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Premises of Literary History: On Genre and Narrative Modes in the Sagas[1]

Discussions of a literary historical nature can be found in the works of many critics of Old Norse literature and not without reason. A history of this type of literature is made difficult by the fact that the structural characteristics of the literary forms first have to be worked out from texts that are chronologically highly diffuse. The majority of the sagas have been preserved in manuscripts written on vellum in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries from originals now lost, and in most cases we lack the sources from which a history of literature could be written. Given the loss of the early manuscripts and their complicated textual transmission, one of the main issues in saga research has been, and directly or indirectly continues to be, the question of how the medieval saga evolved. The few certainties we have concerning the development of vernacular Icelandic literature show that the Icelanders were writing down several kinds of prose literature during the course of the twelfth century. Yet there is no obvious and direct answer as to why they first started to do so and to what extent other kinds of writing, whether domestic or foreign, played a role in the formation of the various forms of the saga genre. As long prosimetric forms in the vernacular, the sagas are conspicuously different from earlier kinds of writings that were being composed in Iceland during the twelfth century. Furthermore, their extensive narrative form and traditional subject matter set them apart from all other major genres written in contemporary Europe. This last circumstance has been of great significance to scholars interested in the development of the saga. How did this genre emerge? And how do we explain why it became the dominant literary form for representing historical matters during the course of the thirteenth century?

Traditionally, there has been a tendency to describe the evolution of saga writing within the framework of an evaluative generic system which presents the sagas in different groups based on their subject matter or categorised through their relationship with the past.[2] For a long time is was generally assumed that the first sagas to be composed were those kings' sagas that consist of dry information of the kind that the earliest historians provided or which were characterised by exaggerated and didactic elements typical of hagiography. The first sagas of Icelanders were thought to have been composed in the first decades of the thirteenth century when the two streams, the real and the imagined, merged into one and came together in a coherent way. This fusion was seen as the hallmark of the classical sagas of Icelanders and of saga writing at its artistic pinnacle. The translations of the French romances, that is, the chivalric sagas, were generally associated with the reign of King Hákon Hákonarson and were accordingly dated to the latter part of the thirteenth century and first decades of the fourteenth. For a long time scholars also assumed that the acquaintance with the romantic chivalric literature from Western Europe led people in Iceland to put a new value on various tales of more fantastic kind. Consequently, this interest in the far past gave rise to the composition of sagas of ancient times that told of the forefathers of the northern lands.

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[2] That is, the generic system which divides the sagas into *konungasögur*, *Íslendingasögur*, *biskupasögur*, *fornaldarsögur*, and *riddarasögur* and the system which seeks to categorise the sagas through the distance between the events described in the texts and the time of composition of the texts (*samtíðssagaer*, *fortíðssagaer* and *oiktíðssagaer*). A more recent characterisation has it that some sagas are 'classical' and others 'post-classical', the latter being more fantastic than the classical sagas and drawing a more diffuse image of the old society (e.g. Vésteinn Ólason 1998).

This evaluative notion of the overall development of saga writing held sway over many years and led many scholars to assume that saga writing emerged from dry historiography and incredible hagiography, reached its climax with the interaction of fact and fiction, and then became debased as it became almost purely fictional during the course of the fourteenth century. In addition, a long-standing theory suggested that the kings' sagas were to be considered more 'historical' and 'reliable' than either the sagas of Icelanders or the legendary sagas, while both the kings' sagas and the sagas of Icelanders were considered more 'realistic' compared to the legendary sagas, which were often described as 'pure fiction' or as stories told for 'pure entertainment' due to their supernatural content.

Over the past few decades, however, scholars interested in concepts of fiction and historicity in the sagas have increasingly questioned these notions.[3] Difficulties in defining the relationship between fact and fiction have led to a new tendency among scholars to view all types of sagas as entirely literary[4] rather than 'quasi-historical' or purely fictional entities, that is, as different types of written conceptions of historical reality – conceptions that are alternatives to, rather than failed anticipations of, the realistic discourse that the classical sagas of Icelanders embody. Nevertheless, although the distinctiveness of the different types of sagas can no longer be evaluated according to their 'fictive' or 'historical' subject matter, the notion of distinctiveness between the different groups of sagas and the general idea of a generic system within the evolution of saga writing is still widely accepted.[5] Admittedly, such acceptance may have more to do with scholarly convention and convenience than with a lack of awareness of the problems associated with generic classification.

In the present paper I shall not attempt a full discussion of the scholarly debate on generic description nor of its connection to the debate on the evolution of saga writing, but rather comment on one of the accepted divisions of the sagas and some consequences of this division. I shall concentrate on the texts normally referred to as the kings' sagas and highlight some of the differences within this group of texts in order to indicate how this classification is problematic as a genre descriptor, perhaps even more so than others, and especially when seen in a literary-historical context. The question of genre as a matter of scholarly debate has generally related to groups of sagas other than to the kings' sagas. In comparison to other groups of the corpus, and due to the prolonged scholarly appreciation of the more 'fictional' kinds of sagas such as the sagas of Icelanders, the literary debate on the kings' sagas has remained marginal. Therefore much remains to be said about the literary aspects of the more 'historical' types of sagas, especially in light of the recent notions of historicity and fictionality found in modern saga research. One such notion that seems to me to be of particular importance for the study of the kings' sagas is that these sagas too, despite their

[3] See for example Lönnroth 1964, 1965, 1975; Harris 1972, 1975; Andersson 1975, 1985; Weber 1972; Clover 1982, 1986; Mitchell 1991; Sverrir Tómasson 1998; Meulengracht Sørensen 1993; Clunies Ross 2000.

