'The people' in these cases does not mean every Tom, Dick and Harry of the countryside, but a small minority with literary or scientific tastes. Ballads, folktales and legends are not common property. The collector of folklore cannot find these things wherever he goes. He must seek out the minstrels and storytellers, the people who, as they say in Sætesdal, go in for that sort of thing. There are not many of them —

there never have been many; just as there never has been any superfluity of fiddlers or painters or wood-carvers in the countryside.

The men who take an interest in old tales are not all of the same type. Some have good voices and are fond of poetry; these are the ballad-singers. Others have a fertile imagination and a taste for the supernatural; these are the tellers of folk-tales. Others, again, have a predilection for history; they deal in 'true stories', and their bent is often towards study rather than literature.

The difference between the narrators comes out too, in the way they handle tradition. Some hand it on, as far as possible, in the form in which they received it. Some, who have a gift for scientific arrangement, are able to combine different stories and draw inferences from them. Others, having more creative genius, can mould and re-fashion the material, giving a more personal character to what they relate.

Again, there is a great difference in the way these story-tellers set about telling a tale. Some of them identify themselves so whole-heartedly with what they relate, that they will even laugh and cry. Of Hallvor Aakre, one of the best modern reciters of legends in Sætesdal, we read that "This old man went on with it as long as he lived; he was always in the mood to tell a story. At one moment he would burst out laughing; at another he would be on the verge of tears. The young people always gathered around him; they enjoyed watching him when he cried and the words would not come because of the lump in his throat." [1]

[1] Skar, Gamalt IV, p. 216.

Olav Eivindsson Austad (Sætesdal), who told folk-tales, used to experience it all so vividly that he would say of the princess: "A more lovely being I never saw." And August Schneider, writing of a woman in Byggland, says that "it seemed as if every folk-tale was one of her many personal experiences, which she could call to mind, and interrupt or go on with, just as she pleased. Whether it were a product of art or an innate gift makes no difference; the whole scene appeared to be so vivid and concrete to her mind's eye, that I should not have felt it all strange if one of the audience had asked whether she remembered what the princess was wearing on a particular occasion, or why she had not warned Oskefeise when the princess stole the fork from him. I do not know when either my eyes or my ears have derived so much enjoyment from the art of the story-teller." [1] Concerning a story-teller in Hjartdal Jörgen Moe remarks: "One cannot say that he *related* his folk-tales, he *played* them: his whole person, from the top of his head to the withy thongs of his shoes was eloquent; and when he came to the place in the story where Askeladd had won the princess and all was joy and wedding bells, he danced the "Snip! snap, snout, my tale is out" of the folk-tale to an old rustic measure." [2]

The story-tellers who throw themselves into their narrative in this fashion are usually the best. They make everything vivid and amusing — like the old woman in Gudbrandsdal, of whom it was said that

[1] Edda XIII (1920), p. 305.

[2] Samlede Skrifter II (1877), p. 191.

"when Old Rönnaug began to tell about old days, every word of it was like a fairy-tale." [1]

But even those who do not warm to their subject in this way are sometimes first-rate narrators. When Svein Hovden told about certain characters in his stories he had an ironical twinkle in his eye; but for all that he could make them stand out absolutely clear and vivid. Other story-tellers, however, will keep their subject so much at arm's length that they no longer feel themselves *at one* with the tradition, but more as if they were at *work upon it*, thinking it over, and giving an account of it. This is apt to have a detrimental effect upon the liveliness and dramatic vigour of the narrative.

One of the legacies of romanticism is the notion that the people who preserved oral traditions were not at all like the writers and research workers of our day, and that their methods had nothing in common with those of our modern authors and men of science. Oral tradition, with its variants and its conventionalizing tendency, certainly cannot be looked upon as a manifestation of a collective, impersonal or non-individual literary attitude; nor does it betray any lack of a scientific regard for truth. The difference between modern literature and science on the one hand, and popular tradition on the other is largely one of different conditions of life and upbringing.

Anyone who set himself to collect and investigate popular traditions could, *mutatis mutandis*, take or leave what he wanted — harmonize several variants, and so on, if he had the traditions clearly and firmly

[1] Olav Aasmundstad, Ovanum Helgefell, p. 26.

memorized, quite as well as he could if he had a pile of manuscripts or books on his writing-table. Just as we must assume that there was such a thing as literary composition in days when there was no writing, so also, we must assume the existence of scientific abilities and a taste for research in those days. In the nineteenth century it was customary to draw a sharp distinction between popular fidelity to tradition and the 'anti-popular' harmonizing and re-fashioning of variants in which authors and men of learning indulged. Sven Grundtvig protested against Landstad's texts of popular ballads because he had occasionally combined certain 'incompatible' variants. But on closer investigation this combination of 'incompatible' variants had a way of turning out to be the work of the people. In collecting folklore I have myself found, on more than one occasion, that ballad-singers and reciters of folk-tales had enriched their variants by drawing upon several sources of tradition and using them to supplement one another. Several legends which explain the import of names indicate the connection there may be between the legend and certain forms of more or less scientific speculation.

We must not take it for granted that the story-tellers felt bound to adhere to any particular patterns of style or rules of composition. Axel Olrik's 'epic laws' are sometimes misinterpreted. They represent what is normal in popular composition, but they are not laws in the sense that their non-observance would exclude a man from the artistic fraternity of oral story-tellers. It is less misleading, perhaps, to follow Heusler and term them *Neigungen* — tendencies. Another of

Olrik's laws which is sometimes employed in the study of the Icelandic family saga is that of "parallelism in the action", the distinction between one-stringed and two-stringed narrative being used as a means of distinguishing between the tradition and the author. But popular literature is not quite so 'one-stringed' as Olrik supposed. Narratives of a strongly epic character are, naturally, apt to be 'two-stringed'. A good example is the Österdal folk-tale: "Eleven barrels of gold and one of salt."[1] This is the story of a boy and a princess who had run away from home and had the misfortune to become separated. First come two entire pages which tell how the boy fared; then the story proceeds: "But now you shall hear what befell the princess after the boy had left her in the wood," and we get a page and a half about her. In the case of traditions which are governed by other than purely artistic considerations, the law of 'parallelism' is still less applicable. A single illustration will suffice. Vonde-Aasmund Rygnestad is in Holland, and while there he learns that his betrothed has been forced to wed another man. Thereupon he returns home, and we have a description of his ride up the valley. But the story tells us what is going on simultaneously at home in Valle: how the wedding is held and the bride manages to prolong the ceremony till Aasmund arrives.[2] The art of the popular story-teller is quite competent to *fara tveim sǫgunum fram* — to tell two stories at once.

The romanticists held that variants were the result

[1] Sigurd Nergaard, Eventyr, p. 13 ff.
[2] Skar, Gamalt II, p. 15.

of a continuous process of unconscious recasting. A number of small modifications, taken together, might eventually alter a whole story so much that it became almost unrecognizable. Modern research, however, is not convinced that the process was always continuous. It is true that there were many small alterations (things forgotten, misremembered etc.); but as conscious reshaping was responsible for the chief changes, the development might take place at a bound. In popular literature we see examples of what Andreas Heusler demonstrated in the case of the Nibelungen poetry: both the *Brünhildsage* and the *Burgundensage* 'changed their skin' several times while still being handed down orally and before they became epics. Kaarle Krohn observes in his Method (under *Gesetze der Umgestaltung*) that "a real re-fashioning and creative rearrangement does not take place bit by bit, but at a single stroke and once for all" (p. 90).

It may be useful to give an example of this. Professor Walter Anderson has studied about 560 variants, culled from Europe, Asia, Africa and America, of the story known as "Kaiser und Abt". The various written forms of it extend over a long period of time, from the ninth century to our own day. We have thus an excellent opportunity of following the evolution of the story at different times and in different places. The course of events seems to have been as follows. The tale came into existence about the year 600 in Western Asia, and, briefly, the original story ran thus. A certain king coveted the riches of his courtiers. Accordingly he gave them three questions to answer: How many stars are there in the sky? Where is the centre

of the earth? What does God do? A man of the people answered instead of the courtiers, exchanged clothes with the king, seated himself on the throne, and killed the king. This earliest form gradually spread all over the East, and it has remained almost unaltered in Mesopotamia and Ceylon for more than a thousand years (right up to our time). It reached Western Europe not later than the first half of the thirteenth century.

At the beginning of the fourteenth century we get the first great reconstruction (*die erste grosse Umwälzung*). The courtiers are replaced by an ecclesiastic. In accordance with this change, the rather involved ending is dropped, and in its place we are told that the ecclesiastic is deposed and succeeded by the man who gives the right answers. But the third question is closely bound up with the original ending; accordingly this is replaced, in Germany, Italy and possibly elsewhere, by the question: How far is it from good luck to bad? The two first alterations spread very quickly (*mit ungeheurer Schnelligkeit*) over both the west and the east of Europe.

About the year 1500, or possibly even earlier, we get the next great reconstruction. In place of the question: "How far is it from good luck to bad?" or "What does God do?" (in countries where this was still current) we now have: "What am I thinking about?" With incredible rapidity (*mit unglaublicher Schnelligkeit*) this new question spread all over Europe and part of Asia, everywhere superseding the older question.

A little before 1700 the third great change occurs.

The king's covetousness, as the reason for his hatred of the ecclesiastic, had long been out of date and replaced by other motives. We now get a new feature in the inscription on the abbot's house: "I have no sorrows." This arose in West Europe, and before long it had spread in every direction, all over Europe and across into Siberia.

Apart from these larger alterations, numbers of more casual and local variations came and went.

These results are very important from the point of view of method. We have, at the same time, wonderful continuity (in the variants from Mesopotamia and Ceylon), and an endless swarm of ephemeral additions. Finally there are permanent changes which almost everywhere supersede the older forms. After one of these reconstructions the normal form of a tradition may no longer agree with the original form; and a comparison of the modern variants may take us no farther back than the last reconstruction. Were we not in possession of the older written versions of "Kaiser und Abt," we should be unable to go back beyond the normal form current in the nineteenth century.

We are chiefly indebted to Russian folklorists for studies of the personality of story-tellers, showing how their emotions, temperament and outlook on life are reflected in their tales. In this connection Mark Asadowskij's book entitled *Eine sibirische Märchenerzählerin* (FFC, no. 68) deserves particular notice. The author tells us that story-tellers of all the types I have described are encountered in Siberia; and he mentions one woman, Natalja Ossipowna Winokurowa, who was unquestionably possessed of literary talent of a

high order, which enabled her to frame her tales with great psychological intuition and conscious art. She delighted in telling them, and was proud of her artistry. Being unable to read or write, she had picked up her stock of stories wherever she had had a chance of hearing them.

The most notable feature of her method was the intensity with which she entered into the spirit of what she related; her tales were psychological, as Asadowskij says. She could see, as it were, right through what she described, and sought to lay bare the mainsprings of action. Some turning-point in the narrative, to which other less talented story-tellers only devoted a few words, became in Winokurowa's mouth a complicated scene, full of intimate psychological touches. By her gestures, by her play of feature, by a smile, she could express highly complex states of mind; and the important point is that she regarded this as part of the story, exactly in the manner of the Icelandic family sagas (e.g. the well-known *glotti við tǫnn*, of Skarphedin in Njála). Her sense of true realism in life was also shown in the way she placed the characters of her tales in the setting she knew from her own world, and in the way she described their appearance. The broad current of everyday life in Siberia, Asadowskij says, flowed through all her stories. In reading his account of this woman one is reminded of many of the features that raised the Icelandic family saga to such a high literary level.

The desire, on scientific or literary grounds, to go beyond the material furnished by tradition, may lead to the amalgamation of compositions which readily

combine together for some reason, or other. Such fusion is very common in folk-tales, and is seen in the Finnish Kalevala songs. It is particularly apt to occur when there are several stories about the same person. The lengthy ballads of Marsk Stig and of Robin Hood were built up out of older and more episodic material.

In devoting so much space to the general question of tradition and the story-teller, my intention has been to furnish the proper background for the discussion of historical tradition. We have seen that it is as impossible for the whole people to preserve popular literature as it is for them to produce it. Instead, we must assign the rôle to individual men and women, each endowed with special gifts and interests, each with his own attitude towards tradition. When we come to historical records, a scientific interest in history acquires special importance. The folk-tale is told to amuse or perhaps to inculcate a moral; the popular ballad is associated with singing and dancing; the mythical legend allures us with the supernatural, and links on to current popular beliefs. But historical tradition deals with bygone days and people who are no longer alive; the links with popular beliefs, if any, are few and far between. The artistic element may, of course, be strong; but it may also be entirely absent in some parts of the narrative. Thus historical tradition, if it is to survive, must be held up by different supports from those which sustain the other forms of popular literature.

Now the only possible supports are those which are founded on the scientific interest in history: the

desire to know something about olden days, and paint in a historical background to contemporary life. This interest need not be allied with any particular literary taste or ability; it may be more or less restricted to what lies nearest — the family, the neighbours — or may have a wider scope, embracing the district or the whole country. Here the previously mentioned individual tastes and capacities are manifested in various ways. The man who gave me the best variant of the Skraddar tale knew no ballads or folk-tales. But Hallvor Bjaai was a poet and singer. And "he was every bit as good a story-teller as he was an adept at singing. He knew all about his own family, and every family in the district around. He could reckon up everything, small and great, from time immemorial".[1] "The family at Viki in Sætesdal, used to tell true stories, generation after generation."[2]

In the old days when few could write and books were seldom seen, there were other and better conditions for oral historical tradition than there are now, particularly in the direction which is decisive in the present connection. Nowadays, those who have scientific tastes, and are in a position to cultivate them, stock their minds with material from books. Instead of staying in their country homes they go to school, and acquire their knowledge there. They become teachers, professors, and the like. If they are interested in history, they read historical works; they are not disposed to listen exclusively to the tales of the story-tellers of the countryside, indeed they learn only too

[1] Skar, Gamalt I, p. 108.
[2] Skar, Gamalt IV, p. 210.

soon to mistrust such stories. Of late, in fact, oral historical tradition has lost its strongest support. This change is what has made it so difficult for us to imagine scientific research and reflection in connection with purely oral tradition. Nowadays the student writes down the old stories and then sets to work to study them, and it never occurs to him that people in days when there was no writing had the same taste for research. Yet in every generation there is sure to be someone with a scientific bent, in a family or a parish, who likes to store old tales in his mind, think them over, and put his own construction upon them.

If we ask what there was to show for this work of collection, the answer is not in doubt: there were large groups of traditions, either separated or more or less related according to the strength of the biographical or causal connection. The events centre round families, but there are no hard and fast rules for what is included in the story. One result of the methodical collection of material is that the family traditions often have a comprehensiveness which no other branch of folklore can rival. Family sagas are most nearly related, in virtue of their content, to popular legends. But no ordinary popular legend approaches the length of the biographies of Vonde-Aasmund or Harde-Aslak. The popular literature which comes next in point of length and fullness of incident is the folk-tale. But even this cannot compare with the longest of the Norwegian family sagas. Evidently there were no natural artistic boundaries in early times, to keep the subject matter within limits or divide it up; for wherever the interest in history was great and widespread, the re-

cord became increasingly full and comprehensive. In the case of family traditions, family pride and a variety of practical considerations (odel laws, regulations regarding consanguinity in marriage, and so forth) came to the aid of curiosity and the desire for knowledge. This is a point which must be considered later in estimating the reliability of traditions. Here we need only notice that, so far as the subject matter was concerned, there was nothing to counteract the comprehensive tendency of the historical traditions of the countryside. They might embrace so much that a very good memory indeed would be required to retain it all.

On the other hand there is no doubt that a highly retentive memory could learn one or several narratives as voluminous as the Icelandic sagas, and remember the whole practically word for word. It has often been argued that people's memories were so much better in the days when there was no writing; and no doubt there is a good deal in this theory, because they were obliged to train their memories more. There were many things which had to be preserved in the memory if they were not to be lost for all time; and we know that what is carefully memorized with the intention of retaining it for a long time stands the best chance of being remembered.[1] The perfectly reliable accounts of what primitive people can remember are astounding. We read, for instance, that the natives of North-west Queensland could remember a series of songs which were so long that it took more than five nights to get

[1] See Guðmundur Finnbogason's paper "Langminni" in Festskrift til Finnur Jónsson, pp. 1—5.

through them. But stranger still was the fact that these songs were in a language unknown to the singers; moreover W. E. Roth was able, by comparing the notes he took among tribes living more than a hundred miles apart, to prove that the natives sang the words correctly. Similar cases have been met with in South and North America.[1] Of course it is easier to remember something one can understand properly. In India long poems were kept alive for centuries in men's memories. Cæsar tells us that in the Druidical Schools in Gaul the pupils had to learn so many verses by heart that some of them had to remain at school for twenty years. It was forbidden ever to put the text of these poems into writing. Among the ancient Irish there were story-tellers who had a large stock of lengthy tales in prose; here, too, it took many years to memorize them, and the stories had to be learnt in a fixed form. Other examples could be added.

We need not, however, go back to times when there was little or no writing in order to find instances of memories which could easily retain an amount of material comparable to an Icelandic saga. If we take the best known Norwegian ballad-singers and story-tellers, we find that Jorunn Björnemyr, of Mo in Telemark, knew about 80 popular ballads, which would fill a large volume. The *Eventyr og segnir* (folk-tales and legends) of Knut Loupedalen include 53 tales and 6 legends obtained from Olav Tjönnstaul, which make up a large part of the whole collection. Anne Golid,

[1] Lévy-Bruhl, Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures (1912) pp. 118—119.

Olav's grandmother, was a great ballad-singer, but she also knew about 100 tales; by way of comparison it may be mentioned that Asbjörnsen and Moe's collection only contains 60. Nor is it literature only that is remembered in this way. M. B. Landstad tells us that in Vinje "there lived half a century ago a man named Olaf Hovdestad who had such remarkable quickness of apprehension and retentiveness of memory that he could repeat any sermon he had ever heard." [1] Moltke Moe mentions a native of Telemark who could recite, practically verbatim, a sermon by Jörgen Moe which he had heard a long time previously.

This power of remembering does not necessarily deteriorate as a result of much reading. James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, composed — he could not write at that time — the ballad of Gilman's-Cleuch, which has no fewer than 88 verses, and recited it to Sir Walter Scott. Three years later Scott was able, Hogg tells us, to repeat the whole ballad without mistake or alteration, although he had neither heard nor seen it in the interval.[2]

Macaulay had a phenomenal memory. He was very proud of it, and ready at any time to display its powers. Trevelyan relates the following incident:

"He was always willing to accept a friendly challenge to a feat of memory. One day, in the Board-room of the British Museum, Sir David Dundas saw him hand to Lord Aberdeen a sheet of foolscap covered with writing arranged in three parallel columns down each of the four pages. This

[1] Fra Telemarken, p. 60.

[2] Elze, Walter Scott (Danish edit.), p. 241.

document, of which the ink was still wet, proved to be a full list of the Senior Wranglers at Cambridge with their dates and colleges, for the hundred years during which the names of Senior Wranglers had been recorded in the University Calendar. On another occasion Sir David asked: 'Macaulay, do you know your Popes?' 'No,' was the answer, 'I always get wrong among the Innocents.' 'But can you say your Archbishops of Canterbury?' 'Any fool,' said Macaulay, 'could say his Archbishops of Canterbury backwards,' and he went off at score, drawing breath only once in order to remark on the oddity of there having been both an Archbishop Sancroft and an Archbishop Bancroft, until Sir David stopped him at Cranmer." [1]

When we consider these examples — and many others from diverse countries and times could be quoted — we no longer feel that there is anything surprising about the conclusion we reached in other ways, namely that large portions of the Icelandic family sagas, and even entire sagas, could be told in practically the same words by different story-tellers. If a native of Telemark to-day can remember a sermon long after hearing it preached, an Icelander in the Middle Ages would be equally able to remember a speech he had heard at the Althing. If La Motte could remember a scene or a play *verbatim*, an Icelander could equally well remember an important conversation *verbatim*. If Macaulay could remember the Senior Wranglers and the Archbishops of Canterbury, one of the learned men of Iceland could very well remember genealogical tables and lists of law-speakers.

[1] Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay II, pp. 201—202.

Modern parallels are instructive also, if we wish to understand the form assumed by oral tradition in the days when writing was unknown. Taking authors of modern times who have been men of letters and students, besides possessing good memories, it is interesting to see how far their literary works show a resemblance to the Icelandic family saga.

Let us return to the two who have been mentioned on account of their exceptional memories: Sir Walter Scott and Lord Macaulay.

Scott belonged to an old family, and was proud of it. From childhood upwards he had listened to stories of his forefathers. His grandmother, sitting at her spinning-wheel, told the boy about his countrymen in olden days — about Wallace and Bruce and other heroes of the Border Country.[1] All through his life he went on collecting every scrap of information he could find about his family, his clan, and the Border Country. Visible memorials of the past, oral traditions of all kinds, books, manuscripts — he knew every one of them, remembering them all perfectly, and making use of them, as Lockhart says, to "realize his own ancestry to his imagination."[2]

The material thus collected became the stuff of what he called his "day-dreams". It combined to form a living picture of his ancestors and of their life in past times. He cherished this picture, and constantly endeavoured to make it clearer, more complete, and richer in detail.

Nor did he keep his lore to himself. Leslie Stephen

[1] Elze, p. 56.
[2] X, p. 199.

says that "he had been a teller of stories before he was well in breeches;" and it has been observed that "he was the king of all narrators of history, able to transmute the most ordinary material into a diamond."[1] That his learning was stored in his mind, and so often related, was bound to leave its mark on his books; it explains, moreover, to some extent, the rapidity with which he could write. To quote Leslie Stephen again: "Probably the most striking incidents of his books are in reality mere modifications of anecdotes which he had rehearsed a hundred times before, just disguised enough to fit into his story. Who can read, for example, the inimitable legend of the blind piper in 'Redgauntlet' without seeing that it bears all the marks of long elaboration as clearly as one of those discourses of Whitfield, which, by constant repetition, became marvels of dramatic art? He was an impromptu composer, in the sense that when his anecdotes once reached paper, they flowed rapidly, and were little corrected; but the correction must have been substantially done in many cases long before they appeared in the state of 'copy'."[2]

As a historian he was neither pragmatic nor philosophic, but epic. He represented Oldbuck as saying that history is half fiction. He spoke of his book on Napoleon as if it were a Waverley novel. His "Tales of a Grandfather", written purely from memory, have a strikingly epic character. He himself said in regard to them that no one could tell who was in the right and who was in the wrong. Instead of opinions or

[1] Elze, p. 380.

[2] Hours in a Library I, p. 147.

points of view, we find strict epic objectivity. In his novels, on the other hand, we are conscious of the historian and the practised story-teller. His forte did not lie in the preparation of well thought-out plots. Often his books are a string of episodes, described with the utmost brilliance, but without that strict sequence of cause and effect which inevitably presses on to a final denouement. More than once, indeed, he came within sight of the end of one of his novels without knowing how it was going to conclude.

If Scott shone as a writer of fiction rather than a historian, Macaulay is better known as a historian than a writer of fiction. He had a memory like Scott's, the kind of memory which enables a writer to store and digest his material in his mind. He, too, speaks of day-dreams and castle-building. In his mind, he says, the past readily assumed the shape of a romance. The smallest details were important in his eyes, in case they served to give vividness to the picture. He liked to see the places associated with historical events, so that the topography might be clear to his mind's eye. He would invent long, animated conversations between the great men of bygone days, "in the style, if not with the merits, of Sir Walter Scott's," as he himself tells us.[1] His distinguished gifts as a raconteur and public speaker have left their mark on his writings. Jebb observes that the dominant characteristic of his style "is the close relation which it exhibits between the written and the spoken word."[2] His history of England was intended to be "a true novel",

[1] Trevelyan I, p. 184.

[2] Macaulay, p. 45.

which should supersede for a few days the last fashionable novel on the tables of young ladies. As a writer he had a tendency to dwell upon the concrete features of the events he described; their abstract and universal aspects did not interest him in the same degree. As Jebb says elsewhere: "his constant endeavour was to make the past live again before his reader's mind" and his greatest gift as a narrator was "the power of telling a story dramatically." It is not surprising that, as Leslie Stephen remarks, "with him, history is nothing more than a sum of biographies." [1]

It is not without interest, in connection with the subject we are studying, that this capacity to visualize a scene with great vividness, which was undoubtedly one of Macaulay's strong points as a writer, had also a tendency to lure him from the path of his much discussed 'accuracy'. In his own opinion, "my accuracy as to facts . . . . is due to my love of castle-building." Nevertheless we can see how the subject matter, and especially the dialogue, was moulded in his mind and thus acquired a more telling form. J. Cotter Morison gives a good example of this in his biography of Macaulay. When Robert Francis was on the scaffold he said a few words about his wife, repelling a scandalous report concerning her relations with Dangerfield, for whose murder he was to be executed. He declared that he was sure she had never seen him in her whole life, and added, "besides that she is as virtuous a woman as lives; and born of so good and loyal a family, she would have scorned to prostitute herself to such a profligate person." In Macaulay's

[1] Hours in a Library, II, p. 372.

version this statement is altered and dressed up thus: "She was, he said, a virtuous woman, she came of a loyal stock, and if she had been inclined to break her marriage vow, would at least have selected a Tory and a churchman for her paramour."

