

THE COURT STYLE

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It is customary to distinguish between three different kinds of style in Old Icelandic and Old Norse literature : "Popular style" (in Danish "folkelig stil"), also sometimes called "saga style" ; "learned style" (Danish "lærd stil"), and "court style" (Danish "høvísk stil"). The learned style is then sometimes divided into two subdivisions : (a) the real or older learned style and the later so-called "florid style" (in Danish "florissant stil" - a designation which would not seem to be particularly aptly chosen).

The learned style has enjoyed the privilege of receiving a special study almost a hundred years ago - viz. in an article by Marius Nygaard called "Den lærde stil i den norrøne prosa" (in "Sproglig-historiske Studier tilegnede Professor C.R. Unger", 1896). This article has ever since been the basis for all discussion of the learned style. However, in the latest years it has been subject to some criticism which indeed is no wonder for such an old study ; but all the same the critics are far from having solved all the problems attached to this special kind of style. The main fault with Nygaards study is thought to be that he chooses at random texts from various times. Also he has been suspected of omitting texts which did not fit well enough into his theories, for instance the oldest translated Saints' lives which show very few of his characteristics of the learned style.

According to Nygaard the learned style is the characteristic feature of literature "that is based on foreign sources, whether straightforward translation or freer rendering and reworking, or foreign scholarship that is handled in a more independent manner". He sees the style of the popular element of the prose literature, on the other hand, as being moulded by the native, oral style, "as developed in use at assemblies and in other public dealings as well as in a narrator's relation of a saga to an interested audience".

These arguments for the division of Icelandic/Norwegian literature into two groups, a learned and a popular one, obviously do not hold true : Firstly, Nygaards characteristic features of the learned style are in fact only found to a very limited degree in the above-mentioned old manuscripts of Saints' lives (written about 1200 or in the beginning of the 13th century) ; and, secondly, the Icelandic prose style seems to develop from a more complicated and "literate" prose in the direction of the spoken language. If we, for instance, liken the language of Sverris saga to that of Njála, the latter seems to be much freer and closer to oral exposition. This

is, of course, an artistic evolution and cannot possibly mean that *Njála*, which is about a hundred years younger than *Sverris saga* and very romantic and unreliable, should rest directly upon oral relations. At the beginning of the age of writing Icelandic prose style is more remote from the spoken language, and the division of the prose into two different styles, a popular and a learned one, is obviously a later phenomenon which first turns up in the late 13th century and culminates in the fourteenth century.

The expression "Court Style" is taken from E.F. Halvorsen's book *The Norse Version of the Chanson de Roland*. In the Scandinavian languages it has been called "høvisk stil", which in turn is derived from the German; R. Meissner talks of "höfisch-ritterlichen" or "ritterlich-höfischen" Literatur" in his work *Die Strengleikar*, this being to date the chief study which has been made of this style.

Halvorsen distinguishes three types of court style: (a) The real court style, an ornate, strongly rhetorical style, represented by *Tristrams saga*, *Elis saga*, *Strengleikar* and *Konungs skuggsjá*. (b) A more colloquial translator's prose, in which the rhetorical devices are used less frequently. As representatives he mentions *Karlamagnús saga* (most parts) and *Þiðreks saga*. (c) "At the end of the (13th) century", Halvorsen maintains, "the Court Style becomes more mannered, Latin syntax is imitated, and translations from Latin occasionally follow the original text so closely that they are almost unreadable... Examples of this "Late Style" are found in the *Clarus saga*, and, at its worst, in the translation of St. Jerome's *Vitae Patrum Sanctorum Ægyptiorum*".

In this classification Halvorsen confines himself to translated works, ignoring what he himself in the Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for nordisk middelalder calls "de originale riddersagaer" (the original romantic sagas), that is, the numerous romantic sagas which are regarded as having been composed in Iceland in the 14th century and later.