[4] In this essay the term 'literary' will refer to a textual artefact exclusively. The content of the literary text, in the sense that I use the word, can be both 'fictional' and 'historical'. Thus, when referring to the sagas as textual artefacts I will use the word 'literary' in order to avoid the multiple meanings of the term 'fictional' as an untrue or simply invented text.

[5] In different ways, Mitchell 1991; Clunies Ross 2000; and Torfi Tulinius 2000, 2002 are exceptions to this tendency. Mitchell argues for a two-dimensional approach to the sagas that provides a total system of genre classification for the texts it addresses, thereby expressing each genre's distinctive characteristics, yet at the same time demonstrating the relationship each group bears to other genres according to these same features. Margaret Clunies Ross has suggested that all sagas are modally mixed and should be seen within a shared historical continuum and as parts of the same literary system. In the second volume of *Prolonged Echoes* she argues that the sagas constitute one genre albeit with sub-genres, which exhibit identifying qualities or modes that allow them to be contrasted with other sub-classes but equally allow them to be compared with one another. A similar argument can be found in much recent work done by Torfi Tulinius who has demonstrated how the different sub-classes of the genre interact. The general idea that specific modes of the saga genre can dominate in some sagas clearly shows the potential to function as an important objective when writing literary history. The idea has, however, not yet been fully incorporated into the general debate on the emergence and evolution of saga writing.

'historical' content, can and should be characterised in terms of their transformation of past events into literary form and accordingly be analysed as such.[6] In the following I will argue that it is worthwhile to re-evaluate some of the old arguments about the literary background of the kings' sagas. I shall, moreover, propose some rudiments of analysis for writing a literary history of the genre in light of recent developments within narratology. I doubt that a straightforward literary-historical account can be written to challenge an earlier era of scholarship with a new grand theory. Yet I suspect it is time to reconsider the premises for the literary-historical description of medieval Icelandic literature and to take new ideas into account, although in this case they will remain on a provisional and overly generalised basis.

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I shall begin by summarising some elements of the received definition of the kings' sagas and the rationale upon which the classification has been based.[7] It has often been noted that the kings' sagas form a category of the saga devoted to royal biography, chiefly to the lives of kings, but also to the earls of the northern lands. It has also been noted that it is a genre which covers many ages in an unbroken timeframe from remote antiquity to the time of the authors themselves and which chronicles non-Icelandic events in predominantly Norwegian, Danish, Orkneyan, and Faroese history. The productive period of the genre is usually thought to fall in the late part of the twelfth century and the first part of the thirteenth, although historical and hagiographic writings of several kinds, both in Latin and in the vernacular, are taken into consideration as earlier stages of its development. Scholars have for the most part assumed that the genre developed in five different stages, but in most cases only four of the periods are discussed: the earliest lives by Sæmundr and Ari from the early twelfth century, the synoptic works from *c.* 1175-90, the formative period of the kings' saga proper from *c.* 1150-1200, and the major compendia from *c.* 1220-30.[8] In most modern surveys, we note that a distinction is made between sagas' telling of either contemporary, legendary or pre-historical kings,[9] and that a second distinction is drawn between the kings' sagas proper and other kinds of historical writings of twelfth-century Iceland.[10] As we can see, the differences within the genre have not gone unnoticed by readers of the kings' sagas. Despite differences in the sagas' length, subject matter and form, scholars have tended to downplay diversity, leaning towards the assumption that these writings, being literary representations of the Nordic historical past, belong to the same literary class.

Many scholars have also pointed out that the kings' sagas as a group tell many of the same stories. Moreover, whereas works in other saga genres are anonymously transmitted, the names of many kings' saga authors have come down to us, often in prologues or epilogues in which the authors address the reader, or by reference in other texts. These textual affiliations are a specific feature of the kings' sagas and therefore we can, at least in theory, more closely follow the development of this group of texts prior to the extant manuscripts than is possible for many other saga genres.[11] Understandably, much work has been done in describing the extensive system of inter-borrowings among the sagas and their sources. The early dating and

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[6] This idea has been put forward by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen who has contributed profoundly to the re-evaluation of the sagas as purely literary, that is, textual artefacts by arguing that Icelandic saga writers transformed the historical past into narrative prose accounts, thus recreating the past as literature. See Meulengracht Sørensen 1993 and 2001.