"This," says Cotter Morison,[1] "is the result of treating history in the style of romance"; and both Gladstone and Leslie Stephen have shown that the mental stores upon which he drew were apt to be coloured by his fancy. Here again we can trace the influence of his day-dreams. Towards the end of his life he writes: "I find that I dream away a good deal of time now; not more perhaps than formerly; but formerly I dreamed my day-dreams chiefly while walking. Now I dream sitting or standing by my fire. I will write, if I live, a fuller disquisition than has ever yet been written on that strange habit, — a good habit, in some respects. I, at least, impute to it a great part of my literary success."[2] Evidently he was alluding to something of the same kind when he said to his sister: "I am no sooner in the streets than I am in Greece, in Rome, in the midst of the French Revolution."[3] He would converse with his sister, Lady Trevelyan, about people, whom they only knew through having read about them in historical or biographical works, as if these people had been personal acquaintances. When Lady Trevelyan married, her husband, who was not so well read in this kind of literature, could not at first understand who some of these curious

[1] Macaulay, p. 160.
[2] Trevelyan II, p. 451.
[3] Ibid. I, p. 183.

characters were, with whom his wife and brother in law seemed to be on terms of such intimacy.[1]

I have intentionally kept very largely to quotations in describing Scott and Macaulay, in order that we may feel certain that the characteristics here mentioned are genuine and conspicuous, and not imagined and exaggerated because we approach the subject with a definite aim and the hope of finding what we want. Somewhat similar traits are noticeable, too, in the case of other authors, who have been compelled for some special reason to depend upon their memories. Prescott had such weak sight that from his early years he could do little in the way of reading and writing. He had, therefore, to store the material for his books in his mind, where he arranged it and put it into final shape before dictating it. He trained himself in this way until he was capable of composing no fewer than 60 pages, in their final form ready for press, an amount approximately equivalent to an Icelandic family saga of medium length. As a result of this method his historical works display many of the best features of oral narration. What makes him so interesting and easy to read is his power of vivid description, and the artistic way in which he arranges the incidents — his mode of thinking out a chapter "on the same structural plan as for a romance or a drama."[2] Perhaps it is no mere accident that so many writers of epic — of the mythical or historical type — have been blind. Although the outer world was shrouded in darkness they received that compensatory inner vision

[1] See the account of this in Trevelyan I, pp. 131—132.

[2] A History of American Literature II, p. 127.

of which Milton speaks, the vision which is all the clearer because it is not distracted by a host of unessential details.

If we turn to Iceland in the thirteenth century, when some at least of the family sagas were written, we find that there were two historians who had both a scientific and a literary bent. These were Snorri Sturluson and Sturla Thordarson. We shall speak only of the former, as Sturla mainly recorded contemporary events, without drawing upon old tradition.

Snorri resembled Macaulay, and to a lesser degree Scott, in being an active participator in public life. He lived right in the centre of things, and had personal knowledge of much that was *sǫgulegt*. Like Macaulay and Scott, he must have possessed an exceptional memory. The best proof of this is the enormous number of lays that he seems to have remembered almost *verbatim*. He knew them so well, that he always had them handy whenever he wanted to fill out or correct the old manuscript sources that he used.[1] These sources are largely extant, so we can see how he handled the material. We find that he possessed scientific judgment, and on the literary side, insight into character, grasp of the connection between events, and the power to combine scattered elements into a symmetrical whole. As his most effective means of revealing underlying motives and tendencies in the train of events, he resorted to speeches and dialogues. His conception of history was clear and vivid, and he knew how to make his chronicle exciting and dramatic.

[1] See Sigurdur Nordal's statement in Snorri Sturluson, 6th chapter.

In other words his work possessed the best features of the anonymous family saga. His Heimskringla has often been truly described as one great family saga, "a sum of biographies" with an inner coherence, displaying the technique of the sagas throughout. A comparison of the Heimskringla with its sources shows how the subject matter assumed a new aspect in consequence of Snorri's, often quite small, modifications. In his hands, as in Sir Walter Scott's, the commonplace became a diamond; and we see how the value of an old story could be enhanced by a good narrator without any substantial deviation from the original.

The Icelandic family saga shows signs, in many important respects, of having been put into shape by persons who possessed some of the best qualities of Snorri, Scott and Macaulay. There is a breadth and amplitude, a true liberality of mind, showing that the narrators included men of culture who were also men of affairs. Like the authors of the popular ballads they must have been men of good social standing, probably grandees or their followers; they were conscious of being chiefs, or at any rate felt that it behoved them to see events with a chief's eyes. This is apparent from the way in which they speak of household retainers and men of lesser rank. The vast number of names and incidents mentioned in the sagas testify to the excellent memories of the narrators. And they could store so much in their memories because they took a scholarly interest in facts. They desired to know what had happened in such and such a family, what records of remarkable events were preserved in

this or that parish, what the state of affairs had been at this or that time. They delighted in antiquarian studies, in old customs, and visible memorials of the *söguöld.*[1] Moreover their desire to realize history vividly extended even to the topography. Occurrences are placed in their due setting in the landscape and the narrative teems with geographical names. The clear conception of the persons, the ability to reveal a man's character by his words, and to make his actions accord with his character, shows that the sagas were once the subject of "day-dreams" and that not only an historian but a man of letters had a hand in fashioning them. During their long journeys on horseback the chroniclers would be able to live the sagas over again, as Macaulay did on his long walks, and when they came to places mentioned in the story, the whole scene would appear to their mind's eye in a new and clearer light. The adjectives used by Ari in speaking of his informants are equally appropriate to other Icelandic narrators. Hall Thorarinsson in Haukadal was *minnigr ok ólyginn* (truthful and had a good memory); Thurid daughter of Snorri Godi was *margspǫk ok óljúgfróð.* Speaking of Ari Frodi himself, Snorri Sturluson says it was only natural that Ari should be *sannfróðr at fornum tíðendum bæði hér ok útan lands, at hann hafði numit at gǫmlum mǫnnum ok vitrum, en var sjálfr námgjarn ok minnigr* (truly informed of what happened in old days both here and abroad, for he had gathered his knowledge from old and wise men,

[1] They often contrasted antiquity with their own days, using such expressions as *Þat var Þá síðr, sem Þá var síðr*, etc. See Döring, Bemerkungen über Stil und Typus d. isl. Saga, p. 18.

and he himself was always eager to learn and a man of good memory).

We know nothing about the individuals who related the family sagas. But we can sometimes get a glimpse of the *last* of the narrators; in other words, of the one who fixed the form of a saga, or whose form of it was fixed in writing. Thus we have the author of Njála, with his predilection for including as much as possible in a single saga, his preoccupation with law, and his remarkable facility for crisp dialogue. The author of Egils Saga has a bent towards national history and politics. Hrafnkels Saga shows a marked predilection for topography, in which the author is evidently interested. Reykdœla is the compilation of a conscientious collector of tradition with the tastes of a student but no particular gift as a narrator. Eyrbyggja's author is specially interested in visible memorials of the past and takes a delight in mentioning and describing them. Of the site of an old court of law he says: "There is yet to be seen the Doom-ring, where men were doomed to the sacrifice. In that ring stands the stone of Thor over which those men were broken who were sacrificed, and the colour of the blood on that stone is yet to be seen" (ch. 10, 8). Again, he tells us that the bodies of two berserks were carried out into the lava and were cast into the "valley which is in the lava, and is so deep that one can see nought therefrom but the heavens above it, and that is beside that self-same road." [1]

The same antiquarian curiosity is noticeable in several of the sagas. Of Björn Hitdœlakappi and the

[1] Ch. 28, 25. Cf. Kålund, Beskr. I, p. 433.

thong King Olaf gave him we read: "And long after, when his bones were disinterred and removed to another church, this thong round Björn's leg had not rotted, though all the rest was rotten; and it is used now as a girdle for the eucharistic vestment at Gardar in Akranes."[1] We get some idea of the interest taken in Egil Skallagrimsson if we read the passage in Egils Saga which describes the finding of his skull:

"There they dug over the churchyard and found human bones under the site of the altar. These bones were much larger than ordinary human bones, and according to what old people say it was pretty sure that they could only be the bones of Egil. The priest, Skapti Thorarinson, who was a learned man, lived there at that time. He took Egil's skull and placed it on the churchyard fence. The skull was of unusual size, but even more remarkable was its weight. Outside, it had ridges all over like a harp-shell. Skapti wished to test the thickness of the skull. He took a good-sized hatchet and swinging it with one hand brought the poll of it down with all his strength on the skull, meaning to smash it. The skull showed a white mark where he struck, but neither dint nor crack. We can understand from this, that such a skull was not readily injured by the blows of lesser men, so long as skin and flesh held together.[2]"

The feelings of the people at Mosfell when they saw this skull must have been very similar to those of Paulus Diaconus when he saw the skull of King Kunimund; or to the feelings with which modern research workers discovered from the skeleton of Svein Estridsson that he must indeed have been lame, as an Icelandic saga says he was.

[1] Bjarnar Saga, Boer's edit. p. 23 15—18.

[2] Egils Saga, ch. 86 2—6.

Macaulay's statement that "my accuracy as to facts is due to my love of castle-building" applies, as a general principle of psychology, to all story-tellers who have to remember a long historical narrative without the aid of written records. The historical personages must stand out clearly before the mind's eye. The picture is built up of materials supplied by tradition. But once it has assumed a clear, coherent and vivid shape, the picture helps the narrator to remember the different elements of which it is composed. Thus a person will habitually be visualized with the same traits in every situation; they become as firmly fixed in the mind as the long nose of the troll in the folk-tale, which we cannot forget because we always *see* him with that nose.

But the very fact that one can see every thing so clearly with the mind's eye involves the danger that one may depart from tradition. One may unintentionally supplement the traditional picture by adding fresh features. If as a child one has been told about Skarphedin, and heard his mouth and nose described, but not the colour of his hair, one will naturally visualize him with hair of a certain shade, say flaxen. This trait may become an inseparable element in the conception of Skarphedin, and without realizing it one may include the new feature when telling others about this hero. A self-invented feature thus finds its way into the tradition, and becomes inseparable from the older elements from that time forward.

Much the same thing occurs in the case of events preserved in tradition. If a man has in his mind a long narrative held together by chronological

or biographical links, he will ponder, in his day-dreams, on the correlation of events, fill up gaps, and perhaps, like Macaulay, invent brilliant conversation between the persons, to elucidate points which were previously obscure. By welding the story more firmly together and making it clearer he will improve his own chances of remembering it. But from the standpoint of history this method has the drawback that it corrupts tradition. What was merely an explanation or an elaboration of the original, may become part of the tradition itself when next it is told. Not only so, but elements which refuse to fit into the connected whole that one has mentally created, and which cannot easily be made to square with interpolated explanations, are liable to be sloughed off and forgotten. This is the psychological background of the normal process of conventionalizing, elaboration and fusion, which we approach here from a different angle. It is also the psychological explanation of the sudden leaps or 'mutations' which occur from time to time in popular composition. When the narrator is not tied down by historical considerations, he can mould the subject matter in his day-dreams until it assumes a new and improved form in his mind; next time he tells the old tale it is a new one.

Tradition does not live in the mind alone, but on the tongue as well; it is not only remembered but related. If we wish to understand the art of saga-telling we must not only study the narrator and his characteristics, but the audience who listened to him, and his relation to his hearers.

Here we are prone to be misled by the customs

of our own day. We think of a man collecting his material, working it up, and writing a book, without being compelled at every turn to think of an audience. Students of tradition in these days are often industrious, retiring men, with no particular gift of oral narration, though they may be quite competent to edit a story and explain their views in writing. As authors they may rank high. But in the days when there was no writing, the man who merely collected material and thought it over, but had neither the will nor the power to tell a story, simply had no audience, and therefore very little influence upon the growth of oral tradition. A man who had no audience of his own could, of course, intervene to correct other people, but he was not a force in the fashioning of tradition, however great his learning and literary taste might be. The very conditions which produced oral tradition excluded research workers of a certain type. On the other hand people were always ready to listen to a good story-teller. Such a man narrated often, to many hearers, possibly in many places. His words produced more effect. As related by him the narrative was easier to remember, with the result that it was learnt by a greater number of people.

Moreover, the sagas were intended not merely to instruct, but to provide amusement, *skemtan*. It was felt, as we hear in regard to a tale in Brandkrossa Þáttr: *þótt sumum þykki hon efanlig, þá er þó gaman at heyra hana* (Austfirðinga sǫgur, p. 186). The expression *sagnaskemtan* occurs more than once. And no doubt it was the case in Iceland, as everywhere else, that people liked best to hear exciting stories

which were full of lively and dramatic incident. A story-teller is unconsciously influenced by the taste of his audience. There must be a certain sympathy or *rapport* between the speaker and his hearers. But this sympathetic relation can only be established if he takes into account their general outlook, and accommodates his tale to their knowledge, habits, and predilections. He is under the control of his audience to a far greater extent than a writer is under the control of his unknown, future readers. A writer does not feel the gaze of many eyes upon him, nor can he see the effect produced by his words.

In this sympathetic relation between the story-teller and his hearers there lurks a danger which threatens his narrative both in its artistic and in its historical aspects. The demand for what is amusing and exciting may tempt the story-teller to take liberties with his material in order to make it more effective. Thus nuances which few can appreciate are dropped, features which appeal to the popular taste are elaborated; the commonplace soon creeps in.[1] In proportion as history can be made to resemble a continuous dramatic story, it becomes more suitable for oral relation. This may lead to artistic developments which practically relegate the historical element to the background. The story-teller in past times was, however, subject to a check which we shall consider later; and this made it difficult for him to depart from what was recognized as historical. He was not supposed to make his story more arresting by altering accepted facts, though he was at liberty to fill out and touch

[1] Cf. Hans E. Kinck, Mange slags kunst, pp. 10—13.

up material which already formed part of the tradition. This means that his *rapport* with the hearers produced, in certain cases, the same results as the re-shaping indulged in by the story-teller alone with his day-dreams. And this reminds us, from another point of view, of the Icelandic family saga, with its remarkable fidelity to tradition in spite of the attention paid throughout to artistic form.

CHAPTER V

SPECIAL ICELANDIC FEATURES

In the preceding chapters I have endeavoured to show how psychological and social factors in general govern the form and content of tradition.

But the word general must not be interpreted in the sense of universal. We must take into account the varying gifts and tastes of different nations. We must take into account, too, the fact that social differences and degrees of culture may exist before the days of writing. A civilization with no script does not necessarily mean a uniform civilization; and the fact that writing is adopted in some fields does not prevent the oral tradition in other fields, where it is not in use, from continuing at the same level that it reached in the days before writing came in, or even from rising to a higher one. Abyssinian oral tradition flourished at a time when script had been adopted for several other purposes. The legends of Sætesdal were related orally for centuries by people who were quite accustomed to reading books and penning documents. In Iceland there were written records when the art of story-telling was at its zenith; and the priests both in India and the Gallic countries preferred to teach certain branches of learning without the aid of books.

We must evidently distinguish in each case between what is common and what is not; and it is a fact that we find nothing anywhere else like the Icelandic family sagas. Our next task is, therefore, to discover the special conditions which raised the Icelandic family saga to its unique position in oral tradition.

It seems natural to suppose that the special factor in this case was the practice of reducing the saga to writing. Family sagas existed in the Norse countries and elsewhere; but only in Iceland were the oral historical traditions written down just as they were, without revision or alteration. Apparently the sagas received the same treatment as the heroic poetry; for though a number of lays which were reduced to writing in Iceland were composed in Norway, and some of these were of South Germanic origin, neither the South Germanic nor the Norwegian lays were ever written down, so far as we know, in the countries where they originated. And this notwithstanding the fact that poems like the Atlakviða, Hamdismál, and Brot af Sigurðarkviðu are among the most remarkable Germanic compositions of early times.

In one respect the reduction of the sagas to writing was absolutely decisive. If the Icelanders had waited, like the people of other countries, until the nineteenth century before putting their historical material into writing, we should have had no Icelandic sagas; for the mediaeval historical records preserved by oral tradition in Iceland to-day are not more numerous than those which are to be found in several other countries. We should thus have been in the same case in regard to Iceland, as we are in regard to

Norway — able to infer from various evidence that historical records once existed, but knowing nothing for certain about them.

It is probable that the Norwegian family traditions known to the colonists ranked high both in historical accuracy and literary form, and that they were very much fuller than the Neo-Norwegian family sagas; nevertheless there are certain facts which show that Iceland, and Iceland alone, was the true home of the family saga in the narrower and more technical sense of the term. That the Icelanders had special aptitudes and tastes in this direction is clearly indicated by the circumstance that they still have an exceptional *flair* for genealogies and memoirs. Even in the Middle Ages they were renowned both in Norway and Denmark, for their great historical gifts. The concrete proof of this is that the lives of the Norwegian kings were written by Icelanders. Moreover, in its artistic aspect the Icelandic family saga rose to heights rarely attained except in a golden age and in one or two countries. It is obvious, therefore, that specially Icelandic conditions must have been responsible for this state of things. The reasons for the wonderful development of saga-telling in Iceland have often been discussed, and attention has been directed to a number of more or less important factors. In the course of these discussions significance has been attached, from time to time, to various circumstances which, though not peculiar to Iceland, have helped to foster the art of story-telling elsewhere, e.g. long winter evenings, story-telling at social gatherings, an aristocratic community, family pride, and family feuds.

But what we really need to investigate are the *special* political and social conditions in Iceland which may have exerted an influence upon the saga-teller's art during and after the time of settlement.

Now the first circumstance likely to lead to a special development of this ancient art was undoubtedly, as has often been pointed out, the quality of the settlers who came to the island. We have seen already that they were people from just those parts of Norway in which the sense for historical tradition remains strongest to this day. The emigrants were not, as is so often the case, the poorest inhabitants, or those who for some reason could not keep up in the struggle for existence at home. On the contrary, many of them were wealthy and self-respecting, exactly of the type to cherish old traditions and keep alive the memory of their ancestors. Moreover the mixture of stocks would naturally give the Icelanders a wider outlook, greater mental elasticity and deeper psychological insight.

In other respects, however, the period of colonisation must have been an unfavourable one for the preservation of memoirs. Only by hard and laborious toil could the colonists adapt themselves to the new conditions and earn a living. The settler's lot is never an easy one. Bread-winning alone must have taken more time than it did in the mother country. And what is even more important, the removal to new surroundings would be apt to extinguish the traditions which were bound up with the old home. For memories of the past are associated with places as well as persons. In this respect family tradition resembles

ordinary folk-legend. But when ordinary legends migrate they often attach themselves to new localities. A family tradition cannot do this; once rooted up, it has less chance of survival because it has lost the stability of local associations. Famous sites become mere names, which are hard to remember; they are no longer vividly present to the mind as a background that was easily remembered so long as there was ample opportunity to see the actual places. When people live in a parish where historical events have taken place, the sight of the localities associated with them will recall these events to mind, and the story will be more often told. Moreover the traditions of a place are remembered better when we can give them their proper local setting. Anyone who has been in Iceland can prove for himself how much easier it is to remember the Icelandic family sagas after he has seen the places mentioned in them. Eyrbyggja, for instance, becomes more coherent, and its separate episodes are more easy to understand, after visiting Snæfellsnes. This explains why family traditions are seldom current outside the parishes to which they belong. As a rule Norwegian family sagas are closely associated with one parish, and are seldom met with farther afield than the neighbouring parishes. Many stories were told in Fjotland about Trond Hoskuldsson of Kvinlog, who lived there. His wife went to Rauland, and her descendants there told some of his adventures which had happened in that parish, but apart from these they knew little or nothing of his history.[1] The Iceland sagas usually seem to have been written by people with local

[1] Norsk Folkekultur 1922, p. 21 ff.

knowledge. Where tradition lived on at a distance from the scene of events the place names were liable to cause trouble, as in Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings. So indispensable, indeed, is this local association, that it may be the most tenacious part of tradition and survive after the story proper has ceased to exist. Thus the Sætesdal legends about Harde-Aslak have become disintegrated in recent times, but vestiges of them remain, connected with certain place names.

When a whole family has migrated to a new home the historical traditions seldom appear to go back to a time prior to the migration. The family history in the old home is either forgotten altogether, or remembered in disconnected fragments, or transformed into myths. This explains why the traditions of so many nations begin with a migration. The first thing that Jordanes can tell us about the Goths is that they emigrated from Scandinavia; he gives the name of the king in whose reign this happened, but mentions none of his predecessors. Paulus Diaconus begins his history by relating something very similar about the Lombards. Kolmodin's previously mentioned studies of Abyssinian tradition are particularly interesting in this connection. The genealogical tables usually go back to the time when the village was founded. Up to that point they seem to be reliable, and there are practically no variants. But directly we go farther back we find ourselves on uncertain ground. This happens with such regularity that Kolmodin divides the material into two portions, one late and reliable, the other early and unreliable, the point at which they diverge coinciding

with the date of settlement in the village.[1] The Herjedal genealogy begins, as we have seen, with Herjolf Hornbrjot, who was the first settler in the valley; it tells us why he went there, but does not even say whose son he was. Traditions from the „Fin-forests" of Norway and Sweden usually start with the name of a Finlander who came from Finland and cleared a bit of ground to live on.

The Norwegians who emigrated to Iceland left their homes very far behind them. In spite of the frequent allusions in Icelandic literature to voyages to Norway, the majority of the Icelanders had probably never seen the places their ancestors came from; especially as the relations of many of them lived far away from the parts visited by the Icelanders when they went to Norway. Iceland and Norway are so unlike that the people in the new country would soon feel that they were different, and the ties which bound them to certain Norwegian parishes would very soon be broken.

Further, the area in Norway from which the colonists came was a very large one. Emigrants are mentioned from as far apart as Halogaland and Vikin, and they hailed from parishes inland as well as on the coast. Although the bulk of them were from Hordaland, Rogaland and Agder, these districts are so large that the emigrants came from widely separated homes. Nor did they leave in large batches, a whole parish at a time. As a rule they sailed to Iceland in small parties, and we often hear that some members of a family

[1] L'établissement au village est le point décisif (Archives 5: 3, pp. VIII—XII).

went, while others remained behind. In Iceland the settlers spread all over the country, so that we find people of the same family in very different places.

The result of all this was, that the family environment, which is so essential a condition for the survival of family memoirs, was completely disorganized. Those who belonged to the same family were not often able to assemble in any great numbers to exchange reminiscences or provide an enthusiastic and well-informed audience for a good story-teller, if there happened to be one in the family. Perhaps each household stood alone as a repository of old historical records. This would be a real drawback. It is a well-known fact that traditions do not thrive as well on isolated farms as they do in populous hamlets. When I began to collect folklore, I imagined that the ancient lore would have the best chance of survival in places where the inhabitants were cut off from intercourse with other people. I soon found, however, that so far from this being the case, there was much more to be found in the populous parishes. Johannes Skar and others had the same experience. And the reason is obvious; the more people there are who take an interest in ancient lore, the more frequently will the old days be discussed, and the better choice will there be of story-tellers who can relate the old traditions. At a gathering of the inhabitants of a new settlement in Iceland those present would not, as in Norway, have a great many reminiscences in common, and be closely connected by ties of blood or marriage. On the contrary, they might come from quite different parts of the motherland, and they could not compare notes with the

enthusiasm which springs from relationship, local knowledge, and the inborn love of home.

Moreover, the old records lost much of their practical value outside Norway, when, for example, it no longer mattered who had the next odel-right to the farm. In early days the subject which was most likely to interest the colonists was the actual settlement; they would be anxious to know how they had been brought together and how the new settlement had come into existence; why they had emigrated and when and how they had obtained their lands. The practical importance of tradition is often bound up with such questions. Again the stories told would include those which were of general interest because their appeal was mainly artistic; or because they were not too closely associated with particular parishes and could therefore be regarded as common property.