In my opinion Halvorsen's classification of these romantic sagas is fully warrantable. The question is, however, if it is right to maintain that they are all written in the court style, even if most of them can be said to belong to the "court literature". The more colloquial translator's prose of *Karlamagnús saga* and *Þiðreks saga* seems to belong to the "popular style" of the Icelandic sagas, such as the kings' sagas or the sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendinga sögur*). The *Vitae Patrum*, on the other hand, is neither a romantic saga nor is it written in the court style; it is a Saints' life and it is if anything written in the florid style which is a variation of the learned style and which will be more explicitly discussed in the following.

As I see it the style of the romantic sagas is chiefly determined by three factors: (a) Age. (b) Nationality (whether the work is Norwegian or Icelandic). (c) Originality (whether or not the work is a translation). On top of these there will obviously be factors peculiar to the style and taste of the individual authors or translators. As indicated earlier not all the

romantic sagas need necessarily be written in the court style, while other kinds of literary works such as *Konungs skuggsjá* may be said to belong to both the courtly literature and the court style.

If we consider first the "real court style" as Halvorsen puts it - what are its chief characteristics? To what extent is it different from the learned style on the one hand and the popular style (or saga style) on the other? I find it most illuminating first to give representatives for all three kinds of style. Then we shall discuss a little further the main characteristics of each kind of style, and, finally, I shall briefly consider what conclusions may be drawn from this little investigation of mine.

It is commonly believed that the first and most typical romantic sagas were translated in Norway on the instigation of King Hákon the Old, even if most of them are only to be found in Icelandic copies which may have changed the style of these sagas in various degree. Therefore the only true representatives of the "real court style" would be sagas which are preserved in Norwegian manuscripts. On the other hand the popular style or the "saga style" is to be found in the original Icelandic sagas; and the younger learned style or the florid style is, in my opinion, an essentially Icelandic phenomenon. I shall accordingly take as representatives the following sagas:

From the 13th century: For the popular style, *Íslendínga saga* by Sturla Þórðarson. For the learned style, *Thomas saga I*, translated from Latin by an Icelander called Jón holt. For the court style, *Strengleikar* by Marie de France, translated or recomposed by an unknown Norwegian. All these works might be nearly contemporary, written shortly after the middle of the 13th century. As the last two works, *Thomas saga I* and *Strengleikar*, are to be found in foreign originals or parallels, I also quote the corresponding pieces from these.

As representatives from the 14th century I select the following: For the popular style, *Finnboga saga ramma*. For the learned style or, more accurately, the florid style, *Nikolaus saga* by Abbot Bergur Sökkason. For the court style, *Viktors saga og Blávus*. The first two sagas are written shortly before the middle of the 14th century, the third one might be a little younger.

Works from the third quarter of the 13th century:

Íslendínga saga by Sturla Þórðarson, ch. 151 (popular style):

Gissur kom í Reykjaholt um nóttina eftir Mauritiusmessu. Brutu þeir upp skemmuna er Snorri svaf í, en hann hljóp upp og úr skemmunni og í hin litlu húsín er voru við skemmuna. Fann hann þar Arnbjörn prest og talaði við hann. Réðu þeir það að Snorri gekk í kjallarann er var undir loftinu þar í húsunum.

Þeir Gissur fóru að leita Snorra um húsín. Þá fann Gissur Arnbjörn

prest og spurði hvar Snorri væri. Hann kvaðst eigi vita. Gissur kvað þá eigi sættast mega ef þeir fyndist eigi. Prestur kvað vera mega að hann fyndist, ef honum væri griðum heitið. Eftir það urðu þeir varir við hvar Snorri var, og gengu þeir í kjallarann Markús Marðarson, Símon Knútur, Árni beiskur, Þorsteinn Guðinason, Þórarinn Ásgrímsson.

Símon Knútur bað Árna höggva hann. "Eigi skal höggva", sagði Snorri. "Högg þú", sagði Símon. "Eigi skal höggva", sagði Snorri. Eftir það veitti Árni honum banasár, og báðir þeir Þorsteinn unnu á honum.