Then came a time when the colonists had settled down. A new local environment had come into existence. New family ties had been formed, and once more there was a store of historical memories in which all could share, in which the majority were interested, and which formed a natural subject of conversation at social gatherings. The inclination and the capacity to tell stories had not been lost, even if the circumstances of the time of settlement had allowed some of the older traditions to sink into oblivion. Indeed the story-telling gift, which the Icelanders inherited, was enhanced by their new surroundings. The actual effect of the settlement was that the process of substituting new historical traditions for older ones — which is continuous in all oral historical tradition — suddenly

became so rapid and far-reaching that the development seems, to a modern student of the subject, like a new creative effort or a break with the past. The Icelandic tradition reflects these conditions very clearly. In most cases the Landnáma does not mention the ancestors of the settlers. Occasionally we are told the name of a man's father or grandfather, but beyond that the record seldom goes. If four or more Norwegian generations are given, we are apt to get back to legendary kings, such as Harald Hilditonn, Ragnar Lodbrok, or King Frodi. The family sagas contain extraordinarily few reminiscences of Norway. There is a sharp distinction between what happened before the days of colonisation and what happened after—which does not mean that nothing *sǫgulegt* had happened in Norway, or that the Icelanders had suddenly and for some unknown reason acquired a passionate interest in family traditions dating from approximately the year 930, but simply that the traditions from before 870 had been overtaken by a landslide. The information relating to times before the settlement is usually so meagre that the padding is easily recognizable if attempts at expansion were made later.

As the Icelandic family traditions suddenly broke off, so to speak, at a comparatively recent date, the newer traditions came for a time to bulk very large in the corpus of historical tradition. It was natural and, indeed, inevitable that the native records of Iceland should display the 'newness' and robust realism which we find in the written family sagas.

If, on the other hand, we turn to literature of more general interest, we find that it was much better able

to survive in the settlement period, as it had a suitable environment from the first. The *fornaldarsǫgur*, with their stories of kings and earls, and wonderful happenings on long expeditions in foreign lands, embodied a great deal of tradition from the *fornǫld*. They more or less replaced the more local family traditions; as may be seen, among other things, by the way in which the Icelanders considered themselves to be akin to heroes of the *fornaldarsǫgur* like Ketill Höng, Grim Lodinkinn, An Bogsveigir and Hromund Greipsson. The heroic poetry with common Nordic and Germanic themes lived on; Gisli Sursson's verse is a good example of the hold that these old lays maintained upon men's minds. The fact that the Icelanders so soon monopolized, as it were, the office of court skald, indicates that they must have carried on the old poetic tradition without a break.

The conditions during the period of settlement serve, also, to explain why the Icelandic traditions of the Norwegian kings were so much fuller, precisely at the time when that period came to a close and the new Icelandic environment was created. This was the time when the antagonism which had existed from the first between the Norwegian kings and some of the more powerful settlers gradually died down. When Icelanders went to Norway they liked to visit populous centres, and to make the acquaintance of kings and nobles. They associated with courtiers and other people in the King's service — politicians and men who were versed in Norwegian national history. They often travelled up and down the country, and in this way they obtained a grasp of the conditions which few Norwegians

could rival. The traditions of the Iceland families dating from after the settlement were interwoven, in several cases, with the lives of the Norwegian kings — as may be seen from the allusions to Icelanders in these sagas.

Once the Icelandic community had become established and settled conditions succeeded the difficulties of colonization, several factors rendered it easier for tradition to thrive in Iceland than elsewhere. Not only were many of the Icelanders picked men from the part of Norway where traditions seem at all times to have flourished, but every chief, or rather every influential *bonde,* acquired a position not unlike that of a petty king in his own territory. Naturally this increased their self-respect and family pride, and, consequently, their interest in the achievements of the family in past times. In Norway it was precisely the rich and powerful *bonde* families that possessed family sagas. Members of these families, who had been conspicuous for their strength, or had in any way taken a leading part in the affairs of the countryside, were accorded the richest memorial laurels. Their biographies were of interest, not only to their descendants, but to many others as well.

Life in the Icelandic community presented that mixture of stability and order with change and incident which is another *sine qua non* for the growth of tradition. A certain continuity in vocation and local ties from generation to generation is a necessary condition for the preservation of family memoirs. That is why the family records in Norway are closely associated with the ancient odel-farms, several of which are still

owned by descendants of the heroes of the sixteenth and seventeenth century legends. But if in one generation we have, say, a farmer, in the next a sailor, then a merchant, and then a public official, the different generations see and remember less of each other. There are fewer persons to attest the tradition, which may thus lose its continuity.

A good example is furnished by the traditions of Agder and Telemark. The people of the inland parishes of Agder have many more traditions than those in the parishes on the coast, although they are all descendants of the same tribe. Obviously this is due to the far more varied conditions of life on the coast, where there are many forms of livelihood, where emigration has long been common, where there is much more novelty to revolutionize the time-honoured ways — in short, it is due to far-reaching changes of the kind which are everywhere sweeping away all the ancient folklore. The old peasant customs have been better preserved in the inland parishes of Agder and Telemark, where the same families have tilled the soil for generations. Yet the traditions in these inland parishes show that the inhabitants have by no means been isolated and mentally cramped. We can see that new impressions continually flowed in,[1] because these parishes kept up a lively intercourse with other parishes. There was no stagnation; the only respect in which they differed from the parishes nearer the coast was that the outside influences were not strong enough to break the continuity.

[1] See my paper "Litterære eventyr og segner i folketraditionen" in Maal og Minne 1918, pp. 89—105.

In Iceland the conditions were ideal for tradition. During the centuries which followed the period of settlement there was little immigration or emigration, and the work done from one generation to another was much the same. Social order reigned, and tradition could crystallize. Still there was enough variety and social intercourse to provide new material for the art of the story-teller. The family sagas give us a vivid picture of the lively communication between different parts of the country. Tidings ran quickly from place to place in spite of the long distances. The difficulties of transport were not so serious as we are apt to suppose. There were many passes over the mountains; above all there were none of the great forests which were among the worst obstacles to travel in olden times. We can see that communications were good, then as now, from the circumstance that there are hardly any dialects of Icelandic. Intercourse with foreign lands, especially Norway, was unbroken; and both the Icelanders who went abroad and the Norwegian or other visitors who came to the country had always something new to tell.

Besides the stability of its family life and its facilities for intercourse Iceland had another favourable condition for the growth of tradition, which Hans E. Kinck paradoxically calls "Iceland's lack of population." The mainspring of the family sagas is biography: the character sketch, the life-story of the individual. But in busy, populous centres, or in states with a strong central administration, the individual is not so prominent. The historian is obliged to deal with people more in the mass, and impersonal or abstract forces

play a greater part in his descriptions of events. If he fails to appreciate this difference, and groups the events round individuals, these persons are liable to bulk too large, to be seen from too far off, and even to assume supernatural dimensions, like Charlemagne. But the Icelandic family sagas are to a large extent the history of Iceland. They are not in any way inferior, but are fully on a level with any other matter which was of vital interest to the Icelanders. They have a value of their own, comparable to the facts recorded by Ari Frodi in his Íslendingabók. Kinck has thus compared the conditions which produced the Italian novel with those which produced the Icelandic family saga: "There are many factors which make the novel of southern lands artistically inferior to our saga. In such an environment, among such teeming populations, a family saga was an impossibility — the stir and unrest made it so; to have undertaken that intimate and painstaking study of the different families would have been out of the question . . . . In the saga, on the other hand, where the delineation of the main persons (and with them the course of events) was facilitated by the fact that there were comparatively few families to be considered, and that the characteristics of these families could really be seized and retained, there developed a keener eye for contrasts of behaviour and character, and for dissimilarities generally." [1]

Political life in Iceland was not of the kind in which tradition suffers through general unrest and revolutionary changes. On the contrary, it centred round a political

[1] Mange slags kunst, pp. 4—5.

institution which exerted an immense influence in the evolution of tradition. Every summer people assembled from all parts of the country for the Althing. For most of them the journey to and from the Althing took several days, and they often travelled in large companies. On such journeys it would be natural for the travellers to talk of the olden times. They had nothing particular to do, so they could talk all day and while away the evening by relating sagas. As Thidriks Saga tells us: "*Sagnaskemtan eða kvæða er með engum fékostnaði eða mannhættu. Má ok einn þar skemta mǫrgum mǫnnum, sem til vilja hlýða. Þessa skemtan má ok hafa við fá menn ef vill. Hon er jafnbúin nótt sem dag, ok hvárt sem er ljóst eða myrkt.*"[1] Every parish that the travellers came to opened up fresh vistas associated with some well-known story. The scenery of Iceland often permits one to see across very wide stretches of country. Sometimes the scene of a whole saga, or even of several sagas, may be visible to the eye. We may suppose that the very conformation of the country aided in bringing the scattered records within the sagaman's range of vision, and thus gave him a comprehensive view of them. The sort of people who rode to the Althing would be the chief persons in the parish. They counted among their ancestors men who had ridden to the national assembly on important business, and had been active participators in much that was *sǫgulegt*. Nothing would be more natural, therefore, than to think and talk of journeys to the Althing in olden times, with all the reminiscences evoked by the

[1] Unger's edit. pp. 4—5.

mention of them. It always adds greatly to the interest of an old road if it passes by places with historical or literary associations. We have several examples from the Middle Ages, showing the importance for tradition of these journeys by large companies travelling together. Bédier has shown that the French heroic poems are closely connected in a number of ways with places along the routes of the pilgrimages. It was no mere chance that Chaucer put his Canterbury Tales into the mouths of a company of pilgrims on the way to St. Thomas' shrine in Canterbury.

At the Althing memories attached, so to say, to every tussock. While it was in session most of the people there, having little to do, could make the time pass more quickly by telling sagas. The most natural thing would be to relate what had happened before at the place where the Althing was held, and a number of sagas contain episodes of this kind. Moreover new things constantly happened at the Althing, and those who attended it could hear a great many items of news about what had been happening elsewhere. It was at the Althing that the Icelander skilled in saga lore learnt Harald Hardradi's *útferðarsaga* from Halldor Snorrason. The eager interest taken in all kinds of news may be judged from an incident, related in Hungrvaka, which occurred early in the *ritöld* (1135). The newly consecrated Bishop Magnus arrived in Iceland while the Althing was being held, and set out to attend it. The courts were sitting, but the parties to the various disputes could not agree. Then a man announced that Bishop Magnus had arrived. This pleased everyone so much that they deserted their

lawsuits and flocked round the bishop, who, making his way to the open space in front of the church, related to the people all that had happened in Norway while he was abroad; and they all agreed that he was a very eloquent speaker.

Story-tellers from every part of the country could meet at the Althing and learn from one another, thus obtaining new material [1] and new artistic inspiration. Very likely they competed in story-telling there. The fact that they had thus the opportunity to compare their tales is, no doubt, one of the reasons why the style of the sagas is so uniform throughout the island; it may also account for the high standard it attained. At all events we may feel sure that the regular journeys to the Althing, and the opportunities of intercourse afforded by them, gave the Icelanders a wider and more liberal outlook, and were partly responsible for the lucidity and distinction of the sagas.

In addition to all this, there was little difference between the ecclesiastical and the lay culture of Iceland. The special reasons which account for this state of things are so well known that I need not enter into them here. Suffice it to say that the ancient traditions were mainly bound up with the great families, from whose ranks the clergy were largely recruited. These ecclesiastics, however, did not lose touch with the world, or become absorbed in intellectual interests of another kind. The priests who could write were

[1] In Hauk Valdisarson's Íslendingadrápa we can see how one man might be familiar with the stories of heroes from all parts. Among others he mentions Gunnar of Hlíðarendi, Egil Skallagrimsson, Grettir, and the Droplaugarsons.

generally interested in the same subjects as the temporal leaders of the people, and valued ordinary family memoirs so highly that they deemed them worthy to be recorded in books, like the histories of the saints. This fact is of profound importance; for the Middle Ages did not afford many openings for men with literary tastes, who, as a rule, took orders. In Iceland, as in other countries, many of the authors whose names are known to us prove to be ecclesiastics. Of course there is no need to infer that those who reduced the sagas to writing were invariably ecclesiastics; but it is certain that the interest taken by the clergy in old memoirs was often the deciding factor which led to their preservation in writing[1].

[1] Well known ecclesiastics are mentioned in connection with saga-telling and genealogical lore. The priest Ingimund, in Þorgils saga ok Haflida, was a poet and a story-teller: *Ingimundr var fræðimaðr mikill, ok fôr mjǫk með sǫgur ok skemti vel kvæðum* (ch. 3). Of Bishop Thorlak Thorhallsson we are told that in his youth he was much occupied in study and prayer, but when not otherwise engaged he learned *ættvísi ok mannfræði* from his mother (Biskupa sögur I, pp. 91, 266).

CHAPTER VI

LOANS AND OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

A tradition which is based upon historical events does not live alone in the mind, but in company with other traditions of various kinds. These stories react upon each other's style, vocabulary, idioms, and motifs; indeed, one story may be influenced all through by another.

The Icelandic saga tradition co-existed with a host of other oral traditions in verse and prose. At the time when the latest family sagas were written, there was a large amount of literature, both of home and foreign origin. We have therefore to reckon with influences derived from written books as well as oral records, and, further, to distinguish between native and foreign matter.

Those who are inclined to look upon the Icelandic family sagas as a collection of books or literary works will search for literary models. If we assume that a saga was penned by an author, it will be natural to compare his work with other literature of the time, and to ask what books he read and used as models or in other ways. And if we hold that the Icelandic

family saga had its roots in an art of oral story-telling—which, however, was peculiar to Iceland—it will be no less natural to look for some foreign influence, to account for the difference between the Icelandic and the other forms of Germanic historical narrative.

Among the peoples with whom the Icelanders maintained relations were the Irish, who developed an art of story-telling which was in many respects like their own. The Irish tales were often very long, and there were professional story-tellers who knew a large number of these tales. Various resemblances have been traced between the Irish saga and the Icelandic saga. But on closer inspection most of these resemblances prove to be of such a general character and of such common occurrence in all story-telling that no special connection can be inferred.[1] Even when the resemblance appears to be of a more intimate nature, e.g. the use of verse in the sagas, it is chiefly external and outweighed by marked internal dissimilarities. Nor has any Irish saga theme been found in Iceland. Brjáns Saga is an Icelandic tale about events in Ireland; and even if there were an Icelandic-Irish story of the Battle of Clontarf, that is no proof that an Irish tale served as the model for an Icelandic one. Not one of the Irish heroes has found his way into the Icelandic tradition. There is no Irish theme even in the *fornaldarsǫgur;* we only find a few features borrowed from Irish folk-tales, showing that the northern people had the usual cultural intercourse with the Irish which admits of the migration of folklore from one country to another. It is impossible to produce evidence of the strong in-

[1] For this and what follows cf. Heusler, Anfänge, pp. 42—50.

fluence that the Irish stories must have exerted if they really altered the conservative and highly local Icelandic family traditions; in fact, it is difficult to imagine in detail how, having regard to the ordinary conditions for the growth of tradition, any such influence could have been brought to bear from a country which was so far away.

Andreas Heusler supposes that the Irish influence was of an external nature. The Icelanders saw that the Irish story-tellers related their tales to the chiefs, by whom they were paid and maintained like the royal skalds in Iceland; this gave them the idea of introducing the same custom into their own country[1]. Now it is not impossible that such an idea may have occurred to an Icelander here and there. But it is hardly likely that many Icelanders had heard the Irish story-tellers; and the number would be still smaller of those who were story-tellers themselves and could expect to gain anything by introducing a new custom of this kind. Imagine, too, the feelings of the Icelanders at home if a story-teller returning from abroad began telling tales in a new way! How would he establish any contact with his hearers? And if he did not narrate in a new way, it is difficult to see where exactly the novelty came in.[2] There is no indication that saga-telling was ever a special calling or profession or means of livelihood in Iceland. One can understand the introduction of a new literary fashion or style in connection with *writing;* what was borrowed in the case of *oral* narration was new subject matter, adapted to suit the tradi-

[1] Anfänge, pp. 48—49.

[2] Cf. Emil Olson in Nordisk Tidsskr. (Letterst.) 1918, p. 426.

tional art of the story-teller. This applies to prose; the case of poetry, which is subject to limitations of metre and music, is somewhat different.

It may seem strange that Ireland and Iceland should be the two countries in which the art of story-telling reached the highest level, and yet that neither should have influenced the other. But in view of the facts, the most probable explanation is that this art grew up on the same soil at a very early time, when a wide area was jointly inhabited by Germanic and Celtic tribes. Subsequently the favourable conditions in these two islands in the Atlantic carried the development further than elsewhere.

We have seen that there is reason to believe that several of the Icelandic family sagas were penned by men with a clerical training. These men might have introduced borrowed features from *the legendary literature* and *the historical books of the Bible* when they wrote down the Icelandic historical legends. But legendary features are seldom found (see, however, ch. 9, 10, 11 of the Hallfreðarsaga, where King Olaf appears three times to Hallfred in dreams). The influence of Esdras' vision has been seen in a verse attributed to Gisli Sursson, which has no connection with the text of the saga and was probably composed by an ecclesiastic at a later date.[1] There were many points of contact with the Scriptures. Just as the Icelanders treasured many stories of the period of colonisation, the Israelites had had their accounts of the journey to Palestine and the settlement of the country. In the Bible, too, there were stories of mighty men, battles

[1] See Paasche in Festskrift til Finnur Jónsson, pp. 200—202.

and deeds of heroism. The numerous lively dialogues and interpolated songs in the Bible remind one of the Icelandic family traditions. May not the Biblical narrative have been used as a model, and may not this furnish a clue to certain things in the Icelandic saga literature? But we look in vain for traces of Biblical style in the family sagas. I know of only one motif taken from Scripture. In ch. 21 of the Flóamannasaga we read of Thorgils' dreams: "Then it seemed to him that Thor led him to some cliffs where the surf beat against the rocks. 'In waves like these thou shalt remain for ever, except thou hold fast to me'. 'Nay,' said Thorgils, 'get thee gone, foul devil! He that redeemed all men with his blood will help me'. Then be awoke". This dream, which is clearly modelled on the temptation of Jesus by the Devil, may have been a feature of the underlying oral tradition. We meet with other cases of this kind. One of the Norwegian *huldre* legends is blended with elements taken from the story of the birth of John the Baptist.[1]

The lavish use made of genealogies in the family sagas seems to be a peculiarity connected with their reduction to writing, but this need not mean that any literary model was followed. It would be natural to group by themselves facts regarding family relationships which were not supplied in the story itself, but would help to make the account more intelligible. We know, moreover, that genealogical tables were among the first things to be recorded in writing in Iceland[2]; the saga-writer could make use of this written material in his own

[1] See Maal og Minne 1918, pp. 98—99.

[2] Islands grammatiske Litteratur I, p. 20.

work, in the same way that the later sagas made use of the Landnáma.

The *romantic sagas* which date from the first half of the thirteenth century, do not seem to have made much impression on the family sagas. As we should expect, their influence appears chiefly in the later sagas and in passages relating to foreign countries—the Spes episodes in Gretla, *hnotskógr* in Njála (ch. 87,21), and occasional details in descriptions of battles with vikings or giants. The romantic flavour about the first chapter of the Droplaugarsona Saga is certainly striking. Generally speaking, however, we may leave out the romantic sagas in studying the origin of the Icelandic family saga. We must look elsewhere for native traditions which may have exerted some influence upon it.

When we try to discover whether *other family sagas* have influenced a particular saga we are confronted by serious difficulties. This will be evident from what has been said already. The style is very much the same in all the sagas. The subject matter, too, does not vary greatly—possibly because life was much the same all over the island, and apt to be rather monotonous in its external aspects. Not only so, but this monotony was emphasized by the selection of incidents for inclusion in the sagas. The subjects deemed suitable for tradition were, to some extent, circumscribed by ancient rule and custom. Accordingly it is often difficult to tell what is original historical matter and what is merely a literary loan. Heinzel was the first to make the important distinction between *Auswahl aus der Überlieferung* and *Auswahl aus dem Leben*. We shall return to this point when discussing

the reliability of the sagas. In the present connection it will be sufficient to notice a few obvious cases of literary influence or loans from one saga to another.

The first question to be considered is whether a whole saga could be modelled on another. Heinzel is of opinion that the Bjarnar Saga and Gunnl. are so closely related that in all probability there was a literary model *(Typus)* for this kind of love romance.[1]

Two men, both skalds, are in love with the same fair lady. One of them is betrothed to her, and the betrothal is to last for three years. The two skalds travel abroad at the same time, and meet at the courts of foreign princes. The prospective bridegroom fails to return home in time; whereupon the other skald seizes his opportunity and marries the lady. The marriage is not a happy one, for the two who had been betrothed still love each other. In the end the two skalds fight, the lover is slain, and the wife mourns for him ever after.

The plots of these sagas are so much alike that it looks as though the same outline was used in both cases. But this does not mean that one of the sagas was modelled on the other. Both have a historical point of departure, and there is nothing extraordinary in a man taking the opportunity of stealing his friend's betrothed. This may have happened on many occasions in Iceland; it was one of the themes that aroused interest and was easy to put into the form of a saga. With writers of romances it has been one of the favourite and most usual subjects in all times. On the other hand we can easily see that these sagas *influenced*

[1] Beschreibung, p. 142.

each other. Since their subjects were fundamentally alike they were liable to influence each other from the very first; and in this case they might easily have gone on influencing each other for generations, for both were associated with the same parish (Mýra sýsla) and were probably related in the same families. Moreover a third saga—Laxdœla—with a similar theme, comes from a neighbouring district (Dala sýsla), only a day's journey to the north.

When, however, we investigate such episodes separately, it is easier to detect the loan of motifs. The later the sagas are, the more numerous the loans become. The Hávarðar Saga has much in common with other sagas from the north of the country.[1] There are many literary loans in Njála.[2] Hœnsa-Þóris Saga seems to have borrowed an episode from Laxd.[3] The story of Odd's removal in Brandkrossa Þáttr (p. 186) has borrowed several features from Glúma (ch. IX) in the description of Thorkell's removal from Þverá. But we also find loans in the older and less literary sagas, so the process of borrowing must have begun even in the days of oral tradition. We have the best examples in the descriptions of the murder of Thorgrim, in Gísl. (ch. 16), and the murder of Helgi Asbjarnarson, in Dropl. (ch. 13). In both sagas the murder is committed clandestinely by night, and several of the distinctive features must have been borrowed by one saga from the other. Both accounts mention that the byre adjoined the room where the crime was committed and that

[1] Cf. Anne Holtsmark's paper in Festskrift til Finnur Jónsson, p. 72 ff.

[2] See A. C. Kersbergen, Litteraire motieven in de Njála.

[3] See p. 87.

the cows were tied together in couples by their tails across the middle passage, to make pursuit more difficult. In both accounts the murderers steal into the bedroom and touch the hand of one of the sleepers, who awakes, and supposing it to be the hand of his wife asks why it is so cold (Gísl.: "*Hví er svá kǫld hǫnd þín?*" Dropl.: "*Hví var svá kǫld hǫnd þín?*"). The likeness continues throughout the description of the murder; in both sagas the author of the deed betrays himself by chanting a verse which is heard by a woman who guesses its purport. Dropl. has borrowed these details from Gísl. From a verse that Grim chanted about the murder we see that Helgi was wounded in the foot, but the prose account agrees with Gísl. that Helgi was wounded in the chest, and in the present context a wound in the foot would be out of the question. Further, the detail that the hero revealed the secret of the murder by chanting a verse certainly comes from Gísl., where it is connected with a real poem and fits in with the story. In Dropl. there is no proper connection between this episode and the rest. Another proof that Dropl. is borrowing is the mention of the little boy at whom Grim laughed; this incident comes from the Ljósvetninga Saga.[1] The passage in Dropl. has been modified to agree with Gísl., the story of a more famous outlaw.[2] It is not easy to account for this loan; but very probably Thordis's name served as a point of attraction, since it was the name both of Thorgrim's wife in Gísl. and of Helgi's wife in Dropl.

[1] Isl. forns. I, p. 178.

[2] See also Björn K. Þórólfsson in Festskrift til Finnur Jónsson, p. 48.

By way of comparison it may be mentioned that the sagas of the kings exhibit the same peculiarity, one saga frequently borrowing features from another. Sigurður Nordal has shown how Snorri sometimes harmonizes two different accounts.[1] The story of Rognvald Kali by the Jordan, related in the Orkneyinga Saga, is told of Sigurd Jorsalfar, and the well-known walnut legend associated with the latter is transferred to Harald Hardradi.[2] The same thing is found also in Norwegian family sagas. In the tale of Trond Hoskuldsson we are told that he frightened some people who came to demand money. This episode occurs again in the legends about Gunnuv Aasland, and it must be a loan in one case or the other. The former tale comes from Fjotland and the latter from the neighbouring parish of Aaseral, so they were current together; but it is impossible to say whether Trond or Gunnuv has a prior claim to the episode.[3]

The *fornaldarsǫgur* resemble the historical sagas more closely than any other branch of literature does. The subjects treated in them are much the same as those in the family sagas, and some of them relate to ancestors of the settlers. But the scene is not laid in Iceland; everything happens in foreign lands at a time prior to the colonisation of the country. Neither in the portrayal of character nor in the description of events have they the individual touch which is so marked in the family sagas; what they give us is of a more typical nature, and in the style of the folk-tales.

[1] Snorri Sturluson, pp. 206, 209—211.

[2] See Koht in (Norwegian) Hist. Tidsskr. V, 5, p. 162 and 166.

[3] See Norske ættesogor, pp. 67 and 131.

In their general character, in fact, they rather resemble folk-tales or romances.

As, however, the family traditions of the *söguöld* grew older and came increasingly to be associated with other and more remote times—while at the same time the matter in them was more firmly welded together—they naturally became more like the *fornaldarsǫgur*. At such a distance of time the two forms of saga assumed a certain resemblance, and as a result they more easily influenced each other. The *fornaldarsǫgur* are largely 'padded' with names and matter derived from the historical sagas.[1]

On the other hand the compact narrative and artistic construction of several of the *fornaldarsǫgur* influenced the family sagas.[2] Direct loans from the *fornaldarsǫgur* became more and more numerous as time went on, especially when a tradition had faded, and it seemed necessary to add fresh colour and detail (e.g. in the case of the Hávarðar Saga).

As we should expect, these loans are chiefly found —like the loans from the romantic sagas—in portions of the sagas which relate to events abroad.

Encounters with vikings were a common occurrence on travels in foreign countries. The accounts of these fights are highly stereotyped in the *fornaldarsǫgur*, and it is easy to recognize the various borrowed features when we meet with them in the family sagas (Ljósv., Svarfd., Kormaks Saga, Harðar Saga, Njála).[3] On a

[1] See Finnur Jónsson, Litt. hist.[2], II, p. 793 note.

[2] Cf. Sigurðar Nordal: "Dæmi fornaldarsagnanna knúði aftur Íslendingasögurnar til samhengis og söguforms" (Snorri Sturluson, p. 139).

[3] See Kersbergen, Litteraire motieven, pp. 143—145.

number of occasions the hero, while abroad, rescues a woman from a berserk (Dropl., Reykd., Glúma, Svarfd., Gretla, Gísl., Egils Saga, Flóam).[1] Here again we can easily recognize loans from the *fornaldarsǫgur* (or perhaps, in a few instances, from the romantic sagas). In Dropl., Glúma and Flóam. the incident takes place *á Upplǫndum* (Norway), and this *Upplǫnd* is one of the commonest names in the *fornaldarsǫgur*. The berserk in the family sagas generally has an unusual name or a descriptive cognomen: Gauss, Moldi;[2] Ljótr hinn Bleiki, Svartr Jarnhauss, Bjǫrn hinn Blakki, and corresponding names are borne in the *fornaldarsǫgur* by people who come to demand the hand of a high-born maiden, e.g. Sóti, Snækollr, Hárekr Jarnhauss. In the family sagas the berserk loses his leg in the struggle (Dropl.: *af fótinn fyrir ofan kné;* Glúma: *fótrinn af berserkinn;* Egils Saga: *kom á fyrir ofan kné ok tók af fótinn;* Flóam.: *undan honum fótinn*). There is a somewhat similar incident in Gríms saga Loðinkinna, where Grim cuts off Sorkvir's legs, one above and the other below the knee.

The only story (of a fight with a berserk to rescue a woman) which has its setting in Iceland is the one in Reykd. (ch. 19). But we can see that elements have been borrowed from the usual literary stock, by the curious way in which the hero gets his sword, which is taken from a grave-mound and replaced there after the fight. On the following night the inmate of the mound appears to the hero in a dream, thanks him

[1] Heinzel, p. 155.

[2] From *mold*, "earth" (cf. the expression "svart som mold" black as earth).

for replacing the sword there, and then makes him a present of it. This feature, of a ghost who appears to a champion to speak of the sword used in a wager of battle *(holmgang)*, occurs again in Flóam., ch. 15. The latter saga has another feature in this connection which is found again in the *fornaldarsǫgur;* this is the provision of two swords for the battle with the berserk, one of which is kept concealed, while the other is used to kill him.[1]

In Reykd. the sword used in the fight with the berserk is taken, as we have seen, from a grave-mound. Frequent mention is made in the *fornaldarsǫgur* of breaking into grave-mounds in order to plunder treasure or take specially fine weapons. We come across one example in the very first allusion to these sagas; the history of Hromund Gripsson, related at a feast at Reykjahólar in 1119, contained the episode *af haugbroti Þráins*, which is still extant in Hrómundar Saga Greipssonar. In Hervarar Saga Hervor gets a sword from Angantyr's grave-mound. In Gǫngu-Hrólfs Saga valuables are taken from a mound. It is from descriptions such as these that grave-opening incidents have found their way into Gull-Þóris Saga and Harðar Saga, both of which are of late date. In Gull-Þóris Saga there is a long conversation with the inmate of a grave-mound, who dissuades Thorir from breaking into his mound, and the whole incident is very much like ch. 16 in Gǫngu-Hrólfs Saga, where there is also a long conversation with the inmate of a grave-mound, who is anxious to aid the hero. In Harðar Saga they break in and have a fight with the dweller in the mound.

[1] See Norske Trollvisor, p. 135.

Another motif often met with in the *fornaldarsǫgur* in connection with the search for treasure is a battle with a dragon. There is one both in Gull-Þóris Saga and Bjarnar Saga.

Finally there are some motifs which are common to the family sagas and the *fornaldarsǫgur*, but it is impossible to tell whether the family sagas borrowed from folk-tales or from the *fornaldarsǫgur*. There is no doubt that folk-tales were current in Iceland in the twelfth century. The stepmother tales are mentioned in Odd Monk and Sverris Saga; and it is clear from the strong impression they made upon the *fornaldarsǫgur* that they must have been known in Iceland for a long time. But their influence on the family sagas was not so great, and they certainly did not serve in any way as a model. On the other hand we can see that features and situations in the folk-tales were running in the mind of the saga-teller or saga-writer while he shaped his account of certain incidents.

Several of the heroes of the family sagas were distinctly inconspicuous in their youth. Viga-Glum was a stay-at-home, silent, sluggish, and disinclined to work on the farm (ch. 5). Grim Eyjulfsson, in Gull-Þóris Saga, dressed in an odd way, stayed at home sitting by the fire, and gave the impression of being half-witted (ch. 9). Thorstein, in Svarfd., was unsociable and liked to sleep by the hearth with the fire on one side of him and a heap of ashes on the other (ch. 1). If these and similar cases[1] have any historical basis, the hero must have grown up rather late and have

[1] A fairly complete list is given by Finnur Jónsson in Egils Saga (Saga-Bibliotek), ch. 25, p. 76, note.

kept so much in the background that people did not expect anything of him, until he suddenly showed them his mettle. But a certain air of unreality in these descriptions and the repetition of various details in several different sagas, are indications that a literary model was utilized. But this model was not in the heroic poetry, for there the hero grew up early and was expected to do great things; he was *vænligr* and *bráðgørr*. Unquestionably the prototype must have been the Askelad of the folk-tales, whom the family sagas either copied directly from these tales or else from the *fornaldarsǫgur*, where he was a prominent figure. Several of the folk-tales began with accounts of Askelad. He was a boy who stayed at home, lay among the ashes, would not work, and was looked upon by all as a fool, until one day he showed himself to be cleverer than any of them. Jörgen Moe holds that the chief point in which Askelad differs from the German Dumling or the Swedish Pinkel is "the profound secrecy which surrounds his natural superiority until he suddenly comes to the fore — a superiority which is disguised as indolent sloth." [1]

Otherwise, there is not much in the family sagas proper which can have been copied from the folk-tales. But sagas of a very similar nature afford several examples which prove how easy it was for folk-tale material to find its way into an historical narrative. When Sigmund and Thorir, in the Færeyinga Saga, come to Dovre, one of the regular haunts of giants and trolls in legend and folk-tale, a miraculous element at once enters into the story. Like the boy in the

[1] Norske Folkeeventyr, 1852, p. LIII.

folk-tale who wanders about for a long time and then comes to a house where there is only a woman at home, Sigmund and Thorir, after an arduous journey, reach a lonely house where only two women are at home. The troll in the folk-tale, returning home in the evening, can smell strangers in the house. Ulf, in Færeyinga saga, does the same: "A big fellow entered wearing a coat of reindeer-skin and with a reindeer on his shoulder. He sniffed the air and then inquired in a fierce voice who was there (ch. 10)." His attention is diverted, as in the folk-tale, by one of the women.

The story which tells how the image of Thor, at Hundorp, was split asunder as the sun rose, shows the influence of the folk-tale concerning the troll who burst at sunrise. The old gods were supposed to be evil spirits, and it was quite in order to represent the god as perishing, like the troll, as the sun rose. In the same way that the hero of the folk-tale bade the troll look eastwards, King Olaf bade the peasants look thither. As the hero of the folk-tale said that a maiden or a queen was coming (or in the words of an Icelandic tale: "*líttu til austurs; þar ríður maður á ljósum hesti*"), King Olaf said: "*Þar ferr Guð várr með miklu ljósi*".[1] For the rest, it will be sufficient to refer to the folk-tale elements which are found in the sagas of Halfdan the Black and Harald Fairhair. A similar infusion of elements from the folk-tales is met

[1] That God was specially associated with the sun, may be seen from several passages in Icelandic literature; the phrase *sá er sóliná hefir skapat* occurs three times in Vatnsdœla (ch. 23^5; 37^6; 46^7;) Landmána speaks of "the God who created the sun" (p. 28). Cf. Vogt, Vatnsdœla, pp. LXXII—LXXIV.

with in Norwegian family records, e.g. in the passage in the Skraddar tale about Olav Austegard shooting his first bear,[1] and in the passage in the Egde tale about Johan Haraldsson driving the sprites away from Funer.[2]

There are remarkably few traces of ordinary *migratory legends* or migratory anecdotes in the Icelandic family sagas. I have previously mentioned that certain elements from a widely known mediaeval story have found their way into the Ingolf episode in Víga-Glúms Saga. Mention has also been made of the well-known fable which has got into Ljósv. Otherwise there are only a couple of doubtful cases in later sagas: the episode of Thorgils and Helga in ch. 31 of Flóam. may be a form of Aarne No. 670, and the account in Svarfd., of how Yngvild Fagrkinn was rendered submissive and compliant may be taken from a foreign source with the same motif as Aarne No. 901.[3]

As we read the Icelandic family sagas we are reminded, from time to time, of persons and occurrences in the *heroic literature*. Gunnar of Hlíðarendi reminds us of Sigurd Fafnisbani and Skarphedin of Hogni. The quarrels between high-born women in the family sagas (Ljósv., Njála) are reminiscent of the quarrel between Brynhild and Gudrun.[4]

In Kjartan's last fight Bolli, his most dangerous adversary, remains aloof until the others reproach him. Styr, in Heiðarvíga Saga, acts in the same way in the fight with Thorhalli. Similarly, Hagen in Waltharius,

[1] Norske Ættesogor, p. 102.
[2] Nordbö, Ættesogor frå Telemark, pp. 127—128.
[3] See Einar Ól. Sveinsson in FFC 83, pp. XVIII—XXI.
[4] See Neckel, Germanisches Wesen, p. 129.

will not at first join in the fighting. In the family sagas the hero's last struggle is depicted on several occasions in terms which recall the heroic literature. The dying Skarphedin buries his axe in the wall, just as Roland smites a stone with his sword; evidently the intention in both passages is to record the warrior's last blow with his death-dealing weapon. After the fall of Gunnar of Hlíðarendi Gissur says: "*Mikinn ǫldung hǫfum vér nú at velli lagit*" (ch. 77, 29), reminding us of Thidriks Saga (ch. 347, Unger's edit.), where the fallen Sigurd is compared to a bison. The statement in Gretla that Grettir and Thorgeir Havarsson once rowed so fast that the rowlocks and oars broke, is very like Atlamál, v. 37, where the Gjukungs row so swiftly that *hǫmlur slitnuðu, háir brotnuðu.* And there are other examples of the kind. The heroic life was the subject of the ancient heroic lays and the family sagas alike, and we may safely assume that in the eyes of the old Icelanders the tales in the heroic literature were historically true. This was commonly the case in the Middle Ages; Saxo treated the old poems, and Philippe Mousket the *chansons de geste*, as historical documents. In the later Icelandic traditions really historical personages in Iceland were treated as descendants of Sigurd Fafnisbani.[1]

In view of the striking internal resemblances between the family sagas and the heroic poetry it seems natural to suppose that the heroic poems influenced the family sagas. The Norwegian colonists brought many of these poems with them to Iceland, and the new Icelandic poetry gives us a clear idea of the way

[1] Njála, ch. 14, 7.

in which they utilized heroic themes. External events in the old material were left practically untouched; the authors of the new lays were chiefly interested in analyzing and interpreting the inner life of the characters in the heroic poetry, and their method was to let Sigurd, Brynhild, Gudrun, Atli and the rest speak of their thoughts, experiences and desires. In this way old material was expanded — the short Sigurðarkviða developed into the great Sigurðarkviða, and the Atlakviða became the long Atlamál. The ancient heroic poems were current in the mouths of the people at the time when the family sagas were put together, and in the *friðaröld* they lived side by side with the oral sagas and developed concurrently with them. That the heroic poetry of the thirteenth century could be so easily turned into prose (in the Vǫlsunga Saga) is one more proof of the intimate relation in which the saga and the heroic poem stand to each other.

We can see elsewhere that heroic poetry might colour historical prose. It has often been maintained that Herodotus owed much to Homer, and that his practice of letting the different characters speak when the opportunity offered was inherited from the epic poets.[1] In Villehardouin we frequently come upon expressions which are direct loans from French heroic poetry.[2] This is all the more remarkable, inasmuch as Villehardouin evidently meant his work to be read aloud; his style too, is rather dry, and devoid of

[1] R. C. Jebb, Essays and Addresses, pp. 363, 375, ff.

[2] See Kressner's paper in Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Litteraturen LVII, pp. 1—16. Cf. Caston Paris and A. Jeanroy, Extraits des chroniqueurs français, pp. 15—17.

rhetorical or lyrical colour. Ménestrel de Reims borrows motifs and phrases from the heroic poetry and uses them to adorn his historical traditions. The French heroic poems, for instance, often have dialogues before the battles, and the same feature appears in Ménestrel de Reims.[1]

The form of literature in which we should particularly expect to find traces of heroic poetry is the tragic saga, where the hero is defeated by fate and lesser men bear off the palm of victory. Here the standpoint of the heroic poetry is distinct from that of the folk-tales or the *fornaldarsǫgur*. We should expect above all to see the influence of the heroic poetry in passages where emotion runs high, where there are deep-seated spiritual conflicts, and where the dialogue, throbbing with tension, reveals the secret places of the soul; or again, in the description of actions which called for conspicuous fortitude.

The profoundly tragic Harðar Saga bears unmistakable marks of the influence of the Volsung legends. Odin is introduced; and the gold ring which Hord received from Soti has the same curse upon it as the ring of Andvari. But this saga is late, and the loan occurs in one of the stock episodes about the desecration of grave-mounds. In the case of Gísla Saga, on

[1] See § 41 of the conversation between the king and his generals: "Sire, dist il, je lo que vous li otroiez la bataille, et je ne dout ne tant ne quant que nous n'aiens la victoire; car nous avons droit et il ont tort, et si avons Dieu en ajoue et il ne l'ont pas." Similar phrases occur like a refrain in the conversation between Oliver and Roland before the battle of Roncevaux (Chanson de Roland, v. 1006 ff.). Cf. Asadowskij in FFC 68, pp. 15—16 regarding the influence of the *bylines* on Russian folk-tales.

the other hand, it has been shown [1] that the heroic poems lived so vividly in the mind of Gisli that he compared his own experiences with occurrences in these poems. And this resemblance must also have been evident to the sagamen, including the last of them, to whom Gísla Saga owes its final and perfect form. The phraseology and the incidents of the heroic poems are so clearly reflected that it may well be entitled, in Magnus Olsen's phrase, "a heroic saga". Hans E. Kinck noticed its resemblance to a popular ballad: "There is a pulsating energy like that of the ballads." [2] This is certainly true, for, in common with the Eddic poetry and the popular ballads, Gísl. knows how to compress a wealth of spiritual experience into a small compass; but the loans prove that the sagaman learned this art from the heroic literature.

Whether the resemblance that Gudrun Osvifsdottir's life bore to the poems about Sigurd and Brynhild was clearly seen by the historical Gudrun, in the same way that the historical Gisli saw points of contact between his own life and the heroic poems, we cannot tell. But undoubtedly the author of Laxd. saw this. Very often it is difficult to distinguish fact from fiction in this saga, but anyone can see that the heroic poetry interpenetrates such a passage as the following conversation between Gudrun and Bolli after the death of Kjartan:

After that Bolli rode back home to Laugar. Gudrun went out to meet him and asked how things were getting on. Bolli answered that it was then near nones of that day. And Gudrun told him, 'It has been a famous

[1] Magnus Olsen in Festskrift til Finnur Jónsson, pp. 6—14.
[2] Mange slags Kunst, p. 22.

day's work. I have spun yarn for a twelve ell's web and you have killed Kjartan.' Bolli said, 'It will take me long enough to forget that mistake, even without your reminding me of it,' Gudrun replied: 'That is not what I would call a mistake. It has seemed to me that you were more thought of the winter Kjartan was in Norway than while he has been walking over you since he came back to Iceland. But I am telling you last of what pleases me the most, that Hrefna will not be laughing when she goes to bed to night.' Then Bolli answered her, and he was very angry by that time: 'I have my doubts whether she will turn paler at these tidings than you. And I am not sure that it would not have shocked you less if we had all been left dead in the fight and Kjartan had brought you the news of it.' By this time Gudrun could see that Bolli's temper was rising, and she went on to say: 'Don't tell me anything like that. Indeed, I thank you very much for what you have done. I am sure now that you are not willing to do anything that is annoying to me.' (Ch. 49, 25—29).[1]

Here we can clearly recognize the Sigurd poems in the Edda, especially Sigurðarkviða hin skamma. In both cases a noble-minded woman loves a valiant man, but has been beguiled into marrying a less valiant one, while the man she loves has married another woman. She urges on her husband to kill the man she loves. He is unwilling to do this, for they are friends. But the woman threatens him. In Sigurðarkviða hin skamma Brynhild says:

10. Gunnar, now
Thou needs must lose
Land of mine
And me myself,
No joy shall I have
With the hero ever

[1] Thorstein Veblen's translation of the Laxdœla Saga.

11. — — — — — —
If Sigurd's death
Thou shalt not dare.[1]

In Laxd. Gudrun's words to Bolli, as she urges him to slay Kjartan, are "It is the end of everything between us two if you shirk this business" (ch. 48, 13). In the one story the man is accompanied by his own brothers, in the other by hers. In both she praises the deed, although in reality it appals her. The dialogue in Laxd. after the murder, is directly modelled on Sigurðarkviða hin skamma. The passage quoted may be compared with the following stanzas:

30. Then Brynhild, daughter
Of Budli, laughed,
Only once,
With all her heart,
When as she lay
Full loud she heard
The grievous wail
Of Gjuki's daughter.

31. Then Gunnar, monarch
Of men, spake forth:
"Thou dost not laugh,
Thou lover of hate,
In gladness there,
Or for aught of good;
Why has thy face
So white a hue,
Mother of ill?
Foredoomed thou art.

[1] H. A. Bellow's translation.

Brynhild spoke:

33. None mock thee, Gunnar.
Thou hast mightily fought![1]

It is significant that what pleases Brynhild most is to hear Gudrun Gjukadottir weep as she lies beside the slain Sigurd, and Gudrun Osvifsdottir says that what she likes best is the thought that Hrefna will not laugh as she goes to bed that night. The man's answer is substantially the same in both accounts, and in both he observes that she changes colour.

One result of this dependence upon the heroic poetry is seen in the important part played by women in Gísl. and Laxd. Their quarrels and conversations often decide the fate of the men. What Aud and Asgerd, in Gísl., say to each other about men in their talk in the women's room, is of no less crucial importance than the conversation between Brynhild and Gudrun as they wash their hair in the river. When the narrative concerns herculean tasks and external activities, the women's rôle is usually a subordinate one; but directly it is concerned with the inward life of the soul, they come into the foreground; love, always one of the mainsprings of inward and outward strife, enables them to intervene powerfully in the fierce struggles of the men.

It is more than a mere accident, therefore, that Gunnlaugs Saga, which is essentially a love story, has a loan from the heroic poetry as early as the second chapter, in which the dream is described. Apparently this dream is based on Kriemhilt's dream in the Nibelungenlied; the latter was evidently known in

[1] H. A. Bellow's translation.

Iceland, for we have an incomplete prose version of it in the Vǫlsunga Saga (ch. 25). Gunnlaugs Saga relates that a swan was sitting on the roof; two eagles came flying along and fought with her until both of them died, after which a falcon came and talked sweetly with the swan. Kriemhilt's dream has the two eagles and the falcon, but there the eagles killed the falcon. In both cases the dream concerns a woman's destiny, and the falcon is the man she marries; for the rest, the details are utilized in Gunnlaugs Saga in a way which fits in with the plot of that saga.[1]

In the character of Brynhild, love is coupled with an iron will. In Signy, the mother of Sinfjotli, we have another example of heroic womanly fortitude, as she calmly and fearlessly goes to a terrible death. In ch. 8 of the Vǫlsunga Saga Sigmund bids her leave the burning house. She refuses, and ends by saying: "*Skal ek nú deyja með Siggeiri konungi lostig, er ek átta hann nauðig*" ("Merrily now will I die with King Siggeir, though I was nought merry to wed him"). Then she kisses her brother and her son, takes leave of them, and goes back into the fire. This truly heroic deed has left its mark on several of the family sagas. One of the finest parts of the description of the fire at Bergthorshval is that in which Flosi bids Bergthora leave the house, and she refuses to do so. Flosi says to Bergthora: "Come out of the house, lady; far be it from me to burn *you* in it." To which she answers: "As a young maid I wedded Njál, and I have promised him that we will share the same fate." Thereupon she and Njál go in again (ch. 129, 17). In Harðar

[1] See Heusler, Nibelungensage [2], p. 32.

Saga, Hord tells his sister to leave the house before he burns it. He is willing to receive her in his own home if she will part from Indridi. But this, she says, would be unseemly, and she refuses to go (ch. 30). In Ljósv. Gudmund tells his wife Thorlaug to leave the house he intends to burn. But she will not desert Alfdis her kinswoman, and Alfdis will not desert Bruni. As Gudmund's son is equally determined that he will not desert his mother, the house is not burnt after all (ch. XX). We notice that in the two last cases, as in the Vǫlsunga Saga, the person who bids and the person who is bidden to leave are near relatives, which makes the choice all the harder.

In Egils Saga, again, there is a loan from the heroic poetry in a passage depicting profound emotion. Egil Skallagrimsson's grief for Bodvar is so violent that his body "swells until his kirtle and his hose split and drop off him" (ch. 78, 15). This is clearly copied from the passage in Sigurðarkviða Meiri where Sigurd, distracted with grief, goes away after his last conversation with Brynhild (Vǫls. Saga ch. 29):

Out then went Sigurd,
The great king's well-loved,
From the speech and the sorrow,
Sore drooping, so grieving,
That the shirt round about him
Of iron rings woven,
From the sides brake asunder
Of the brave in the battle.[1]

[1] Heusler, Niebelungensage [2], p. 27. The heroes swell with *grief* in both accounts. On other occasions they swell with anger. In Gamalt I Johs. Skar relates of the mighty Thorkell Björnsson that he became so infuriated that his "garters burst, and the scarf came loose from his neck" (p. 99).

In the heroic poetry we plumb the depths of the soul. As Samuel Johnson puts it, we see not only the face but the works of the clock. The family sagas *read* as if everything is looked at from without. They are wholly taken up with the realities that we see and know. Yet, though they only show the face of the clock, there are many indications that they are familiar with its works as well, and the form in which this knowledge is presented reveals the literary model.

May we not say that, in part, the family sagas derived their soul from the heroic poetry? The rich fund of tradition provided a large stock of detailed material which was fashioned for generations, in peculiarly favourable circumstances, by men with scholarly and literary tastes; but without the heroic poetry the sagas would never have possessed the inner fire which shines through from below the surface in their penetrating soul-analysis, their dramatic tension, and their pathos.