Thomas saga erkebiskups I, Part 3, ch. 17 (learned style) :

Hinn signaði Thomas gefandi sig guði féll á kné sem hann fékk hið fyrsta höggið, augunum meður samtengdum höndum frammi fyrir sér til himinsins uppléttum, á þann hátt sem góðir menn biðjast fyrir til guðs, offrandi svo guði sjálfan sig lifandi fórn í musteri fyrir heilögu altari. Og svo sem hann stendur svo meður hneigðu höfðu biðandi annars höggs, hleypur fram annar riddari og heggur enn í höfuð honum. En er hann fær þetta sár fellur hann fram á, rekkjandi sig út meður réttum líkami til jarðarinnar, framfallinn svo sem til bænar. Þvísa næst hleypur fram hinn þriðji riddari, höggvandi meður því móti til höfuðs erkebiskupinum að hann sveipar til sverðinu, sniðandi mikinn þorra krúnunnar af honum, aukandi svo hið fyrsta sárið. Hinn fjórði riddarinn, sem hann er um stund frameggjaður af einum þeirra og fast háttaður til að hann fresti eigi lengur að höggva, hleypur hann fram reiðandi sverðið meður öllu afli og heggur í það sama sár sem hinir höfðu áður höggvið svo hart að marmaragólfinu tekur, og brestur sverðið í tvo hluti ; fellur hinn fremri hlutur sverðsins á gólfíð, en hann kastar hinum efra þar til, og svo liggja báðir eftir, klerkunum og kirkjunni til minnis.

Parallel text, in Latin :

Sentiens itaque sacerdos ille Altissimi, se ipsum Altissimo immolans, immolationem iam inchoatam, attollens in cœlum oculos, genu flexo et orantis modo iunctis ante se manibus, in templo ante altare obtulit se ipsum hostiam vivam Deo. Et inclinato capite secundi vulneris præstolabatur adventum. Secundo vero vulnere capiti eius inflicto, recto corpore quasi ad orationem prostratus in terram corruit. Tertius autem plurimam testæ portionem amputando vulnus præcedens horribiliter ampliavit. Quartus autem ab uno eorum quod ferire tardaret correptus, in idem vulnus in manu gladium vibravit, gladioque in pavimento marmoreo confracto, tam cuspidem, quam gladii sui capulum reliquit ecclesiæ.

Strengleikar, Eskja ch. 2 (court style) :

En granna hennar er laug á hana þessu hrópi (og) svívirði hana

saklausa þrutnaði af getnaði á þeim sömu tólfmánuðum og gekk digur með tveim, og hefir guð nú hefnt grönnu hennar ; og er að kom burð hennar þá fæddi hún sjálfri sér (!) harm tvær dætur ; varð hún mjög hrygg og harmabi hörmulega sjálfa sig. "Vesöl em eg nú", sagði hún, "hvað skal eg nú gera ? Aldri mun eg fá sæmd né sóma heðan af, virðing né vinsæld, frægð né lofsælu. Að vísu em eg svívirð. Bóndi minn mun hvervitna vera hrópapur, hafnaður og hæddur og hataður. Frændur mínir og vinir munu jafnan neita mér og neikvæða og aldri vinir mínir vera þá er þetta spyrst, því að hvervitna þar sem upp kemur af þessum atburð hefi eg fyrirðæmt sjálfa mig, því að eg amælti öllum konum þá er eg laust þeim ódæmum upp að engi kona mætti eiga eða fæða tvö börn nema tveir menn hefði legið hana. En nú er mér berlega sýnt að eg hefi af einum manni tvö börn fætt, og er nú minn hlutur hinn dálegri.

Parallel French text, Fresne, 65-86 :

La dame ki si mesparla
 en l'an meismes enceinta ;
 De deus enfanz est enceintee :
 Ore est sa veisine vengiee !
 Desqu'a sun terme les porta ;
 Deus filles ot, mut li pesa !
 Mut durement en est dolente,
 A sei meismes se desmente :
 "Lasse, fet ele, que ferai ?
 Jamés pris ne honur n'avrai !
 Hunie sui, c'est veritez !
 Mis sire e tuz sis parentez
 Certes jamés ne me crerunt,
 Des que ceste aventure orrunt ;
 Kar jeo meismes me jugai,
 De tutes femmes mesparlai.
 Dunc ne dis jeo que unc ne fu
 Ne nus ne l'avium veü
 Que femme deus enfanz eüst,
 Si deus humes ne coneüst ?
 Ore en ai deus ! Ceo m'est avis,
 Sur mei en est turnez li pis !

Works from the 14th century :

Finnboga saga, ch. 36 (popular style) :

Þá mælti þorgeir til Finnboga : "Með því, frændi, að það er líkara að frestist komur þínar norður hingað, þá viljum vér biðja þig að þú

sýnir hér nokkura aftraun, er bæði eru hjá frændur þínir og vinir". Finnbogi spurði hvað hann vildi helst að hann gerði, - "eða vilji þér að vér glíumum?" Þorgeir kvað það ekki gaman mundu vera. Finnbogi leggur þá af sér kaupuna. Var maðurinn bæði mikill og veglegur, miðmjór og herðibreiður, limaður manna best og hærður vel, hverjum manni fríðari og hinn kurteisasti og allra manna hermannlegastur undir vopnum. Og það viljum vér segja að fáir eða engir muni sterkari verið hafa á Íslandi, þeirra er einhamir hafa verið. Finnbogi gengur þar að sem einn steinn mikill stóð jarðfastur. Hann hnykkir upp steininum, og sýndist flestum mönnum ólíklegur til hafs fyrir vaxtar sakir. Hann tekur tvo steina og leggur á hinn mikla steininn, tekur upp alla saman á bringu sér og gengur með eigi allskammt og skýtur niður síðan, svo að steinninn gekk eigi skemmra niður en tveggja álna niður í jörðina. Og heyrum vér það sagt að lítill merki sjái nú þess hins mikla steinsins, en hina sjái tvo er hann lagði á ofan.

Nikolaus saga erkbiskups II, ch. 15 (florid style) :

Sem þessi undranartíðendi berast til eyrna réttlátri húsfú Epiphanií er fyrr var greind í þessu máli, samþínist hún sínum borgarmönnum og fyllist, sem trúlegt er, meður leynilegum áblæstri heilags anda, takandi fólkvopn sterkar trúar í trausti guðs miskunnar. Svo væpnir hún síðan alla sína limu, girnandist glæðlega í mót orminum til stríðs að ganga, eigi grjóti kastandi eða örur skjótandi, heldur lítillátlega framgangandi ein samt af sínu herbergi, eigi framar klædd en einum möttli. Er það fyrst af hennar ferðum greinanda að ormsins augu megu henni ekki grand gjöra, og því síður að hans sjónum verður niðrað í þessum tíma, því að heilagur andi blæs í brjóst konunni það snjallræði að hún ber frá sér möttulinn og sýnir Basilisko beran kvíðinn; bregður honum svo við þessa sýn að hann fellur dauður niður þar sem hann er kominn. (At this time the wife of Epiphanius, as might be guessed, was pregnant with St. Nicholas).

Viktors saga og Blávus, ch. 2 (younger court style) :

Byrjum vér hér fyrsta capitulum er riddararnir klæða sig með fögrum herfórum og heiðarlegum herneskjum, dragandi upp sína gyllda hjálma, gripandi sín glaðél, upp stígandi á sín ess, gjörandi svo sterka atreið að öll jörð og vellírnir og allt það er nær var skalf sem á þræði léki. Og síðan sem þeir höfðu allar sínar stengur brotið brugðu þeir sínum gullbúnum sverðum og huggust í ákefð, svo mannlega að eldur glæddi um allan vígvöllinn er stálin saman komu. Gekk þeim harða atgang framan til miðdags. Hafði þá hvorgi sári komið á annan. Prófaðist svo að þeir voru í öllum íþróttum jafnir, stígandi af sínum essum, lofandi hvor annars hreysti og riddaradóm.