The heroic poetry is no inorganic component of the sagas. The sagaman, meditating on his subject in his day-dreams, was struck by certain resemblances to heroic motifs, and exploited his discovery. He did not, however, borrow mechanically; this would only have embellished his work outwardly, in the manner of the reviser of Fóstbrœðra Saga who made occasional loans from the skaldic poetry. He kept the influence of the heroic poetry within narrow but natural limits. It was not allowed to alter the workaday, realistic and often humorous tone of the saga. On the contrary, these characteristics of the saga left their mark on the later heroic poetry. Several features of the Atlakviða

were reduced to smaller proportions in the Greenland Atlamál, in order to bring them more into line with the conditions in the author's native country. This lay has a richness of detail which is extremely like the family sagas, and a comic figure, Hjalli, is introduced, who does not want to "die and leave his pigs". The argument between Atli and Gudrun, with its redoubled accusations of lying and duplicity, is very much like some of the arguments between man and wife in the family sagas (e. g. between Thord and Oddny in Bjarnar Saga, when Thord's deceitful behaviour is discovered). What the heroic poetry imparted to the family sagas was not so much any concrete loan of material as a kind of psychological sense and intuition — a gift for delineating individuals in a life-like way, with a spiritual harmony and a consistent personality which we recognize at once against any historical background.

CHAPTER VII

UNHISTORICAL

The family sagas are based upon contemporary tradition. So long as this contemporary tradition has not been modified it may be regarded as historical. But, as we have seen, tradition was revised in many ways and exposed to many influences before it was committed to parchment. How far did these alterations, taken together, remove it from the original form? Or to put the question in another way, how great was the distance, from a purely historical point of view, between the contemporary tradition and the saga? The trend of development is known, but how far did it go? Was the contemporary tradition altered to such a degree that these sagas can no longer be looked upon as history? Up to now we have considered the changes in their artistic or formal aspects only. But the problem of reliability or unreliability, of truth or fiction, cannot be burked; it is the most interesting and probably the most controversial issue in the critical study of the sagas. Some writers endeavour to evade it, or to treat it as a secondary matter. They argue that the real value of the sagas lies in their artistic merit, and

that the percentage of historical truth is of less moment. In any case the question is so difficult that one is tempted to cry "sour grapes". But we have all an instinctive desire to know whether a thing is true or not, and of two equally good stories the one which can claim to be historical will always be the more interesting. The Icelandic family sagas are admired, not only because several of them are great works of art, but because the remarkable men and women described in them actually existed. Moreover the sagas are our most important source of information regarding the history of Iceland during a period of more than a hundred years; and the information they contain regarding the life and customs of those times is of immense historical value for the study, not only of Icelandic, but of Scandinavian and even of Germanic culture.

We cannot discuss the problem of the historical or unhistorical character of the family sagas in all its bearings. This would necessitate a detailed investigation of each saga separately, and lead us far beyond the limits of what is reasonable in a book of this kind. But it will be convenient to collect all the scattered strands of our enquiry under the head "historical or unhistorical", although this will involve a certain amount of recapitulation. By drawing a sharp line of demarcation between what is, and what is not, reliable, we shall more easily be able to see what the sagas are, and what they profess to be. Our first aim must be to establish the main criterion and the main conclusion. Until this has been done, we have no adequate standard by which to judge the many separate questions that call for decision. As the material that can be

checked by other sources sometimes turns out to be reliable and sometimes unreliable, while the main body of the tradition cannot be checked at all in that way, it is obvious that we can neither accept nor reject this main body of tradition until we have discovered a proper criterion by which its authenticity can be tested.

The best plan will be to begin with what is unhistorical. Once more, then, we start from the contemporary tradition, which we assume to be historical, although, of course, much of what is recounted even at the time may be quite inaccurate. From the very first opinions may differ as to the facts. We are all familiar with the contradictory statements of witnesses in the law-courts. At a psychological congress in Göttingen the following experiment was made. All the members had to give a (written) description of a dramatic incident which they had witnessed, and which had been secretly prepared to the last detail. Everything was carried out in accordance with the programme, and the members of the congress wrote, in all, 40 reports. Only in one report were the errors in describing the characteristic features of the incident under 20 per cent. In 14 the errors were from 20 to 40 per cent; in 12 the percentage was from 40 to 50; while in 13 it was over 50. In 24 reports 10 per cent of the details were invented; in 6 reports the inventions amounted to less and in 10 reports to more than 10 per cent.[1]

The imagination of several different people may work simultaneously in the same way with the result that their stories agree, in spite of being invented. In

[1] Quoted from van Gennep, La formation des légendes, pp. 158—159.

his book entitled "Imagination" Arne Löchen mentions the following example: "In cases which powerfully affect the minds of several people in a particular manner, this agreement may be remarkable. An instance of this may be given. Several boys were playing skittles. Another boy, whom they did not know, walked past. They called out to him and invited him to join in their game. The unknown boy did not answer, and went on. Thinking this rude the others shouted abuse after him, and ended by beating him. Subsequently the affair was brought into court and all the witnesses stated that the unknown boy had turned round and shouted back a number of abusive epithets. In reality, however, the boy had neither heard their abuse nor replied to it. He was deaf and dumb" (pp. 13—14). What can happen in our day could equally well happen in the past. We know that the Icelanders were fully aware that stories might be unreliable and misleading. The author of Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar introduces his theme by saying: *"Atburðir margir, þeir er verða, falla mǫnnum opt ór minni, en sumir eru annan veg sagðir en verit hafa, ok trúa því margir, er logit er, en tortryggja þat satt er".*[1] The author of Njála makes Flosi say that he does not know how far the stories told of Kari's travels are true; *"Þykki mér þat opt rjúfaz, er skemra er at frétta en slíkt* (ch. 149, 11). We hear more than once of people who deliberately try to *halla sǫgunni*, e.g. in Gretla, ch. 85,2: "he told only as much of the story as redounded to his credit and touched very lightly on the things which were not so creditable".

[1] Biskupa sögur I, p. 639.

There may be a difference of opinion as to facts from the outset. The Orkneyinga Saga tells us, as already mentioned, that the men who had captured a dromond could not agree as to who had boarded her first. They decided that *one* of them should say who had done so; and then they would all tell the same story. But different versions may exist separately for a long time without becoming mixed, either because each person prefers his own, or because they happen to be current in different districts. Variants as a rule arise later, when the factors which modify tradition have had time to work. In the case of the family sagas we can seldom tell when the original split up into separate versions; all we know is that the sagas as they exist to day present many variants. From an historical point of view this means an equivalent number of errors; for although two variants may be equally genuine as folklore and equally good as art, only one of them can be correct as history, because the events could only take place in one way.

The same saga may mention several variants of the same thing, or two sagas may differ mutually; or the Landnáma and a family saga may disagree. We will take one or two examples. On several occasions a saga first tells us what some people say about an incident, and then what others say about it *(Þat vilja sumir menn segja . . . . . en ek hefi Þat heyrt)*. Sometimes an account of an incident is followed by the remark that *sumir menn* tell it otherwise. We have seen that such remarks occur several times in Reykd.; and in the previously quoted passage about the slaying of Steingrim we apparently have to do with

variants from the contemporary tradition itself: "Some say that Vemund hurled a javelin at Steingrim as he was trying to climb out of the hole on to the ice, and that this missile killed him. But some say that he was drowned in the hole in the ice. Two of his followers were drowned with him: Helgi his brother-in-law and another man" (ch. XVI). In the heat of the struggle nobody noticed exactly how Steingrim lost his life; so there was room for a difference of opinion. On the other hand there was no doubt as to the persons who had lost their lives, as this could be seen afterwards. Reykd. apparently disliked combining several versions into one. Several other sagas, however, did so, and this resulted as a rule in repetitions and discrepancies. In ch. 42 of Vatnsd. two variants have evidently been combined. The same meeting is to be held "at Karnsá" and "in Forsœludal"; there are two versions of the way in which Thorkell Silfri was warned not to go to this meeting; and so on.[1] Dropl. combines two accounts of the manner in which Grim concealed himself after he had killed Helgi.[2] Hallstein's sons at Viðivellir are called Sighvat and Snorri in Hrafnkels Saga, but bear other names in Dropl. Thordis Thorolfsdottir of Borg is stated by Hrafnkels Saga to have been the wife of Thormod Thjostarson of Alptanes; whereas Egils Saga says that she was the wife of Grim of Mosfell, and the Landnáma says that Thormod married Thurid Thorleifsdottir.

The genealogical table of Thorstein the White in Þorst. s. Hv. does not agree entirely with his family

[1] W. H. Vogt, Vatnsdœla Saga, p. LXIII.

[2] Björn K. Þórólfsson in Festskrift til Finnur Jónsson, p. 48.

tree in Vápnf. According to Dropl., Vethorm, in Jamtaland, was the son of Rognvald Ketilsson; according to the Lándnama, he was the son of Vemund the Old. Dropl. tells us that Vethorm and his three brothers captured Arneid, but the Landnáma says that Vethorm's son Halmfast and his sister's son Grim captured her. The mother of this Arneid is called Sigrid in Dropl. but Olof in the Landnáma. Þorst. s. Hv. states that Thorstein purchased some land from Steinbjörn Kort; but the Landnáma says that he purchased it from Steinbjörn's father's brother, Eyvind Vapni.

In the later sagas the variations are often more extensive and radical. One or two examples will serve to illustrate this. Svarfd. relates that the viking Snækoll kidnapped Thorarna. But according to the Landnáma the viking obtained her in the ordinary way [1] and all that Svarfd. tells us about this must be an invention. Moreover Landn. does not call this couple Snækoll and Thorarna, but Hafthor and Gudrun. Hœnsa-Þóris Saga describes how Blund-Ketil was burned in his house. This is one of the chief incidents, but it does not accord with Ari Frodi's Íslendingabók, which states that the person thus burned was Blund-Ketil's son Thorkell. Eyrb. and the Landnáma disagree with each other in regard to a number of less important matters.[2] Some of these variants may be due to mistakes in copying, but many of them are unquestionably of the kind which go back to different oral accounts.

One class of variants may be found together in the

[1] Finnur Jónsson in Aarböger for nord. oldk. 1884, p. 127.

[2] See Finnur Jónsson, Litt. hist.[2] II, p. 428, note 2.

same saga, in cases where the prose narrative is inconsistent with the *lausavísur*. It will be remembered that there is a verse in Dropl. in which Grim describes the slaying of Helgi Asbjarnarson and says: "*egg kom snǫrp í leggi Helga.*" But the prose account states that Grim ran him through the body; there is nothing whatever about wounding Helgi in the legs. Here, as we have seen already, Gísl. had encroached upon the original story and changed it. In Bjarnar Saga there is a verse in which Björn declares that he slew Thorstein Kalfsson *á Klifsjǫrva*, whereas the prose account says that the place is between Hólm and Húsafell. The *lausavísa* is evidently right, as Thorstein lived in Selárdalr, and as Klifsjǫrvi is on the road from Hólm to Selárdalr, it was natural that Björn should accompany Thorstein thither. The Máhlíðinga-vísur state explicitly that the cowardly Nagli was a thrall, but in the prose account he was a freeman. In various other respects also there seem to be clear indications of a disagreement between the Máhlíðinga-vísur and the prose narrative. For the rest, I would refer to Finnur Jónsson's paper, entitled *Sagaernes lausavísur*,[1] concerning the discrepancies between the verse and the prose in several sagas (Kormaks Saga, Heiðarvíga Saga, Gísl. and Dropl).

The lack of agreement between the *lausavísur* and the prose is puzzling, as we should expect them to

[1] Aarböger 1912, pp. 1—57. In one instance there is also a disagreement between a skaldic poem and a saga. In Hauk Valdisarson's Íslendingadrápa we read that Glum Geirason conversed with a dead man. But Reykd. relates this of Glum's brother.

agree if the story-tellers could understand the poetry. Literary historians often speak of oral tradition and the skaldic lays as being the two sources used by the authors of the sagas. But poetry was transmitted by oral tradition in the same way as prose, and in the case of the *lausavísur* it is noteworthy that they often have little interest apart from the narrative which tells how they came to be composed.[1] To some extent the explanation may be that the verses, though they form an integral part of the story, are so sharply distinguished from the prose by their form, that they have a kind of independent existence. Portions of a story which are self-contained can be more easily removed than the rest. In this respect verses resemble the migratory legends which are sometimes woven into a larger epic whole. Like the old fable in Ljósv., which occupies different places in the two versions of that saga, a stanza may get into a new context and even sever its connection with the old one. The second of the two lays that Eirik Vidsja recited in the Heiðarvíga Saga is not very appropriate in its present place; no doubt some unaccountable change in the tradition has torn it out of its original context. Besides taking these transferences into account, we must remember that the verses themselves may have been altered, corrupted and combined in oral tradition (not to speak of careless transcription); so it is often impossible to know

[1] Heusler rightly observes that "The prose and poetic traditions formed as a rule a single whole (the stanzas having always, apart from exceptions, been in their proper context in the narrative from very early times); this whole made up the saga". (Anfänge, p. 70.)

whether we can altogether rely upon the text. Some of the verses have been interpreted in different ways, while many are so vaguely worded that it is unsafe to say that any particular view of the events to which they refer is the right one. In addition there is the difficult question as to whether the verses are authentic. The fact that the poetry and the prose are not entirely consistent does not entitle us to jump to the conclusion that the verses should be preferred as authentic and historical. It shows that they existed side by side with the prose until a discrepancy arose in some way; but we cannot decide off-hand whether the discrepancy is of a secondary nature.

It is obvious that, other things being equal, divergencies may as easily arise between prose and unauthentic verses as between prose and authentic verses. We meet with inconsistencies between the poetry and the prose even in unhistorical sagas; Hildebrand's 'swansong' for instance, (in Ásmundar saga Kappabana) differs from the prose text in several respects.[1] Accordingly we cannot safely treat the contents of the verses as original or as a means of gauging the growth of legend.

The opposite process, more or less, to the formation of variants is the *fusion* of several originally separate stories. Traditions which live side by side and have certain resemblances are apt to be confused. This phenomenon has already been mentioned in its purely formal aspect, as manifested in the influence of one saga upon another. In its historical aspect such fusion is productive of errors; wrong names or cognomens

[1] See Heusler and Ranisch, Eddica minora, p. XLIII.

are given to historical personages, and one man's deeds are ascribed to another. In Hœnsa-Þóris Saga Blund-Ketil has not only taken the place of his son Torkell, but has been confused with another Blund-Ketil and has appropriated the ancestors of the latter. Why the fire at Ǫrnólfsdalr should be associated with Blund-Ketil instead of his son, it is difficult to say; but the confusion between Blund-Ketil Qrnolfsson and Blund-Ketil Geirsson is due to the similarity of their names. Björn Breidvikingakappi and Björn Hitdœlakappi both came from the same district, had the same name and more or less the same cognomen, were both skalds, and figured in love stories. Now there are two verses which both are said to have composed. Bjarnar Saga ascribes them to Björn Hitdœlakappi, and Eyrb. to Björn Breidvikingakappi; and the publishers of these sagas differ as to which view is the right one. Gunnl. has a verse by Gunnlaug himself, but the same verse appears in Kormaks Saga, where it is ascribed to Kormak. Laxd. confuses Ásgeirr of Ásgeirsá with Ásgeirr Æðikollr, and interchanges members of their respective families.[1] According to Hávarðar Saga Thorbjörn of Laugaból married the sister of Gest Oddleifsson the Wise, which cannot be right; but in the Landnáma his wife is the sister of Ljot the Wise, and the confusion is evidently due to the epithet "the Wise" *(hinn spaki)*. Besides this, Ljot the Wise is mixed up with Holmgǫngu-Ljótr, and half of a stanza by Hromund Halti is transferred to Havard, because his cognomen also happens to be *Halti* (the

[1] B. M. Olsen, Landnáma og Laxdœla (Aarböger 1908) p. 219.

Lame).[1] In Dropl. Bessi Ossurarson and Bessi Havarsson are confused. Sometimes, too, an incident is substituted for another incident, one which is well known being put instead of another which is less well known. Thus Gunnl. seems to confuse Knut the Great's campaigns with earlier events in the days of King Svein.[2]

The substitution of names and incidents for one another may bring about a number of other changes in the story. But this kind of thing is hardly noticeable unless we study the subject closely. On the other hand most readers will at once be struck by the fact that so much is exaggerated and sometimes magnified to supernatural proportions. A tradition need not be current long before this tendency becomes apparent. We get a good example of it by comparing Sturla's Íslendinga Saga with the separate saga relating to Aron Hjörleifsson. Sturla, as we have seen, describes events which took place in his own day. Arons Saga was written about a century after the events; here various details (e.g. numbers) have been magnified, and the difficulties encountered by the hero are greater. Íslendinga Saga tells us that Hrafn's sons had to pay a fine of ten hundreds because they had helped Aron, but in Arons Saga the sum is inflated to sixty hundreds. Íslendinga Saga says that Aron escaped from Valshamri at night. Arons Saga says it was in the day-time; this however, would have been practically impossible in the circumstances; besides which the context shows that it was dark. Íslendinga Saga says that the two

[1] Finnur Jonsson, Litt. hist.[2] II, p. 747; Hávarðar Saga, Björn K. Þórólfsson's edit. p. XXXI.

[2] Gunnlaugs Saga, hg. v. Mogk, p. XII.

priests who were maimed at Grímsey were caught in the churchyard; Arons Saga says that this happened in the church itself. Other examples could be quoted.[1]

The longer an oral tradition is current, the greater, as a rule, are the exaggerations in it. Skallagrim dives to the bottom of the Borgarfjǫrðr and takes up a stone so large that "four men could not lift it nowadays" (ch. 30,10). Egil Skallagrimsson makes his first verses when he is three, and kills his first man when he is seven (the figures three and seven should be noted). When Olaf Pa moves from Goddastaðir to Hjarðarholt his cattle are so numerous that the herd stretches from one farm to the other "without a gap in it anywhere" (ch. 24,14). It is about three miles from Goddastaðir to Hjarðarholt! Njála has much that is incredible and even impossible. Hildegunn collects the blood of Hoskuld in his cloak, and when she puts this cloak on Flosi long afterwards, "*dundi þá blóðit um hann allan*" (ch. 116,13). Skarphedin preserves one of Thrain's back teeth; in the fire at Bergthorshval he hurls this tooth at Gunnar Lambason, knocking out his eye so that it hangs loose on his face.

The Icelandic family sagas give the impression of being remarkably objective. We have seen that this objectivity was largely the result of their being transmitted from one generation to another; and that personal sympathies or antipathies hardly left any trace on the narrative. But sometimes everybody, including the story-tellers and their hearers, shared the same sentiments and point of view; in such cases the whole

[1] See B. M. Olsen in Safn til sögu Íslands III, p. 267 ff.

tradition might be partial and biased. The Icelanders were anxious that their countrymen should distinguish themselves abroad in competition with other nations, and the effects of this ambition are clearly visible in the sagas. When Icelanders went to foreign countries they performed many notable deeds and invariably got the better of their enemies. Ladies of noble birth fell in love with them: Gunnhild Konungamóðir loved Hrut Herjólfsson; Gunnar of Hlíðarendi might have had Bergljot, Hakon Jarl's kinswoman; Ingibjörg, Olaf Tryggvason's sister, was enamoured of Kjartan; and so on.

But none of the deviations from the truth that have hitherto been mentioned are as numerous as those which were due to the re-fashioning and conventionalizing of tradition. A very little added to or subtracted from the historical truth might make a great deal of difference from an artistic point of view. What wonder if a story-teller here and there felt, like Voltaire, that he much preferred something untrue which was effective on the stage to all the archives in the world. We have seen already [1] that much of the dialogue in the sagas must be fictitious, and the differences between variants often become more marked as soon as a conversation begins. Historically speaking, in fact, we are on insecure ground whenever we have to do with dialogue. Yet, as we have seen, a large percentage of the sagas is dialogue — sometimes as much as fifty per cent is in direct speech. In addition to this we must take into account such departures from historical accuracy as are involved in the use of the literary

[1] See pp. 85—89.

triad, the arrangement of the characters in contrasted pairs, parallelism, and the like.

In some of the later sagas we come upon unmistakable inventions. Tradition had become dim, but the sagaman evidently wanted his saga to be as complete and detailed as the older sagas. In ch. 74 of Laxd. there is an account of an expedition Thorkell and Gellir made to Norway. All or most of it must be an invention, for it conflicts with what we know from other more reliable sources. The tradition underlying the opening section of Svarfd. was scanty; not even the name of the settler's father was known. To remedy this a pretentious beginning was constructed out of stock literary motifs. In ch. 1 of Gull-Þóris Saga the sons of Helgi are Þórarinn Ákafi and Þránðr hinn Mikli. But in ch. 14 we are introduced to two sons with the odd names of Frakki and Bljúgr. All they do is to take part in a battle and lose their lives in it; but we are told that their names occur in certain place names. Evidently the whole story is an invention.[1]

The fact that story-tellers have a lively conception of their theme and constantly turn it over in their minds, helps to give coherence and permanency to a tradition. But it has its drawbacks from an historical point of view.[2] Quite unconsciously new elements are added to the various stories, and these elements may encroach upon the tradition. This not only may but must, in accordance with all analogy, have affected a number of details in the sagas, although it is hard to

[1] See Maurer, Gull-Þóris Saga, p. 26.

[2] Cf. p. 130.

prove. Further, even the scientific passion for accuracy may lead to an expansion of tradition which, historically considered, is just as bad as its artistic expansion. For instance, some item of information is lacking about a subject that interests me, and I hazard a conjecture as to the real state of affairs. In tradition, such a conjecture may cease to be looked upon as conjectural and come to be regarded as a fact—a process we can see exemplified almost daily in the case of idle rumours of all sorts. In Heiðarvíga Saga the saga-writer (or oral narrator) mentions a dowry in terms which show us that he was wondering how large it was: "*Eigi er ákveðit hvé mikit fé henni skyldi heiman fylgja, en líklegt at vera mundi góðr sómi*" (p. 106). Only a slight change in the wording would make this into a statement that the dowry *was* a large one.

Nowadays people take a pleasure in studying the etymology of place names; it is well known that many legends actually arise from such names and explain their purport. In by-gone days the same thing happened in Iceland. The later sagas, especially, contain many legends which explain the origin of various things and connect place names with persons and events mentioned in the sagas. Such legends are as a rule particularly unreliable; the absurd etymologies are often evidence enough that the explanations are wrong, and that they rest upon nothing more substantial than conjectures of a late date. For instance, Gull-Þóris Saga associates the place name Breiðabólstaðr with the name of a man called Breiðr: "*Þá bjó Breiðr í Grǫf; þar heitir nú á Breiðabólstað*" (ch. 7). Svarfd. tells us, with regard to Svarthofdi, that "*heita þar síðan Svarthǫfða-*

steinar, er hann drukknaði, því Siglunes, at þar rak seglit, því Siglufjǫrðr, at þar rak siglutréit" (ch. XIII, 36—39). These etymologies do not agree with the Landnáma, which states that Thormod hinn Rammi *"kom skipi sínu í Siglufjǫrð ok sigldi inn at Þormóðseyri ok kallaði af því Siglufjǫrð; hann nam Siglufjǫrð allan á milli Ulfsdala ok Hvanndala ok bjó á Siglunesi"* (p. 110).

As we should expect, the departures from historical accuracy often led to mistakes in chronology. Several things in the family sagas seem impossible on chronological grounds. In Bjarnar Saga Kolli joined in the battle in which Björn fell; but he could not have been more than four or five at that time. If Olaf Pa brought his dog Sam from Ireland, it must have been between thirty or forty years old when Gunnar of Hlíðarendi got it. In Vápnf. we read that Jorunn was the wife of Thorkell Geitisson at the time of the battle of Bǫðvarsdalr. But this must be wrong, for her father, Einar Thveræing, was not old enough to have a grown-up daughter. A number of similar chronological errors are noted in Gudbrand Vigfusson's paper entitled "Um tímatal í Íslendinga sögum".

Up to now we have only considered cases which might conceivably be historical. But the sagas have a large supernatural element—tales of sorcery, supernatural beings and ghosts, not to speak of warnings and dreams. There is hardly a saga without something of the kind. It would take too much space to analyze the different sagas and point out the superstitions they contain. But we can take an old and detailed tradition which was not influenced by the *fornaldarsǫgur* or by any other

sagas of the miraculous type. In ch. 11 of *Eyrbyggja* we read of a shepherd who saw Thorstein Thorskabit on the mountain called Helgafell. The north side of the mountain opened, and he saw huge fires and heard a great clamour within. Thorstein and his men were welcomed there and Thorstein was bidden to sit in the seat of honour in front of his father. An earlier passage says that Thorstein's father believed that he and his kinsfolk would go into Helgafell when they died. Ch. 16 tells of a trollwife who was a *kveldriða* and rode a man, with the result that he lay sick all the winter. In ch. 20 the same troll-wife bewitches some men three times. They are trying to get hold of her son, but on their first visit to the farm she causes them to see him as a spinning-wheel, on the next as a goat, and on the third occasion as a hog. Eventually they call in the help of another wise woman and succeed in their search for the troll-wife's son. In ch. 18 we have Spa-Gils, who "had second sight and was a dab at tracing thefts or anything else that he wanted to find." In ch. 34 and many subsequent passages we hear a great deal about the damage done by Thorolf Bægifot when he "walked" after his death. He slew both man and beast, until at last Hvammsdalr was deserted simply on his account. Ch. 40 tells of a troll-wife who brought such a fearful storm upon Björn Breidvikingakappi that he had to shelter for three days in a cave on Fróðá heath. In ch. 43 there is a bodiless head which sings a song and predicts the fight at Geirvǫr. Chapters 51—55 contain the famous account of the marvels at Fróðá, with a blood shower, a weird moon, and any number of hauntings. In ch. 61 we

encounter a man who can assume various shapes. In ch. 63 we have more about Thorolf Bægifot's doings. His corpse is being burnt, and a cow comes and licks some of the ashes. Afterwards the cow has a bull-calf, and a wise woman advises killing it forthwith; this is not done, however, and when the calf grows older it kills its owner.