Now let us have a closer look at the two texts quoted above as representatives of the early learned style and the "real" court style (pp. -). We see at once that there is a great difference between them. The main characteristics of the learned style are : 1) the present participle used in the active sense (*gefandi sig guði, offrandi svo guði sjálfan sig, bíðandi annars höggs* etc.) and, 2) the frequent use of the past participle used in apposition to a noun (*meður samtengdum höndum... til himins uppléttum, meður réttum líkami... framfallinn svo sem til bænar* etc.). The main distinguishing feature of the court style, on the other hand, is the use of parallelisms or strings of highly-coloured words, as a rule bound together by alliteration : *varð hún mjög hrygg og harmaði hörmulega sjálfa sig ; Aldri mun eg fá sæmd né sóma héðan af, virðing né vinsæld, frægd né lofsöslu* etc.

The learned use of the present and past participles is very rare in the court style, whereas parallelisms or chains of kindred words cannot be counted amongst the characteristics of the older learned style. Thus, at the beginning, there is a marked difference between the two ornate styles ; and as is indicated by the quotation from *Íslendinga saga*, both features are practically unknown to the popular style.

In the latin text of *Thomas saga* the use of the present participle is less frequent than in the Icelandic translation. This may be caused by the Icelandic translator having used an other and somewhat longer text, but ostensibly the Latin characteristics are already beginning to have a life of their own in the Icelandic learned style - a feature which becomes much more obvious in the florid style of the 14th century. The ornate expressions of the *Strengleikar* have scarcely any parallels in the French text, which is much shorter ; here the Icelandic text is obviously expanded, and the customary explanation is that the translator should have used these decorations as a substitute for the poetic style of the French originals.

Halvorsen mentions *Karlamagnús saga* and *Þiðreks saga* as representatives of the more colloquial "translators prose". Both these works were probably translated around or soon after the middle of the 13th century, which means that they would be of approximately the same age as *Íslendinga saga*, *Thomas saga I* and *Strengleikar*. Both sagas are usually classified among the romantic sagas, but their style, as mentioned earlier, is quite different. Halvorsen says (p. 9-10) :

when we find translations written in a simple and plain style, the explanation is probably that the writers were not able to imitate the rhetorical style of the *Tristrams saga*.

But is it not more likely to be due to deliberate choice on the part of the translators rather than inability ? The question arises whether we do not have on the one hand Icelandic translators who force their texts into the mould of the classical Icelandic saga style, and on the other Norwegians with less tradition to rely on but with sound Scholastic training

and "an almost pathetic receptivity to the new literature" (Einar Ól. Sveinsson). The unknown authors or translators of *Karlamagnús saga* and *Þiðreks saga* would be in good company with other Icelandic writers working for Norsemen, such as Abbot Karl Jónsson (*Sverris saga*), Snorri Sturluson (*Heimskringla*) and Sturla Þórðarson (*Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, *Magnús saga lagabætis*).

Halvorsen ends with the very mannered late style which is found in *Clarus saga* and the *Vitae Patrum*. Ole Widding has since described this style in more detail and given it in Danish the name "den florissante stil" (*Norrøn Fortællekunst*, p. 132 ff.) ; in addition, Alfred Jakobsen and Mattias Tveitane respectively have written books on the two works mentioned above. Halvorsen regards this style as a development from the older court style, whereas Widding is nearer the truth in seeing it as a variant of the learned style, since it can be clearly traced to Latin, and mostly religious works are involved. We have already taken *Nikolaus saga II* as representative for this very artificial style. The saga is attributed to Abbot Bergur Sokkason who wrote in the first half of the 14th century, and this style has sometimes been named "Bergsstíll" after him. It seems to be a peculiarly Icelandic phenomenon rather than Norwegian. Indeed, I could have given a more typical representative of the florid style, but I have chosen this sample because it clearly shows that St. Nikolaus was the greatest of all saints, performing his first miracle while he was in his mother's womb. All the same, we find here some examples of the most typical characteristic of the florid style, namely the compounding of abstract nouns : *undranartíðendi*, *meður leynilegum áblaestri heilags anda*, *fólkvopn sterkrar trúar*.