Hitherto we have devoted our attention to separate unhistorical features in the saga. But fortunately we can also take a very long continuous passage in one of the later sagas and compare it with a much older and more reliable source. This will give us an idea of the cumulative effect of the different changes.

In ch. 5 of the Íslendingabók Ari Frodi tells of a great lawsuit between Thord Gellir, the son of Olaf Feilan of Breiðafjǫrðr, and Tungu-Odd of Borgarfjǫrðr. Thorvald, the son of Odd, had helped Hœnsa-Thorir to burn the house over the head of Thorkell Blundketilsson in Ǫrnólfsdalr. But Thord Gellir had to prosecute the men who had burnt Thorkell because Herstein, Thorkell's son, was the husband of his niece Thorunn. Thorunn was the daughter of Gunnar and Helga, sister of Jofrid, Thorstein Egilsson's wife. The case was tried at the local court in Borgarfjǫrðr, held at a place afterwards called Þingnes. At that time there was a law that cases of murder had to be tried at the *thing* which was nearest to the site of the murder. The parties came to blows there, and the court could not be held in conformity with the law. There fell Thorolf Ref, the brother of Alf of Dalir, out of the company of Thord Gellir. The cases were then taken to the Althing, where there was another fight. This time

several of Odd's people were killed. Hœnsa-Thorir was sentenced to outlawry, and was afterwards killed, as were several of those who had helped to burn Thorkell. Then Thord Gellir made a speech from the Rock of Laws, in which he criticized the administration of the law in Iceland; and in consequence of this a reform was decided upon.

The same historical incidents (from ca. 960) underlie the larger part of Hœnsa-Þóris Saga. The latter differs, however, in several respects from Ari. In the first place it was not Thorkell, but Blundketil, as we have seen, who was burned. Next, the first fight took place at Hvítá instead of at the local assembly; the accusers never reached the court, but had to return home. From the phrase used by Ari *(Hersteinn . . . átti Þórunni)* we are led to suppose that Herstein had married Thorunn even before the burning; but according to Hœnsa-Þóris Saga they were betrothed after the crime, and her name is given as Thurid. Ari says that Hœnsa-Thorir was sentenced to outlawry and killed subsequently; according to Hœnsa-Þóris Saga he was killed in time for the tidings of his death to reach the Althing before the case came up for trial there.

These divergencies are the more important inasmuch as they concern facts which have nothing to do with the literary form of the story. If Ari's version were put into Hœnsa-Þóris Saga, great changes would ensue. Supposing Herstein was already the husband of Thorunn, the long account of the way in which they became betrothed, and of Thord Gellir's connection with the case, would drop out altogether. That this part of the saga is, in the main, a late 'improve-

ment' and expansion, may be inferred from its structure; it is arranged in three portions, in each of which the importance and power of the men who are visited, and the difficulty of talking them round, are increasingly emphasized.[1] If Hœnsa-Thorir had been first outlawed and then killed, the description of how Herstein pretended to be ill and then killed Hœnsa-Thorir while the others were at the *thing* would have assumed a very different form.

[1] See Heusler, Zwei Isländergeschichten, pp. XXIV—XXV.

CHAPTER VIII

HISTORICAL

The preceding chapter has shown that the text of the Icelandic family sagas contains much that is corrupted or invented. The next step in our inquiry must be to approach the subject from the opposite side, and see how much we can reasonably accept as historical.

As usual we start from the contemporary tradition. Even this may contain errors from the outset; but for the historian it is the safest point of departure. Mistakes and omissions in a story related by a single witness often disappear when several people meet and discuss the circumstances. They talk over the details, and correct, fill out, and combine the different versions. In this way a composite and generally accepted form soon becomes fixed, and this is the local version which lives on.[1]

Even when they are old, people with good memories can often describe incidents which took place when they were young, without much alteration in the story. I have mentioned that Svein Hovden told me the

[1] Cf. p. 58.

story of Hallvor Bjaai with little deviation from the form in which he had told it to Skar a generation before.) Among their hearers may be persons with particularly retentive memories who can take over the tradition practically word for word. The same thing may be repeated in succeeding generations. In some families generation after generation may show a special attitude for remembering and taking an interest in traditional lore; like the family at Viki, in Valle, of whom Skar writes: "The people at Viki had remarkable memories — father and son, it had been the same from time immemorial. The tales had been current for five or six generations when the last story-teller learned them".[1]

Again, members of another family may transmit the tradition; as Svein Hovden preserved the tales relating to Hallvor Bjaai, although he did not belong to Hallvor's family. When stories are handed down in a family they are not necessarily recounted by someone in *each* generation. The old folks tell the story not only to their children but to their grandchildren as well, and in this way the requisite number of story-tellers need not be equal to more than half the number of generations in which the tradition is current. Knut Skraddar might have described events which happened around the year 1580 to his grandson Olav, who lived until about 1720.[2] Hallvor Bjaai was born in 1777 and related stories to Svein Hovden, who lived until 1924.

In the case of the Icelandic family sagas, the interval between the *söguöld* and the *ritöld* is not as long as many people seem to think. There is about the

[1] Gamalt IV, p. 210.

[2] See Norske Ættesogor, p. 162.

same length of time between Hallvor Bjaai's birth and Svein Hovden's death as there is between the deaths of Snorri Godi and Grettir Asmundsson and the birth of Snorri Sturluson. As a rule there are from three to five links in the transmission of an Icelandic family saga. Hall Thorarinsson, in Haukadal, was born in 995, in the middle of the saga period which was richest in memories. Those were the days of Njál and his sons, of Snorri Godi and Gudmund the Mighty, of Gunnlaug Ormstunga, Helga the Fair and many other famous figures in the Icelandic family sagas. When Njál was burned Hall was about fifteen years of age; when Gunnlaug and Hrafn fell he was about seventeen; and when Snorri Godi died he was about thirty-six. Hall was *stórvitr ok minnigr;* a man of parts and retentive memory, he could remember that Thangbrand christened him when he was three years old. Ari came to him at the age of seven, and he was alive until Ari was twenty-one. Ari's Íslendingabók was written about the year 1134, at the beginning of the period in which the Icelanders set to work to put their *sagnafræði* into writing. A chronicler born in 1130 would have been eighteen when Ari died, and might have learnt from Ari as Ari learned from Hall. If he wrote a saga at the same age as Ari wrote his Íslendingabók, this would bring us to the year 1200. The line of tradition would then be:

Hall
|
Ari
|
A chronicler, circa 1200

The first of these men grew up while the events of the *söguöld* were taking place. The last of them lived at the time when the Icelanders are generally supposed to have adopted the practice of reducing their sagas to writing. This would not be at all exceptional. Ari learned a good deal from Thurid, the daughter of Snorri Godi. Thurid was *margspok ok óljúgfróð* (wise and full of true information), and Snorri Sturluson states that she could remember her father. In that case she would also remember Gudrun Osvifsdottir, Ari's great-grandmother, who lived longer than Snorri. In other words, the reminiscences of Ari's source of information went back to the *söguöld.*

With Odd Kolsson, a third source, we get another link in the chain. Odd was the son of Kol Halsson, who (according to Njála) was present when Flosi and Thorgeir Skorargeir settled their quarrel. But Odd's traditions relating to Norwegian kings, which he taught to Ari, had been learnt from Thorgeir Afradskoll, "who was a wise man and so old that he lived at Nidarnes when Hakon Jarl the Mighty was slain".[1] Here the line of tradition is:

Thorgeir Afradskoll
|
Odd Kolsson
|
Ari Frodi.

Then we have a fourth source of information, Thorkell Gellisson, who was Ari's paternal uncle. Thorkell had heard the story of the discovery of Greenland from a man who had been with Eirik the Red when he discovered that country.

[1] Prologue to Heimskringla.

At the end of Dropl. there is a line of tradition which is of particular interest because it embraces an entire family saga. Grim, one of the chief persons in it, had a son named Thorvald (or Thorkell) who was the grandfather of the Thorvald "*er sagði sǫgu þessa*". The line of tradition is:

Grim
|
Thorvald
|
Ingjald
|
Thorvald.

We may assume that the last Thorvald told the story to the saga-writer or at any rate to his informant. Allowing the same length of time between Thorvald and the saga-writer that there was between Hall and Ari, we get back to 1200 or thereabouts. And if we allow for a link between Thorvald and the saga-writer this brings us well into the thirteenth century.[1] Occasionally we meet with complete lines of tradition outside the family sagas. In Þorvalds þáttr ens Víðfǫrla we read: "Gunnlaug Monk says that this incident was related to him by Glum Thorgilsson, a truthful man; and Glum had heard it from a man called Arnor Arndisarson" (3, 9). At the end of Grœnlendinga Þáttr we are told that Karlsefni was the man who could give the most detailed account of the voyages to Vinland;[2] evidently he was the original

[1] Our conclusions are rendered uncertain by what we must presume to be a scribal error. — The confusion between Thorvald and Thorkell in the MS. may indicate that something has dropped out.

[2] Flat. I, p. 549.

source of information. In Eyrb. (ch. 65, 15—17) Gudny Bodvarsdottir is mentioned as a source. And Bjarnar Saga refers in one passage (p. 42) to an informant named Runolf Dalksson.

But the sources of tradition mentioned in the family sagas are few. Probably this is because the sagas were so well known locally that there was no particular point in mentioning one story-teller rather than another. It was enough to refer to the tradition in general terms; and such references are frequent, as we have seen.[1] In dealing with the traditions relating to Norwegian kings, or such subjects as lists of law-givers, chronology, and other historical or political matters of a more general nature, the case was different. There were not so many people who took an interest in these things; it was more natural, therefore, to inquire where the information came from; and accordingly we find many more references to sources in this connection.[2]

We must not infer from this difference between the family sagas and the lives of the kings that Ari Frodi and those who followed in his footsteps were the only people who took an interest in the transmission of tradition and noted the names of their sources of information. Any man with a taste for research would naturally want to know where his information came from, and we may be sure that the saga-writers could frequently have given us full information on this subject. The Sætesdal people knew the names of those who had transmitted their historical traditions and folk-

[1] Cf. pp. 33.

[2] See Finnur Jónsson, Litt. hist.[2] II, p. 209, note.

tales. Gunnar Björnsson told his son Olav about the men of Viki, and Olav passed on the tradition to Torgrim Olavsson, known as "Old Torgrim". "Then Olav Torgrimsson took it on from Old Torgrim. But with 'Little Torgrim', the son of Olav Torgrimsson, the line of tradition came to an end . . . But the ancient lore was kept alive; for Knut Kjetillsson, son of Olav Torgrimsson's sister, learned it from Olav. Nor did it stop with Knut either, for Knut Björnsson heard him recount it".[1] In Byggland, Skar heard some folk-tales related by Hallvor Steinsson, who had learned them from Aanond Kvaale; the latter had heard them told by a certain Jon Björnsson, who was a native of Skaalid in Fyresdal. This covers a period of 150 years.

In Moslem tradition, or *hadith*, there is a regular system of references to sources. Every complete *hadith* consists of two parts. The first part contains a list of the names of those who have handed down the tradition. This list is called the *isnād*, i. e. the guarantee (that the tradition is authentic). The narrator (A) says: "I heard this from B, who was told by C," etc., right back to the original source of information. The second part is the text itself.

The existence of such a line of tradition does not, however, mean that the tradition is entirely restricted to that line. When there is only *one* narrator, it generally means that the tradition is dying out. There may be many repositories of a tradition; as a rule several story-tellers of the older generation pass it on to several of the younger generation. Nor does the

[1] Skar, Gamalt IV, p. 210.

line of descent stand alone; it is linked up with and supported by many other contemporary lines of descent. And this means that the different versions of a story serve as a *check* on one another.

In the first place, we must remember that story-tellers of the kind we are considering usually know the traditions very well, having heard them related several times. If there is anything they cannot remember, or that they remember incorrectly, they can make the necessary addition or correction next time they hear it, until they eventually know the whole story by heart. Sometimes a story-teller will forget to mention something on one occasion which he includes on a subsequent occasion. A listener who hears the same tale narrated a second time by the same story-teller will thus be enabled to fill up any gaps there may be in it. This point is particularly important in connection with family traditions, which in many cases, of course, owed their preservation to the families concerned. A child who is with his grandfather day after day has a better chance of hearing the same story many times, than other people who only meet the old man occasionally. In Finland it has been proved that lapses of memory increase greatly in number when songs are not transmitted in a direct line, but through the medium of a neighbour.[1]

In the second place, there is often an opportunity of hearing several story-tellers relate the same thing, and the narratives can then be checked by one another. What we have said of contemporary tradition when it first acquires a generally accepted form holds good,

[1] See Kaarle Krohn, Die folkloristische Methode, p. 59.

more or less, of old stories: the mistakes, additions and omissions made by one story-teller are eliminated by comparing his version with others. In this way, as Walter Anderson observes, a person who sets himself to learn a tradition performs "on a smaller scale and more or less unconsciously what the research worker does with the help of much fuller materials — he reconstructs the original form of the folk-tale in question".[1]

Moreover, the narrator's words are checked by his audience, if, as is usually the case in places where story-telling is common, it includes people who know the story already. Anyone who has related fairy-tales to children knows how quickly they will take him up if he does not tell it in the way he did before. "You did not tell it like that last time", they will say; or, if they have heard it from someone else, "he did not tell it in that way". This was noticed long ago. In Goethe's *Leiden des jungen Werther*, Werther says of the tales he tells to the children: "Often I invent some feature but forget it on the next occasion. At once they say, '*it wasn't like that last time*'. Now I have taken to reciting it in a singsong voice without any alterations".

One is reminded of the Sætesdal reciter of folk-tales who on hearing his daughter telling one of these tales in different words from those he always used, said to her: "You don't tell the story half right". I have heard an elderly man correct a younger one who

[1] Kaiser und Abt, p. 402. Cf. what is said above in Ch. IV concerning the way in which story-tellers combine different versions, (p. 104 f.).

was relating a portion of the Skraddar tale and told an anecdote about the wrong man.

The effects of this check can be demonstrated empirically in popular literature. Everybody knows that no story-teller can repeat a story exactly as he heard it. When it is passed on to another person, fresh differences creep in. When a third story-teller takes it up, the same thing happens again. If there were no checks the changes would mount up, until at length the story might become unrecognizable. Discussing "contemporary reports" and "legends" Kr. Erslev says in his "Technique of History" (p. 64) that "The contemporary report rests on accounts given by many different sources of information, who support one another mutually; for it extracts the kernel which is common to all these varying accounts at a particular time". This, as a rule, is true. But his further axiom that "The legend, on the contrary, originates with a single individual, whose account is handed on by others without the application of any mutual checks", is certainly wrong in most cases. Bédier makes a similar mistake in *Les fabliaux,* when he describes how folk-tales migrate. Experience proves that, in spite of the constant changes which story-tellers make in repeating what they hear, legends and folk-tales are remarkably tenacious of their form. They may exist for centuries and migrate far from the place of their origin without undergoing any substantial alteration. Thus the tale known as *Kaiser und Abt* has survived, practically unaltered, for more than a thousand years both in Mesopotamia and in Ceylon. This cannot be explained by the accurate and retentive memory of the

illiterate. For variants arise and disappear again, gaps are filled, interpolations are rejected; and the original form is re-created, as it were, again and again. Mysterious forces seem to be at work correcting the errors. But it is merely the result of repetition and the checks that have been described. These are the factors which underlie what Walter Anderson calls "*das Gesetz der Selbstberichtigung*".[1]

Even outside the sphere of what may properly be termed popular literature the process of constant repetition and checking will enable a tradition to last remarkably well and for a remarkably long time; thus dry genealogical tables and bare statements of facts will often hold their ground for centuries. Kolmodin tells us that "One of the first things Abyssinian children learn (sometimes before they can talk properly) is to memorize the family tree, back to the founder of their family and village" And he adds in a note that he was often present when these lessons were being learnt by the fire of an evening. "The father asks his son, 'whose son are you?' . . . . 'And whose son was he?' etc., until the boy knows it all by heart".[2] The result of this method is that we hardly ever meet with different versions of such genealogies, and they may be reliable up to at least the fifteenth generation. The Skraddar tale mentions explicitly that the stories were related by several different people and heard several times.[3]

[1] See his lucid exposition in Kaiser und Abt, p. 399 and cf. my own comments in Norske Ættesogor, pp. 161—162.

[2] Archives 5:3, p. IX.

[3] Norske Ættosogor pp. 73, 175, 179, 180, 182.

When something we see daily constantly reminds us of the traditions connected with it, we are very unlikely to forget them. Excavations in recent times have markedly reinforced the old legends about grave-mounds. Lorange mentions that, when he was about to begin excavating Raknehaug, people told him that a king lay within the mound between two white horses, in a stone chamber covered by several layers of timber. When they started digging the excavators actually came upon successive layers of timber and found the bones of a horse. At this point the excavation had to stop, so they could not find out any more. An example given by Karl Rygh is so remarkable that I must quote it in full: "In 1876 I was told in Strinden of a legend current there, concerning a huge boulder on a rock-strewn slope, which covered a knight in armour and his horse. He had been overtaken by a landslide as he rode by, and crushed to death. I set to work to dig as far as I could under the boulder and found the bones of a horse and a man, a fire-steel and two spear-heads, unquestionably dating from the viking age. There had not been any grave-mound there."[1] Birger Nerman collected, in *Etnologiska Studier* dedicated to Hammarstedt, a number of typical stories connected with ancient grave-mounds; these show that traditions may continue intact for a thousand years or more, possibly even for several thousand years.[2] Of great interest in the present connection is the excavation of certain large grave-mounds near Upsala; it seems that the Ynglingatal is a tradition which has preserved

[1] Maal og Minne 1912, p. 68.

[2] Etnologiska Studier 1921, pp. 213—226.

historical matter for some three or four hundred years.

Altogether, many examples could be quoted showing that traditions may survive practically unaltered for long periods of time, provided the conditions are favourable. And in the case of the Icelandic traditions there can be no doubt that the conditions were exceptionally favourable.

As we have seen, the saga-tradition did not exist for long in its oral form. Usually there was a succession of story-tellers, from two to five in number These story-tellers were not ignorant men of the people, of a different class from those who studied books and foreign learning. On the contrary, we find that men of the best and ablest families took a deep interest in local affairs and wrote in the vernacular. Bringing their scholarly passion for truth, their critical sense, and their artistic taste to bear upon oral historical tradition, they showed that they could handle it in masterly fashion.

The large amount of material preserved in Icelandic tradition, and the fixed form in which the sagas seem to have been current, show that they were so often recited that they impressed themselves firmly upon the mind. The saga literature frequently speaks of saga-telling and saga-tellers, but hardly ever of the recitation of an Eddic poem.[1] That the saga-writers or their sources had heard sagas (or at any rate portions of them) related by several saga-tellers, is evident from their own statements that "some" or "most people" say so and so. Moreover the sagas were

[1] Heusler, Anfänge, p. 60.

current in the localities where the events told in them had taken place, and the memorable sites were known to all. Such local associations would reinforce the stories by making them easier to remember, as we can see in the case of modern traditions. Place names were often associated with persons in the sagas, e. g. Flosadalr, Bægifótshǫfði, Berserkjahraun, Egilsskarð etc. And there were visible relics of the past which recalled incidents in them, e. g. Skallagrim's smithy, the foundations of houses, grave-mounds, cairns, and so on.[1]

In a locality where people are thoroughly at home it is easy, as we have seen, to picture and remember events that have taken place there. Conversely, a tradition which has lived for a long time at a distance from the scene of the story is apt to become inexact in its topography, and this may lead to various readjustments, as it has in the Hávarðar Saga.

But the scrupulous attention paid by the sagas to topographical details is not necessarily a proof that they are true; an invented story may, and indeed ought to be, extremely accurate in this respect, as it is one of the best ways of strengthening the impression of verisimilitude. Many place names in the sagas are doubtless of secondary historical value, put in to satisfy an artistic and scholarly passion for lucidity

[1] Cf. Landnáma, p. 141: "King Harald sent Hrollaug a sword, a drinking horn, and a gold ring weighing five *aurar*. This sword was afterwards the property of Kol, the son of Sidu-Hall, and Kolskegg the Learned had seen the horn". In the Sturlung time there was a javelin "which people called *Grásíða*, and they said it had belonged to Gisli Sursson". (Sturlunga I, p. 247).

or a literary passion for accuracy and completeness.[1]

It is only when we come to names which would otherwise have been unknown to the Icelanders, or descriptions of places they had never visited, that the topographical details become valuable evidence of a persistent tradition. Egils Saga gives such accurate and striking particulars concerning the battle-field at Vinheiðr (Brunanburh) that they must emanate from someone who had seen the place. There is little probability that any Icelandic story-teller of later times had visited this old battle-field and carried on topographical researches there. The most reasonable explanation would therefore seem to be that the account of the battle and the description of the place were so closely connected that they helped to sustain each other.[2] In Gísl. we meet with some purely local names from the inland districts of Nordmöre.[3] And similar examples occur in the sagas of the kings.[4]

The checks must have been particularly effective where the Icelandic family sagas were concerned. When

[1] Cf. Vigfusson's remarks in Origines Islandicæ II, p. 45: "The editor of AM. 556 had a curious taste for geography; he preserves many old place names; whenever one of his characters travels, he gives his route somewhat after the style of Niala, but with less skill. The comparison with W. β. makes it probable that these geographical bits are additions, for none occurs in the extant leaf of the Watzhyrna text".

[2] Much has been written on this subject. The latest contribution is Per Wieselgren's article in (Swedish) Historisk Tidskrift 1929, pp. 45—47.

[3] See Magnus Olsen in Aarböger 1918, pp. 41—60.

[4] See Finnur Jónsson, Litt. hist.[2] II, pp. 238—239.

a saga was related in the parishes where the events had taken place — as would usually be the case — there would almost always be persons present who had heard it before and knew whether the sagaman was telling it 'right'. There might be a *fræðimaðr* among the hearers, who might ask him his authority for such and such a statement, and how he knew this or that. We must remember that he was narrating history, not fiction or a fairy-tale. Thus the story-teller was compelled to keep to historical fact; he could not very well alter, still less play fast and loose with what people knew to be true. This state of things may be compared with what Snorri says about songs in praise of chieftains: "*Engi myndi þat þora, at segja sjálfum honum þau verk hans, er allir þeir, er heyrði, vissi, at hégómi væri ok skrǫk, ok svá sjálfr hann*".[1] Among the audience might be relatives of some of the persons in the story, who would protest at once if the narrator got the genealogies mixed or failed to do justice to the character and deeds of their ancestors. In these circumstances he could not indulge in frank judgments of events and persons in the sagas, or show his personal sympathies or antipathies, or in any way adopt a partisan attitude.[2]

We must remember that in the past people knew much more about their families than they do now. "Kinship went so far then", as the Sætesdal people say of their ancestors in olden days. It was highly

[1] No one would have dared to recite to the man himself exploits which he and all the hearers knew to be false and feigned. (Prologue to the Heimskringla).

[2] On the objectivity of the sagas cf. p. 30 ff.

necessary, for practical reasons, to be well up in this matter of kinship, not only on account of inheritances, but of trusteeships, rights of maintenance, blood-fines, and marriages. In such cases consanguinity was reckoned to the fifth degree, and in Christian times consanguinity as a bar to marriage was extended even to the seventh degree. In public life it was sometimes very important for a chief to be well versed in his family connections.[1]

The legal document from Sveig, in Herjedal, to which reference has been made previously, shows that the people in a parish could trace genealogies a long way back. In all probability these Herjedal family traditions are reliable. They state that Herjolf Hornbrjot, who made the first clearing in the valley, came from Norway; and it now appears, both from the archaeological material and the place names there, that the pioneers did come from the west.[2] Herjolf first lived at the court of Halfdan the Black and afterwards at the court of the Swedish King Anund; these kings must, therefore, have lived at the same time. This agrees with the facts, for Halfdan died about the year 860, and Rimbertus mentions, in *Vita Anskarii*, that King Anund made an attempt, about the year 844, to overthrow Birka with the assistance of a Danish fleet.

[1] Cf. B. M. Olsen, Aarböger 1908, pp. 174—175, who remarks that "People to-day can hardly realize how strong this feeling of kinship was with our forefathers, especially in an aristocratic state like Iceland". He quotes the opinion expressed by J. E. Sars that: "the influence and reputation of an Icelandic chief depended largely on his birth".

[2] Edv. Bull, Jemtland og Norge, p. 134.

He had reigned in Sweden before, and wished to recover his throne. He made peace with the Swedes and settled in the country. The number of generations in the family tree from Sveig also fits in remarkably well. There are fourteen generations between Herjolf, the first man, and Asulf, the last, who must have lived somewhere about the year 1270. If, as usual, we reckon the length of each generation as thirty years, this gives a total of 420 years. Subtracting 420 from 1270 we get back to the year 850, i. e. the time of King Halfdan the Black. But the most striking coincidence is that the account in the document from Sveig agrees with the Landnáma tradition, although the two stories must be quite independent of each other. The Landnáma says that Thrasi, the grandson of Herjolf Hornabrjot left Hordaland for Iceland in the settlement period, i. e. the time between 870 and 930; and this, if the Herjedal tradition is correct, would be exactly the period in which Herjolf's grandson lived. The two traditions confirm each other.

These are the more general considerations. Obviously they indicate that the Icelandic saga-tradition was unusually reliable, as oral traditions go. In addition there are certain points of a more specific nature which show how faithfully this tradition preserved the historical memoirs.

First, we will see what an Icelandic tradition was like in the thirteenth century, when it was two or three generations old. Arons Saga represents, as already mentioned, a tradition of this kind. Aron's life resembled in many respects that of the outlawed heroes of the *söguöld*, and no other saga of the Sturlung time

has so much in common with the old family sagas. I have spoken of the dialogue in this saga and have shown that some of it, at any rate, must be historical. Further, I have mentioned in another connection that certain things in Arons Saga appear to be incorrect because they disagree with Sturla's Íslendinga Saga in a way which gives grounds for preferring the latter version. But the number of divergencies are trifling compared with the number of details which agree with Sturla — in fact, the two accounts tally in all the more important points. The resemblance is so great that we could get a detailed picture of all that happened simply from the parts that are common to Arons Saga and Íslendinga Saga. This means that after two or three generations the tradition had diverged so little from the contemporary account, that it was not appreciably less historical than at first. If Arons Saga had lived as long on the tongue of the people as the old family sagas did, the divergencies would of course have been very much greater. But there is no reason to suppose that they would have been of a different kind, or that they would suddenly have multiplied so rapidly as to make the account into something altogether different and unreliable. The conditions for the preservation of tradition cannot have been less favourable in the eleventh and twelfth centuries than they were in the thirteenth.

We have seen already, when comparing the saga variants, that tradition held its own well in the *friðaröld* and *ritöld*. Now it is true of all oral tradition that a great resemblance between variants indicates that they have kept pretty near to the original account. The

comparison of saga variants showed that, on the whole, there was little difference between them, even when the sagas came from different parts of the country. The main features were the same; one could never feel in doubt as to whether one was dealing with the same story or another, as is so often the case in folk-tradition. The agreement between the variants proves that the sagas had crystallized before the departures from the common source had gone very far. Whatever we may think of the date and trustworthiness of the common source in question,[1] it is certain that once a tradition has attained a fixed form it is more easily preserved and less liable to be altered.

The common source must, as a rule, have been a contemporary historical tradition. Were it otherwise, we should have to assume that the underlying historical account was deliberately re-fashioned. And further, that this process of re-fashioning led to precisely the same results in quite different parts of the country. That, however, would be unexampled in the field of family tradition; and it is hardly conceivable in Iceland, where there were so many branches of tradition, subject to very vigilant criticism and effective. checks.

It may be suggested that the exceptional opportunities of intercourse in Iceland made it possible for new and artistically superior forms of tradition to gain such wide currency that they ousted the old ones, as

[1] A story like the episode of Gunnar Thidrandabani at the wedding at Helgafell is improbable; see Vigfusson in Safn I, p. 409.

sometimes happens in the case of folk-tales; but to this hypothesis there are insuperable objections. For not only the form of the sagas, but a number of things in their contents as well, are indicative of a stable and trustworthy tradition.

In the first place, the sagas contain many skaldic poems which show every sign of being genuine. A great deal of this verse is only intelligible in connection with the events recorded in the context. It forms part of the saga tradition, and this part, at least, must have remained substantially intact. The fact that skalds are the leading actors in several of the sagas is evidence that the skaldic poetry helped to reinforce tradition. The poetry kept alive the memory of the men who composed it. Groups of stories came to be associated with the skalds, on account of their romantic love-tales and their often irregular lives. In Norwegian tradition, too, the favourite heroes were warlike or artistic natures.

Next, we find that even features of tradition which are usually liable to be modified in accordance with the needs of a later time have retained their original form to a surprising degree. Customs which have been abandoned, laws which have become obsolete, are apt to be replaced by others which are more up-to-date. But though details of this kind are altered in obedience to the dictates of a newer culture, the motif — the essential epic content of the story — may still remain unchanged.[1]

[1] Such things as legal provisions are generally more difficult to remember than the other matter in the sagas. Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavik gives us an admirable version of that portion of the

For instance, the description in the Skraddar tale of how Olaf Austegarden shot the goblin-bull with his gun, is a modification of an older form of the legend, in which the bull was killed with a javelin. Guns were in common use in the seventeenth century, and story-tellers in the nineteenth century would be unfamiliar with the javelin as a weapon used in hunting. But the verse preserves the original form: "Ringaal was slain by the javelin".[1] In his book entitled *Das Strafrecht der Isländersagas* (1911), Heusler has conclusively proved that the criminal law of the Icelandic sagas remained unaffected by the legal conceptions which were prevalent in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; it must, therefore, have been the ancient legal system which was in force in the *söguöld*. He enumerates 18 points in which saga law differs from Grágás; and here the sagas always represent the old provisions which were actually in force. There is not a single point, he states, in which the laws mentioned in the family sagas are later than Grágás. "*Und an keinem der hier hervorgehobenen Punkte kann man die Vermutung begründen, dass die Erzähler Bräuche späterer Zeit dem Sagaalter aufgedrängt hätten*" (p. 223).

This remarkable capacity for preserving the original intact was not the result of a mechanical and unintelligent but faithful repetition of the old stories. On the

Heiðarvíga Saga which he copied, and which was subsequently burnt. But where lawsuits are concerned there are several obscurities in his narrative. (See Heusler, Das Strafrecht der Isländersagas, p. 11).

[1] Norske ættesogor, p. 104.

contrary, the narrators (and the saga-writers) were fully aware of the difference between the conditions in the *söguöld* and their own day, and were fond of comparing them. We come across such comments as: *Þat váru lǫg í þann tíma, þat var þá siðr, sem þá var siðr til, þat var þá siðr kaupmanna, eptir fornum sið* — and other remarks of the same kind.[1] Even if the use of such expressions may sometimes be a mannerism, they occur so frequently and in such a way that they testify to a conscious historical sense, which sought to keep the characteristics of different times distinct from each other and to create historical perspective. Of course we come across anachronisms, especially in regard to clothing, weapons etc.; but it must not be forgotten in this connection that the historians of the past hardly realized the difference between old and new in such cases, for as Erslev observes,[2] "they naively imagined that all epochs were pretty much alike".

There is a definite connection between this conscious historical discrimination and the comparatively accurate chronology in the Icelandic family sagas. It may seem rather surprising to speak of the accuracy of this chronology, for there are many obvious errors and much that is open to doubt. But in reality the chronology of the family sagas is one of the best proofs that the tradition is tolerably reliable. We must remember that not a single date is given in these sagas. This fact has been taken as evidence that they are fictitious, as compared with the lives of the kings,

[1] Döring, Bemerkungen, p. 18; cf. above, page 126 ff.

[2] Historieskrivning, p. 17.

which claim to be historical, and are therefore chronologically arranged with dates. The same argument would prove that all the Norwegian family sagas were fictitious, for they do not give a single date either; but it has been proved that several of these sagas are true in all their main features. When events are divorced from dates and there is no systematic chronology at all, one would expect a great deal of re-grouping, especially as there are so many disconnected episodes which could easily be shifted from one place to another. There are, of course, some sagas, e. g. Laxd., in which the chronology has become dislocated. But in most of them the main lines are fairly clear, and not much remains in doubt. This can be seen from Vigfusson's *Tímatal í Íslendinga sögum*, which he completed in the short space of three months; the statements contained in this work have, broadly speaking, remained unassailable. The reason why the chronology causes, comparatively speaking, little difficulty, must be that occurrences described in the sagas as contemporary were, in fact, more or less contemporary, and usually recorded in correct sequence.[1] The chief mistakes appear just where we should expect to find them, i. e. in cases where the interval *between* two events is lengthened or shortened. The good mutual agreement between the sagas in the matter of

[1] Per Wieselgren has shown that the inner consistency of the chronology in Egils Saga is remarkable if we keep to the story itself and to reliable foreign sources, disregarding the learned chronology, of later origin, which is woven into this saga. (See Författarskapet till Eigla, pp. 83—107, and Tideräkningsfrågan i norsk niohundratalshistoria in (Swedish) Historisk Tidskrift 1929, pp. 35—66.

chronology is not a result of later manipulations, as may easily be seen from the confusion which arises as soon as we come to the inventions of a later age. The *Bolla-þáttr* in Laxd. cannot be made to fit in with the rest, and the Finnboga Saga has so many divergencies from the chronology in the other sagas that it occupies a place quite by itself.

Yet, with all their efforts to be accurate and lucid, the sagas contain things which have been misinterpreted or misunderstood. And this comes of their very fidelity to the original.

An example — taken, it is true, from the Biskupa Sögur, but embodying the kind of tradition that we find in the foreign portions of the family sagas — will show how a speech might be preserved intact in spite of being misunderstood. Gisl Illugason, who accompanied Magnus Barefoot to Ireland, was the chief of the hostages whom King Magnus sent to King Myrkjartan of Connaught. Among these hostages was a Norseman. This man said he knew Irish well and asked leave to greet the king, which Gisl granted. When the time came he greeted the king, with the word "*Malediarik*" which, the saga explains, means "Cursed be thou, O king." One of the king's men exclaimed: "Sire, this man must be the meanest thrall of all the Norsemen!" The king answered "*Olgeira ragall*", meaning, we are told: "Unknown is a dark road." The first speech in Irish is: "*Mallacht duit a rig*", which is correctly translated. Marstrander, who was the first to interpret the last speech, says that it "is simply the Ir. *olc aera(dh) ra gall*, 'It is ill to be cursed by a Northman'; the mute

Ir. *dh* was naturally dropped when the phrase was repeated in Norwegian. Explained in this fashion the speeches fit in perfectly with the circumstances." [1] These speeches had been remembered for more than a hundred years. The incident occurred near the end of the eleventh century, and Jóns Saga, in which it is related (I, p. 227), was not written till the thirteenth century. Notwithstanding the fact that the meaning of one of the speeches had been forgotten, the Irish form of it was so faithfully preserved that it has now been possible to find out what the words meant.

In Njála we read that Flosi asked Snorri Godi why he was hindering the incendiaries from going up to the stronghold in Almannagjá. Snorri replied that it was not himself but Thorvald Kroppinskeggi and Kol who were barring the way, and the saga adds: "Both of them were dead, and they had been the worst of the evil-doers in Flosi's band". This is simply a vague reminiscence of a crime which had a special connection with the place where the Althing was held. Ari Frodi tells the story as follows: "A man who owned land in Bláskógar had been found guilty of the murder of a thrall or a freedman; his name was Thorir Kroppinskeggi. His daughter had a son, Thorvald Kroppinskeggi, who afterwards went to Austfirðir and burned Gunnar, his brother, in his house. The story was told thus by Hall Orœkjason. And the murdered man's name was Kol. The ravine where his body was found was subsequently called Kolsgjá after him. This piece of land was afterwards a common which the Icelanders set aside for the

[1] Bidrag til det norske sprogs historie i Irland, p. 69, note 2.

Althing." The tradition about the great burning case at the Althing must have included a remark by Snorri Godi referring to the crimes recorded by Ari. But the saga-writer did not understand Snorri's allusion, so he (or tradition before him) interpreted it in his own way.[1]

There is a paper by Hans E. Kinck entitled *Ættesagaen. Skikkelser den ikke forstod* ("The family saga. Misunderstood characters in it"). Here he points out that the sagas contain materials for a number of character sketches, but that these materials were never utilized because the narrators did not understand the particulars handed down by tradition, which might have served as a basis for a conception of their characters. History recorded the facts and tradition preserved them, although the story-tellers could not see the psychological connection between them. These facts, then, are survivals, in the light of which a modern author can form a clearer and truer idea of the persons in question. The examples mentioned by Kinck include Hallgerd and Kari (in Njála), Kormak and Yngvild Fair-cheek (in Svarfd.). It is difficult to express any definite opinion on this theory, for the view taken will necessarily be very individual. But Kinck certainly seems to be on the right track. Several of the characters, e. g. Snorri Godi and Gudmund the Mighty, retain their identity in entirely different sagas; the inner correspondence between their action in these different sagas not only shows that the conception of

[1] See Matthías Þórðarson: "Hvað Snorri goði sagði" in Árbók hins íslenzka fornleifafélags, 1920, pp. 8—10.

[2] Mange slags kunst pp. 3—58; cf. Dagbladet June 5, 1926.

their characters had long been fixed, but that it had a certain connection with the underlying historical source, which must have furnished a sufficient number of traits for tradition to preserve an outline of their characters. Even the composite, mixed, and unexpected elements that we find are very different from the portraiture in the fictitious sagas of the same period, and indeed from mediaeval character sketches in general. As a rule the persons in the family sagas are very clearly drawn; the story-tellers understood them. But it need hardly be said that the vast portrait gallery in the sagas contained a certain number of complex and enigmatical personalities who were understood neither by their own nor by succeeding generations, and who never found an interpreter among the story-tellers. They retained the place in tradition which had belonged to them from the first, but they were always envisaged in a dim and even distorted fashion. Here again the rich diversity of life itself made it more difficult to create an artistically complete whole, as we have already seen in considering the composition of the sagas.

There is, however, another and a more direct manner in which the persons in the sagas appear to be firmly fixed in the underlying stratum of history. We have seen already[1] that the number of persons decreased as the historical tradition was handed on from one narrator to another, those being dropped who were unnecessary to the story. Still, the number retained in the family sagas is exceptionally large. It is this feature, no doubt, that often makes the sagas

[1] See p. 73.

difficult to read. I do not allude to the genealogies with which the sagas are also overloaded, but to the persons who are mentioned in connection with the story. These do not necessarily play any part in it. When, for instance, a saga gives the name of a man who had some casual connection with certain events, it is apt to give the name of his wife as well, even if she had nothing to do with them. In Bjarnar Saga we read that: "Thord Kolbeinsson helped two outlaws and allowed them to take refuge in Hraundalr with Steinolf, whose wife was Thorhalla Gudbrandsdottir".[1] The fact that Steinolf was married has nothing to do with the story, and the names of his wife and her father are quite irrelevant. At other times we are given the names of persons who took part in a battle, including some who did nothing. In Reykd. a message is sent to various people who are to join in the fight in which Hanef loses his life. Among them is "Thorir Geitskegg who lived in Laxárdalr, at the farm called Holt". At first he is unwilling to go, but he consents to do so for Askel's sake; this is all we hear about him.[2] Among the followers of Helgi Droplaugarson on his last expedition is a man named Gunnstein of Krossavík; but he does nothing, and there is no other mention of him either before or afterwards.[3] This sort of thing is quite common. One might indeed suppose that it was a literary device intended to make the narrative more realistic, and that the names were borrowed or invented. In fact, several of the persons

[1] Boer's edit., p. 48.

[2] Ísl. forns. II, p. 26.

[3] Austfirðinga sǫgur, p. 157.

in the foreign episodes seem to be fictitious; and the man in Njála who took Hallgerd home after her husband had been killed was probably put in by the saga-writer. But we find that the fictitious persons were generally added because they were necessary in some way to the plot — not as a mere dead weight.

Persons who take no active part in the story occur, moreover, in the earliest and most reliable sagas. Heiðarvíga Saga states that Illugi and Eystein, the sons of Eid, were summoned and took part in the campaign; but we are not told of anything they did. These men, at any rate, were not invented, as we come across them again, as well as their family, in the Landnáma. The clearest evidence that such persons really had a place in the original tradition is afforded by a comparison between Sturlunga, the family sagas, and the *fornaldarsǫgur*. Sturlunga gives many more names than the family sagas, because in its case the tradition was too recent to have discarded as many of them as the older family sagas did. On the other hand the *fornaldarsǫgur* have not nearly so many names as the family sagas, although they obviously tried to imitate the style of the latter, and might therefore have been tempted to put in imaginary persons, especially as the narrative was not subject to the same strenuous control as the local Icelandic sagas.

Absolute proofs of the truth of particular incidents cannot very well be given because there is practically no means of checking the facts. The archaeological researches have not produced any decisive results. The discovery of traces of an old fire at Kirkjubær certainly suggests that there may have been historical grounds

for Njála's statement that Otkell burned the store-house there, but it is no proof. On the other hand the sagas of the kings give us some idea of the way in which *söguöld* tradition might preserve historical details — including little touches which have no bearing on the epic narrative but are merely embedded in it and help to make it more vivid. After the battle of Nisa Svein Estridsson escaped and made his way to a farm. Here the peasant's wife did not know the king; and when she heard how the battle had gone she said it was only natural that the Danes should have been defeated, seeing that their king was both *haltr ok ragr* (lame and craven). Now there is no mention, either in contemporary or any other records, of the fact that Svein was lame. But an examination of Svein Estridsson's skeleton in recent times has shown that he had a defect in the hip which would have caused him to limp a little, especially if he walked at all fast. It his highly improbable that the Icelanders would have invented a groundless story that the king had a bodily defect; and that this would afterwards have turned out to be true. The story must, therefore, be an old tradition; the most reasonable explanation being that the king subsequently related the amusing anecdote of the woman who did not know him, and that this anecdote found its way directly or indirectly to Iceland, where it was transmitted by at least two or three story-tellers before being committed to writing.[1]

[1] Finnur Jónsson in Skírnir 1919, pp. 184—185.

CHAPTER IX

THE FAMILY SAGA'S CLAIM TO BE HISTORY

In the chapter entitled "Unhistorical" we saw that the Icelandic family sagas are in many respects unreliable; while in the last chapter we came to the conclusion that they enshrined many old memories, and further that, on account of the conditions in which Icelandic traditions were preserved, they ought to be particularly reliable.

This may seem self-contradictory, but in reality these apparently inconsistent results can easily be reconciled.

In dealing with the question of reliability or unreliability students of family tradition have often gone to work in a somewhat mechanical fashion. Some collect the historical features and pointing to these exclaim: see how much of the family sagas is true. Others concentrate upon the errors and omissions in the tradition and exclaim: how unreliable it all is! This method has long been in vogue in the case of the Icelandic family sagas. While Icelanders have been prone to lay stress upon their reliability, various foreign research workers have dwelt upon their artistic merit and unhistorical character.

It is easy to see and prove that a tradition may become unreliable in a short space of time — even in a few days or weeks. This, indeed, frequently happens. Accordingly, several research workers argue, on the strength of a mass of old and new material, that what may properly be termed oral historical tradition never retains its character for more than two or three generations. More recent studies of family, and to some extent other, traditions have, however, made it clear that oral tradition may survive in a tolerably reliable form for several centuries. Obviously, then, we can neither say of oral tradition that it is essentially reliable or unreliable, nor that it is essentially short-lived or long-lived. *Everything depends on the conditions in which it lives.* Some factors preserve, others disintegrate it. The interplay of these factors decides whether a tradition will become fixed and lasting, or fall to pieces in a short time. Some components of tradition are more liable to be altered than others; the same story may be historical in parts, though in other parts it may be quite unreliable and fictitious.

In the modern study of tradition this general question of the reliability or unreliability of oral tradition has been abandoned. The issue is not, in any case, a clearly defined one, for we cannot draw any hard and fast distinction between reliable and unreliable traditions. No story is absolutely correct, it can never give us *das Ding an sich.* What percentage of truth must a tradition contain before it can be considered reliable? And what percentage is admissible before we may pronounce it unreliable? Here as elsewhere everything is relative. Our task, therefore, is to discover the factors

which govern the development of tradition, and find out how and when they come into play. Special conditions will produce unusual results. This method of research will, it is to be hoped, conduct us to firmer and safer ground, from which we can survey the whole problem of oral historical tradition.

Now the historian depends less upon general laws of tradition and rational analogies than upon his own subjective judgment, trained by work in a different field, where the material takes form in different circumstances and obeys different laws. His attitude to tradition is more or less sceptical, and it often becomes a matter of personal taste whether he accepts a thing as history or rejects it as fiction. This largely accounts for the very divergent points of view, ranging from a rather uncritical acceptance of everything within reason, to an arbitrary scepticism which relegates most things to the realm of pure invention. The very premisses upon which we might base our judgment are lacking here. Neither belief nor disbelief is scientific in itself; we have to find out *why* we believe or disbelieve.

In the preceding chapter I drew attention to many circumstances which would help to preserve tradition in Iceland and make it more reliable than elsewhere. Historical, political and social factors united to produce the same result. The conditions which are most effective in keeping tradition reliable were present in Iceland in a vigorous combination which must have been almost unparalleled.

That the Icelandic family sagas nevertheless contain many errors is only natural. It would be so even if we had only to take into account lapses of memory.

But the self-contradictory conclusions mentioned at the beginning of the present chapter are to some extent accounted for by the fact that we have intentionally dealt throughout with the family sagas as a whole, without distinguishing between sagas which are more, or less, reliable. We had to see what result would be reached by studying the features which are common to all or most of the family sagas. In reality, however, these sagas, much as they resemble one another in style and choice of subject, differ greatly in a number of ways. In discussing various aspects of the family sagas we have repeatedly quoted the same sagas, while little or no mention has been made of the rest. In connection with the subject of literary loans the chief illustrations have been taken from Njála, Svarfd., Gull-Þóris Saga, Hávarðar Saga and Flóam; there has not been a single example from Heiðarvíga Saga, Reykd. or Vápnf. The same thing applies to cases in which the incidents have been touched up and unreasonably exaggerated, great deeds being magnified out of all proportion; here again the same sagas are in the fore-front. But these are precisely the sagas which literary historians consider to be late and place in a separate category as being in some respects less historical than the others. Moreover we have seen in comparing the variants that the style of certain sagas was polished in such a way that they became more literary or more personal, or acquired an enhanced artistic value. This applies more especially to Njála and Laxd. Other sagas, such as Reykd. and Ljósv., we have found to be very faithful to tradition; the author was loth to make any considerable departure from the story as he

had heard it; in fact we may say that he was more a collector and recorder of stories than an author. All this obviously places the sagas in such different categories from an *historical* point of view, that we cannot possibly argue from the earlier to the later sagas.

In certain cases, however, practically all the sagas must be taken into account in discussing the problem of unreliability. If we are dealing with superstitions, we naturally regard them as something unreal, or at least as a misinterpretation of historical phenomena. But the people of the saga age made no distinction, as regards possibility or impossibility, between these things and the most everyday occurrences. They believed in sorcery, prophecies, warnings, ghosts, and various kinds of genii; if anything peculiar happened it came quite natural to them to attribute it to what we should call supernatural causes. If you believe in warnings, it is natural to look for them everywhere; if anything strange happens, it is natural to ask whether it was preceded by a warning, and easy to find something which can be regarded as such. The belief in true dreams, again, makes people pay more attention to dreams, remember them better, and interpret them more readily as warnings. Thus the supernatural is given a place in the historical narrative either as something supplementary to ordinary occurrences or as an explanation of them.