The style of the Icelandic or "original" romantic sagas has been little studied, but it is clear that it owes much to the style of the earlier translated sagas, while on the other hand it is distinct from that of the other native Icelandic sagas which are assigned to the same period (the *fornaldarsögur* and the youngest Family Sagas). There is therefore an unbroken line of development from the translated sagas to the original, from Norway to Iceland. But the affinity with the Icelandic learned style or florid style is also obvious in places.

Most of the translated romantic sagas, quite apart from whether they were Norwegian or Icelandic originally, are only preserved in Icelandic manuscripts. In the course of time, during their passage through many successive copies now lost, the style of the Norwegian translations changed somewhat, moving towards (later) Icelandic language and the classical saga-style. It is easy then to overlook the underlying Norwegian foundation. Thus Torkil Damsgaard Olsen has this to say about *Tristrams saga* :

In its present form *Tristrams saga* belongs if anything with the 14th and 15th century literature written in florid style. Whether in fact it

is a redaction of an old Norwegian translation of Thomas' *Tristan*, or whether the information given in the prologue is pure fabrication, has not been settled with any certainty.

(Norrøn Fortællekunst, p. 116)

This view is unacceptable. The style and diction of *Tristráms saga* show clearly that the work cannot have been composed in Iceland in the 14th century. It is not at all the Icelandic florid style, but the Norwegian court style - only it has acquired something of an Icelandic appearance after having passed through many changes of costume in Icelandic copies. As a further proof of this I give a short quotation from *Tristráms saga* :

Þar voru fagrir vellir og víðir, sléttir, prýddir fögrum grósum og blómasamlegum. En fyrir sakir þess að staður þessi var hinn lystilegasti, sakir margfaldrar skemmtunar, þá lét Markis konungur á þeim völlum þar setja og skipa stórum landtjöldum, gulum og grænum, blám og rauðum og ríkulega búnum, gylltum og gullsaumuðum, undir ilmandum laufum og nýsprungnum blómstrum. Þar gjörðust þá nýdubbaðir riddarar og ungir menn með fögrum atreiðum og léku riddaralega fyrir útan öfund og hégóma og öðlast með því ást og yndi fríðra meyja og kurteisra kvenna er þar voru saman safnaðar í svo miklum fjölda hvorstveggja fólks bæði úti og inni hjá landtjöldunum, með bændum sínum og unnustum er þangað voru komnir til veislunnar.

Now I am going to summarize in a few words the main results of this little investigation.

- 1 The oldest sagas written in the Icelandic language would be the sagas of Saints (*heilagra manna sögur*), dating back to the 12th century. In these we find very few traces of the latinized or learned style. The oldest noteworthy symptoms of this style are to be found in the homilies and similar kinds of "holy interpretations" or *þýðingar heilgar* which are mentioned in the First Grammatical Treatise about 1150.
- 2 From the second and third quarters of the 13th century we have Norwegian sagas of chivalry, or romantic sagas (*riddarasögur*), translated from French and written in an ornate, rhetorical style, the so-called court style which originally was quite different from the latinized learned style.
- 3 In the course of time we find a stylistic evolution of the sagas of Saints, and a good century later, in the second half of the 13th century, translated sagas show strong influence from the Latin originals (e.g. *Thomas saga*). From about the same time we have original Icelandic sagas such as Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga* and translated sagas such as *Karlamagnús saga* written in the classical Icelandic saga style, also called the popular style.
- 4 While in the 14th century this popular style is still used for the "Nordic" sagas, such as the *Íslendinga sögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*, the *heilagra manna sögur*, on the other hand, go still farther into imitating the Latin florid style which was customary in Europe at that time (cfr. *Nikolaus saga* by Bergur Sökkason).
- 5 At the same time and later we have the Icelandic or original romantic sagas, written mostly in a mixture of the older court style and the younger florid style.