The supernatural element does not necessarily insinuate itself into the narrative at a later stage — it may be there from the very first. Anyone who has studied folklore at all, is aware of the surprising rapidity with which a story may be transformed, if ordinary superstitions

have a chance of getting into it. The supernatural manifests itself in typical forms which are easily recognized, and the historical account has to make room for these and adapt itself to them. At the same time features taken from older stories of a similar nature are apt to be interpolated in the historical narrative. A good instance of this is a tale about the Devil in Danzig, which was investigated by Mannhardt. According to this tale, the Devil went to a ball-room in that city, danced with a girl there, and then jumped out of the window with her. The story had quickly developed out of a perfectly simple and natural incident, under the influence of an old legend, with a superstitious belief in the Devil as the mainspring of the whole thing.[1] Another case is Amund Helland's story of how a picture of the Virgin stopped the flow of lava from Vesuvius on April 8th. 1906.[2]

In Iceland a belief in warnings, prophecies, dreams, and ghosts has been prevalent in all ages. The two parts of *Gráskinna* that have been published afford many examples from our own day. It will be sufficient to take the first long tale, about *Skiptapinn á Hjallasandi.* The headings speak for themselves. 1. *Andlatsspá Torfa.* 2. *Mannshöfuðin* [an admonitory dream]. 3. *Forspá Péturs Steinssonar.* 4. *Sýn Péturs Péturssonar.* 5. *Draumar Snæbjarnar.* 6. *Sýn Gísla Ólafssonar.* At length we come to the story: 7. *Skiptapinn. Frásögn Snæbjarnar.* 8. *Drukknun Eyjamanna. Frásögn Guðjóns Guðlaugssonar frá Ljúfustödum.* Then, with the last heading, we come back to: 9. *Sýn Ingimundar*

[1] Mélusine I, pp. 564—567.
[2] Samtiden 1910, p. 413 ff.

Jónssonar. The whole story relates to events in the 'seventies of last century.

If we go back two or three hundred years to the time of Torfæus we find the same thing. In many ways Thormod Torfæus reminds one of the old chieftains who had a bent for history. Large-limbed, powerful, robust and genial, he was a *vígamaðr* to the best of his abilities, and a man of substance who knew how to stand up for his rights. He was a scholar, but prone to believe everything he found in the ancient sagas, and even to accept, wherever possible, the contents of the *fornaldarsǫgur* as historical. He made great use of current oral tradition (Orvarodd, Aslaug Kraka), and dealt with it in such a conscientious and scholarly fashion that Svend Grundtvig quotes the whole of his written version of the Aslaug legend "as a model of the way in which such records should be compiled".[1] But superstition went hand in hand with his learning and research, and had such a firm hold upon him that he was disposed to accept almost anything in the sagas which concerned predictions, sorcery, and the like. He himself had admonitory dreams and saw apparitions; he relates that one of his forefathers appeared to him in a dream and revealed his future in oracular words.[2]

If we go still farther back to the thirteenth century, we find that Sturla Thordarson has much to tell us about warnings and dreams, and that he has the gift of prophecy. Some of the warnings in Sturlunga bear a remarkable resemblance to the family sagas; e. g. the passage in Íslendinga Saga ch. 311, which describes

[1] Danmarks gamle Folkeviser I, p. 328.

[2] See Arne Magnussons Brevveksling med Torfæus, p. XXVII.

how blood appeared on the food (cf. Heiðarvíga Saga, p. 82, and Njála, ch. 82 and 127).[1]

Admonitory dreams were commonplaces in the Sturlung age, as we should naturally expect, since the people of those days believed in such things, and lived dangerous and unsettled lives which made them highly-strung. The conditions in the *söguöld* must have been rather similar; we meet with the same beliefs and the same insecurity and quarrels. There can be no doubt, therefore, that the supernatural element existed in saga traditions from the very first. The only question is, to what extent was it able to alter the historical subject matter.

As a rule we find that the supernatural features can be removed without difficulty, and that they have not affected the rest of the material to any great extent. Accounts of storms, avalanches etc. caused by sorcery *may* be perfectly true, except in so far as they explain how such storms or avalanches were brought about. In Eyrb. the whole of the large section relating to the marvels at Fróðá is devoid of any connection with the rest of the story; there is something curiously realistic even about its disconnected and inexplicable character, which suggests that it may in some way be founded on fact.[2] Sometimes the close correspondence between the warning (or prophecy) and the event shows that the warning (prophecy) has been made to conform with the event; this has evidently happened in the case of Gudrun Osvifsdottir's dream about her four marriages

[1] Cf. several examples given by Kersbergen, pp. 162—163.

[2] See Collingwood and Stefánsson, A Pilgrimage to the Sagasteads of Iceland, p. 67.

(Laxd. ch. 33). In Kormaks Saga the spell is intended to explain Kormak's *brigðmæli* (breach of promise), as the narrators cannot find any natural explanation. At other times a dream or warning is of purely literary origin, like the falcon dream in Gunnlaugs Saga.[1]

But in other instances, as we should expect, the supernatural penetrated deeply into the story itself while it was developing, with far-reaching effects. In the Mávahlíð episode in Eyrb. the supernatural element has been welded so firmly into the rest that it must at any rate have changed the part which was historical, as, indeed, may be inferred from the skaldic verses. Sometimes a comparison of the variants shows how the supernatural element increased as time went on. For example there is Sigurður Nordal's explanation of how Thangbrand lost his horse; this narrative has a historical basis, but the natural occurrences have received a supernatural interpretation and have subsequently absorbed certain epic features from legends about sorcery in the usual way. In the story of Gisl Illugason we are told that he was sentenced to death and would have been executed, had not Jón Ǫgmundsson, who was there, pleaded successfully for his release. But in Jóns Saga we read that Gisl was hanged and then restored to life by a miracle that Jón performed!

The supernatural element in a saga may be the expression of a certain attitude towards the entire narrative; in such a case it may colour everything, without necessarily altering any important detail in the story. This gives to the whole saga a slightly one-sided character, often throwing a kind of shadow of fateful

[1] See also Kersbergen, p. 158.

gloom over it. Gísl., Glúma and Harðar Saga are conspicuous examples. Occasionally we come upon inconsistent views of the supernatural powers at work behind the scenes. In Vatnsd. the idea of *hamingja* (luck) pervades the whole; whereas the predominating idea in the older form found in the Landnáma is that of a curse.[1] The sequence of events, however, is practically the same in both.

The supernatural element in the family sagas does not indicate that the story-tellers handled tradition arbitrarily or disbelieved in it. They saw no difference between the supernatural part and the rest of the subject matter; both alike were 'history'. The supernatural might, like other material, subserve artistic ends; but apart from this there are no signs that the sagas we are considering were invented, any more than the Norwegian family sagas were invented.

Another respect in which, as we have seen, the Icelandic family saga appears to be largely unhistorical, is the dialogue. It has been shown that there must have been conversations in the story from the first. A number of these are doubtless historical; the main points in them may be true, and some of the speeches may even have been couched in the actual words recorded in the sagas; for there is no reason why such things should not be remembered quite as long as any other material, provided their form is sufficiently striking to impress itself upon the memory. But we have seen also that dialogue is particularly liable to undergo modifications; and generally speaking it is the most difficult part of tradition to remember accurately.

1 Vogt, Vatnsdœla, p. XVII.

Several of the conversations, moreover, are unquestionably inventions. According to modern historical standards this is a serious indictment of the family saga. Consider how much space is devoted to dialogue, and how greatly the dialogue helps us to understand persons and events in the family sagas. What remains of Ofeig the Crafty apart from what he said? Or of Hallgerd in Njála?

But here again we must judge the family sagas, not by standards of modern historical research, but by what was normal in the Middle Ages. The writing of history was to a large extent an art in olden times, as it is to-day. But every art has its own forms of expression, and those employed by the historian in the past were different in many respects from those now in vogue, which are so familiar that we regard them as inseparable from all true history. The old forms of expression have more in common with the technique of epic poetry or the modern historical novel; for in the old days, as the romanticists used to say, poetry had not been divorced from history. Herodotus, the first great historian, shows what the classical scholar Jebb terms "the true freedom of an epic poet" in the more dramatic parts of his narrative. He seldom uses his own words if there is a reasonable pretext for allowing historical personages to speak instead.[1] Thucydides endeavoured to make a clear distinction between truth and fiction; if, however, he did not know exactly what someone had said, he put into his mouth words which seemed suitable and natural to the occasion. Much the same thing was done by a number of

[1] Essays and Addresses, p. 363. Cf. above p. 172.

historians down the ages (up to about the year 1800). Mezerai, for instance, represented Joan of Arc as making a speech to her executioners, full of mockery and sinister predictions, although contemporary records prove that she never did anything of the kind. The splendid speech that Snorri puts into the mouth of Thorgny Lagmann seems to be a pure invention[1]; and the same may be said of many other speeches in Snorri. Undoubtedly speeches and conversations often make more impression upon us, and give more substance to the picture we form in our minds of bygone days, than mere descriptions of the events that occurred. A historian's opinion of persons or events comes out more clearly in these speeches and conversations. If his knowledge of the times of which he is writing is thorough and he has made a sympathetic study of the persons he describes, his interpretation will help us to form a more correct estimate of those far off days.

The supernatural element, migratory legends, and dialogue, all seem to have aided in moulding oral tradition. They either found their way in or were deliberately utilized when the story-tellers could not produce the effect desired by more direct means. Methods which find favour with modern writers — lengthy, detailed descriptions, logical argument, abstract statement — would have been wholly unsuited to the art of oral narration. Nevertheless the difference between the art of the historian nowadays and in the past is by no means as absolute and immeasurable as many appear to imagine. Let us see what the historical

[1] Nat. Beckman in Edda, vol. IX (1918), pp. 278—286.

critic Erslev has to say on this subject in his book entitled *Historieskrivning* (the Writing of History):

"History, with its innate predilection for graphic vividness of presentation, compels the historian to avoid abstract terms and to replace them by arresting details" (p. 21).

"We can see that the demand for dramatic vividness is deeply inherent in the very nature of the historian's art, from the immense pains he takes to re-fashion material which is not dramatic in itself" (p. 20).

As an artist the historian selects what is characteristic. As an artist he endeavours to weld it together, round it off, and reveal the underlying motives. His mentality and his attitude towards social problems and life in general are bound to colour his writings, however impartial he may try to be. We all know what an enormous difference an author's religious or political opinions make when he comes to describe a certain class of events. In delineating character "the strictly scientific method is abandoned, being replaced by ordinary knowledge of human nature," as Erslev puts it (p. 25). According to a celebrated saying of Michelet, which is inscribed on his tomb, *L'histoire est une résurrection* — history is a resurrection. The words often come to mind as one reads the Icelandic family sagas; for they are living history in which the old times rise again from the dead. And among the great historical works of later times there are some which resemble the family sagas, inasmuch as they are great works of art. They have an unalterable character of their own, and can never be "brought up to date". Of these too we may say: *Sint ut sunt, aut non sint.*

In judging of the historical reliability of the sagas we must remember that they represent a selection of incidents taken from life, and that it came natural to choose historical matter which could easily be put into an artistic shape, or which had from the first a connected epic form or dramatic structure. Material which life itself had rough-hewn, in such a way that it could readily be converted into a work of art without greatly altering its original form, had the best chance among the many subjects which competed for a place in tradition. Things that were commonplace and undramatic were soon passed over and forgotten. Perfect aesthetic form cannot, therefore, be taken as a decisive proof that a saga has departed far from the historical facts. Moreover the private, unpolitical — or, at most, locally political — nature of the contents of the family sagas is apt to make us think, not so much of history, as of historical novels, where personal and private matters are normally placed in the foreground.

If, then, we bear in mind the circumstances in which the Icelandic traditions grew up, and base our judgment upon the criteria afforded by the sagas themselves, we arrive at the final result that the family sagas have a historical foundation, that they claimed from the first to be history, and that they were looked upon as historical. But in the form in which they exist to-day they contain very much that is unhistorical. There are errors due to lapses of memory and misinterpretations. There are things which would nowadays be called unhistorical because they were not in the original tradition, but were put in later as expansions and additions. There

are errors due to the artistic shaping of historical matter, which reacted upon and altered the history itself. It is often difficult and even impossible to draw the line between what is, and what is not, historical. But Sophus Bugge's dictum with regard to the Icelandic tradition of events prior to the period of settlement, that "its statements cannot even claim to be authentic until they are disproved," is not really applicable to the family sagas. As regards the older sagas, which were not subjected to literary revision, the proper criterion would seem to be that if there are no grounds for holding that a thing is unhistorical there are grounds for holding that it is historical. This means that a great deal which cannot well be checked must be accepted as historical — not in every particular, but in the main. In so doing we shall, of course, make mistakes, because some things may be unreliable for reasons we can no longer ascertain. But it would be a greater mistake to assume that the bulk of the material which cannot be checked is unhistorical.

This conclusion is confirmed by a comparison with the Norwegian family sagas, which can often be checked, not only as regards their main features but sometimes in regard to quite small points as well.

Here we must recollect that, artistically, the Norwegian family sagas occupy a lower plane than those of Iceland. They lack the intelligent breadth of vision that we invariably find in the Icelandic sagas. The characters are often drawn clearly enough, and we get a vivid impression of men like Asgeir Heggtveit, Sterke-Saave and Olav Mannslagar; but the media of expression are few and rather rudimentary. We do not feel that the

material has been subjected to the penetrating artistic analysis which knows how to seize the salient points and place them in the foreground.

This explains why Norwegian family tradition is so much scantier. The episodes in it are seldom expanded to the epic breadth and richness that we associate with the Icelandic family sagas. Moreover the Norwegian tradition was reduced to writing at a date when much had been forgotten and the ancient art of story-telling was in its decline.

In the present connection, however, these differences are unimportant. For the resemblances between the Norwegian and Icelandic family traditions are many and great notwithstanding, and they relate to precisely the points which are of most importance in deciding whether tradition has remained reliable.

In the first place, the interval between the date of the events and the time when the record of them was reduced to writing is approximately the same in Norway and Iceland. Secondly, the subject matter is largely the same. In both cases the story centres round one man or several men who lived at the same time; or else round two or three generations of the same family. In both cases the story is concerned with the lives of the great peasant landowners. We are told how much property they owned, how large their houses were, how extravagantly they lived, how generous and powerful they were, how far they travelled. The events, too, are *mutatis mutandis* of the same kind — quarrels about land or a woman, quarrels ending in murder, vengeance and outlawry. The women goad on the men

to take vengeance. Particulars are given of odel-lands, lawsuits, relationships and marriages.

In their form, too, the narratives agree in several important respects. Both the Norwegian and the Icelandic family traditions tell us what people looked like.[1] Both have preserved verses which were composed on various occasions. The narrative is usually episodic, so that portions can be omitted without being missed. Ordinary folk-legends (migratory legends, legends of origins) are interwoven with the story. Superstitions are mingled with the historical facts. One story borrows features from another. In both cases we can see that efforts have been made to weld the episodes better together; and that a particular view of the whole course of events sometimes shines through. This shows that the content of oral tradition developed to a considerable extent on parallel lines in the two countries.

If we try to estimate how much is true in the Norwegian family sagas we discover that the amount of truth varies very much from one saga to another. The Skraddar tale, the story of Olav Mannslagar, and several other tales have been found to be tolerably reliable. Others, like the long Egde tale, are very unreliable. Here again we can see how the conditions affected the tradition. We find that the most trust-

[1] This, as Axel Olrik has pointed out, is a peculiarity of Norse tradition, which is found in Saxo just where the material is of Norse origin. "It deserves mention also, that the Faroean and Norwegian ballads contain palpable traces of descriptions in the saga style (though they are hardly as striking as those in Saxo's *fornaldarsǫgur);* this shows that a certain type of description must have been used in the Norse countries by others as well as the genuinely Icelandic sagamen." (Sakses Oldhistorie 1, p. 73; cf. p. 68.)

worthy traditions emanate from the families which were conspicuous for their mental alertness and interest in history. This applies to the Skraddar family; and the descendents of Olav Mannslagar were, as Rikard Berge says, "a family of story-tellers". The family sagas come from just those parts of the country where story-telling was much practised, which means that there were many opportunities of hearing these tales. In other words, the sagas which are found to be exceptionally reliable usually turn out to be connected with places where the knowledge, the criticism, and the checks were above the average.

The conclusion at which I arrived when studying the Skraddar and other tales from Agder was as follows: "What may be called the skeleton of the story is historical throughout. The men and women mentioned in it really existed; not one of them is imaginary. Their names are in most cases given correctly, even in the case of subordinate characters. The relationships are also correct in most cases. The generations are given in correct order. And the same may be said of many small, often quite trifling, points . . . . . The *unhistorical* element is chiefly noticeable in the matter which serves to fill out and enrich the narrative, giving life and colour to it. These sagas do not differ so much in regard to historical facts or particular data as in *the view taken of them.*"[1] I may add the important point that the age of a tradition is not necessarily decisive evidence for or against its reliability. It is not true that the unhistorical element increases with the age of the tradition. The older portions of the

[1] Norske ættesogor, pp. 154, 155—156.

Skraddar tale can easily be checked, and they appear to be as reliable as the later portions. The explanation must be that the tradition acquired a tolerably fixed form at a comparatively early date, and thus became more capable of resisting the process of modification.

Basing our conclusion upon all these analogies we may consider the Icelandic family sagas to be at least as reliable as the Norwegian family sagas. In Iceland the sagas attained greater fixity of form, and the criticism was more vigilant. How much better and more detailed the old Icelandic traditions were than the later traditions in Norway, may best be seen by comparing Neo-Norwegian traditions, current for about a century, with the old Icelandic tradition in Sturlunga. The latter is much more circumstantial and coherent. Arons saga Hjǫrleifssonar shows how remarkably trustworthy the tradition might be, for not only are the main facts of the story true, but even, apparently, the majority of its smaller details. Of course the form is far more artistic in Iceland; but this, as we have seen, does not mean that the historical facts were modified to an equal extent. They were arranged in connected sequence and explained. There were fewest additions and modifications, as already stated, in cases where the subject matter existed in an artistic form from the outset; and matter of this kind had the best chance, by a process of natural selection, of being embodied in a saga.

The conditions in Iceland changed rapidly in the course of the period in which the sagas were reduced to writing. Outside influences became stronger and a literary standard was set up. In the longer sagas,

such as Laxd. and Njála, the author's deliberate attempt to make everything interesting, detailed and effective, made him more independent of tradition. The writing down of sagas, which to begin with was merely intended to preserve them from being forgotten, ended with the creation of individual works of art like Njála, and romances in the ancient style like Þórðar saga Hreðu. In sagas like Friðþjófs Saga and Víglundar Saga themes taken from the *fornöld* and *söguöld*, in combination with themes taken from European literature, form compositions of a new kind proper to a new age.

The writing down of the sagas had the effect of making their oral preservation more difficult. The very fact that we know that something is in writing makes us less careful about remembering it, at any rate when it is chiefly considered as an object of scientific study. But it was high time for the sagas to be put into book form. However retentive the memory may be, it cannot retain an unlimited amount. New material demanding a place ousts the older material. The Sturlung time, with its disturbed conditions and its many notable happenings, thrust the ancient family memories into the background; men's minds were full of the new events. We may take it for granted that the majority of the family sagas committed to writing later than the Sturlung time were recorded by people who had no direct connection with tradition in the previous period. For the traditions of the *söguöld* written down about the year 1300 had evidently faded greatly; these sagas (Svarfd., Hávarðar Saga, Gretla, Hœnsa-Þóris Saga, Flóam.) are far inferior to their predecessors in historical value. The Icelandic saga tradition

had now to contend with the obstacle which so often destroys the memorials of the past; people had turned their minds to other interests — modern history and modern literature.[1] The special conditions which had preserved the tradition of the *söguöld* were now, to a large extent, lacking. The Icelandic family saga had to obey the law of life which ordains that growth is followed by decay and that the blossom, when full-blown, sheds its petals. But we owe an immense debt of gratitude to the old Icelanders who not only brought the blossom to perfection, but preserved it in writing for the delectation of future generations.

Only on the assumption that the Icelandic family saga claims to be, and *is*, history in the mediaeval sense, can we really understand it — appraising it as a work of art and placing it in its proper position in the literature of the same epoch. It is unique, for here and here only was the old Germanic art of story-telling committed to parchment without any alteration. It is unique, too, because this art rose to greater heights in Iceland than anywhere else. It stands apart from all the other literature of the Middle Ages. It has no place in the usual categories, and occupies one by itself, which proves that both its origin and its development were exceptional. In an age of romance it achieved a realism which remained unparalleled until the nineteenth century. This realism was the expression of its intimate connection with life, based as it was

[1] In the last few generations there have been ample opportunities of studying both the causes which destroy tradition and the conditions which help to preserve it. See Kaarle Krohn, Die folkloristische Methode, p. 65.

upon actual events, recorded by a people with a genius for facts, whether in the form of a scientific respect for tradition or of an artistic insight into the workings of the soul. In an age when migratory motifs encroached, as it were, in every direction, it remained, with a few exceptions, untainted by them. In an age when it was an accepted practice for compositions to borrow freely from one another, we find only a few instances of an epic theme which was actually transferred from one saga to another.

The Icelandic family saga stood alone, with its roots deep in the past; and it rose to heights which render it conspicuous in the literature of the world.

ABBREVIATIONS. EDITIONS OF THE SAGAS

Archives: Archives d'études orientales.
Arkiv (ell. Ark.): Arkiv for nordisk filologi.
Döring, Bemerkungen: Bernhard Döring, Bemerkungen über Stil und Typus der isländischen Saga (Programm des Nicolaigymnasiums in Leipzig) 1877.
Dropl.: Droplaugarsona saga.
Edda: Edda. Nordisk tidsskrift for literaturforskning 1914 ff.
Eyrb.: Eyrbyggja saga.
FFC.: FF Communications 1911 ff.
Flat.: Flateyjarbók I—III. Christiania 1860—68.
Flóam.: Flóamanna saga.
Fms.: Fornmanna sögur I—XII (1825—1837).
Fóstbr.: Fóstbrœðra saga.
Fær.: Færeyinga saga.
Gísl.: Gísla saga Súrssonar.
Gunn. s. Þiðr.: Gunnars saga Þiðrandabana.
Gunnl.: Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu.
Hallfr.: Hallfreðar saga.
Heinzel, Beschreibung (or only: Heinzel): Richard Heinzel, Beschreibung der isländischen Saga (Sitzungsber. d. kais. Akad. d. Wiss. Phil.-hist. Cl. XCVII, Wien 1880).
Heusler, Anfänge: Andreas Heusler, Die Anfänge der isländischen Saga (Abh. d. kön. preuss. Akad. d. Wiss. Jahrg. 1913. Phil-hist. Cl. nr. 9. Berlin 1914).
Ísl. forns.: Íslenzkar fornsögur I—III. Kaupmannahöfn 1880—1883.
Kersbergen: A. C. Kersbergen, Litteraire motieven in de Njála.

Kristn.: Kristni saga.
Laxd.: Laxdœla saga.
Lockhart: Lockhart, Life of Sir Walter Scott I—X. Edinb. 1902—1903.
Ljósv.: Ljósvetninga saga.
Reykd.: Reykdœla saga.
Safn: Safn til sögu Íslands og íslenzkra bókmenta.
Skar, Gamalt: Johannes Skar, Gamalt or Sætesdal I—VIII (1903—1916).
Svarfd.: Svarfdœla saga.
Vápnf.: Vápnfirðinga saga.
Þorst. s. Hv.: Þorsteins saga Hvíta.
Þorst. s. S.-H.: Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar.
Þorv. þ.: Þorvalds þáttr ens viðfǫrla.

Quotations from Egils saga, Eyrb., Gísl., Gretla, Kristn., Laxd.. Njála., Vatnsd. and Þorv. þ. follow the text in Altnordische Sagabibliothek. The references are to chapter and paragraph. — Quotations from the sagas relating to the north of Iceland (Glúma, Ljósv., Reykd., Valla-Ljóts saga and Svarfd.) follow the text in Íslenzkar fornsögur 1880—1883. — Quotations from the sagas from the east of Iceland (Þorst. s. Hv., Vápnf., Hrafnkels saga, Dropl., Brandkrossa þáttr, Gunn. s. Þiðr., Þorst. s. S.-H.) follow Jakob Jakobsen's edition of Austfirðinga sǫgur 1902—1903 (Samfund til Udg. af gml. nord. Litt.) — Other editions quoted are: Bjarnar saga hítdœlakappa, ed. by R. C. Boer, 1893; Fóstbrœðra saga, ed. by Björn K. Þórólfsson, 1925—1927 (Samfund); Gull-Þóris saga, ed. by Kålund, 1898 (Samfund); Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu, ed. by Finnur Jónsson, 1916 (Samfund); Hávarðar saga ísfirðings, ed. by Björn K. Þórólfsson, 1923 (Samfund); Heiðarvíga saga, ed. by Kålund, 1904 (Samfund); Zwei Isländergeschichten: die Hœnsa-Þóres und die Bandamanna saga, ed. by Andreas Heusler, 2. Aufl. 1913. Quotations from Hallfreðar saga and Flóamanna saga follow Vigfusson and Möbius' ed. of the Fornsögur, Leipzig, 1860; Sturlunga saga is quoted from Vigfusson's ed., Oxford, 1878, and Landnáma from Finnur Jónsson's ed., 1925.

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