[7] I am mainly referring to Andersson 1985 and the works of scholars he cites in his summary of the scholarly debate. When talking about surveys of the kings' sagas I am mainly referring to those that are given in Holtsmark 1964; Turville-Petre 1953; Damsgaard Olsen 1965; Knirk 1993; Whaley 1993; Jónas Kristjánsson 1988.

[8] The kings' sagas from the latter part of the thirteenth century have not yet become the focus of protracted debate and are therefore usually omitted. See Andersson 1985, p. 198.

[9] Cf. Holtsmark 1964; Damsgaard Olsen.

[10] See Knirk 1993.

[11] See Andersson 1985, 197.

the apparent possibility of establishing a relative chronology within this particular group of texts certainly make the kings' sagas a good place to start a literary-historical study of the evolution of saga-writing, although it should be emphasised that the chronology of texts that can be established on the grounds of textual criticism must not be mistaken as equivalent to their literary-historical development. We may be able to reconstruct the relative chronological order of the original composition of the kings' sagas but this order in itself does not show how the kings' sagas developed as a literary genre, that is, as one *narrative* tradition of historical expression.

This in some ways rather obvious statement has been ignored in most kings' saga studies. Scholarly analysis has remained almost exclusively in the hands of philologists, who have been concerned with the historical aspects of the texts, especially with the evaluation of the sagas as source material and with various philological problems concerning the manuscripts, the sources employed, and the time of composition. Most scholarly effort has been devoted to the establishment of a relative chronology of composition of texts based on the literary connections that can be established between the kings' sagas and those texts that were being composed prior to them. As a result of these inquiries, the chronology of composition and the development of the indigenous narrative forms of historical writing in twelfth-century Iceland have been construed as though chronology of texts and literary history were the same. Such reasoning is also reflected in most literary-historical surveys of the genre.[12] When presented in a literary-historical context the kings' sagas are usually said to have been composed under the influence of the earliest historical writings, in the style introduced by Ari, Sæmundr and Eiríkr Oddson.[13] None of these works survive, but since subsequent saga writers make frequent references to them, they are generally considered to be predecessors to the kings' sagas or at least the oldest works on Nordic history that have a certain kinship with saga narrative, though briefly told and tersely phrased.[14] Also, the Norwegian synoptic stories[15] are presented as having had considerable importance for the emergence of the kings' sagas, although these texts do not display all the same characteristics as the kings' sagas either.[16] The synoptic stories tend to end abruptly, as if the authors ran out of reference to the past they were trying to recreate in writing, and their learned and Latinate style seems far from the rhetorical vernacular style found in most sagas. Despite other significant differences, most scholars have shared what could be called a developmental way of conceiving the kings' sagas. The premise of literary history, however implicit it may seem to be, is that historical writing in medieval Iceland went through a series of changes in which

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[12] Cf. Damsgaard Olsen 1965; Turville-Petre 1967; Andersson 1989; Knirk 1993; Jónas Kristjánsson 1988.

[13] Cf. Turville-Petre 1967; Andersson 1989; Damsgaard Olsen 1965.

[14] According to *Heimskringla*'s prologue, Ari was the first to write historiography in the vernacular. Sæmundr's seniority to Ari suggests that Sæmundr may have written first, but since his work is lost it is difficult to determine the validity of this thought. Ari's account of the Norwegian kings is also lost, but the references to him in other books and the hints contained in the preserved version of *Íslendingabók* bear evidence of its existence in the twelfth century. We do not know, however, whether the list of kings, the so-called *konunga ævi* which is mentioned in the preserved version of his book were in any sense narrative in the original version or whether they were brief indications of a largely chronological nature. The prologue to *Heimskringla* also speaks of an Icelander called Eiríkr Oddson. His book, the so-called *Hryggjarstykki*, is lost, but one can get a fair idea of what it may have been like from *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*, which take long passages from it with little alteration. We do not know exactly when *Hryggjarstykki* was composed, but it has been suggested that it was being completed some time between 1150 and 1165. *Hryggjarstykki* is often seen as the nearest that we come to a pioneer work to those kings' sagas that tell of contemporary or recent events. See for instance Jónas Kristjánsson 1988, pp. 150-152.

[15] That is, Theodoricus's *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwegiensium* and the anonymous *Historia Norwegie*, both written in Latin, and a third synoptic work, *Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sögum* (herein referred to as *Ágrip*), written in the vernacular and preserved in an Icelandic manuscript from the first part of the thirteenth century. It has been suggested that *Ágrip* proved an important source for later kings' sagas and that authors used the facts it recorded as the kernels of more elaborate narratives. It has also been suggested that the authors adopted its lively anecdotes and took them as models for new stories.

[16] Cf. Turville-Petre 1953; Damsgaard Olsen 1965; Jónas Kristjánsson 1988, p. 157.

new genres became possible only on the basis of previous ones. Importantly, this approach implies that generic transitions have continuity.

When studied from a formal point of view, however, the tradition of Icelandic historical writing does in fact appear to have been discontinuous, insofar as it led to a *new* treatment of the past at the turn of the twelfth century. Historical themes were among the earliest uses to which literacy was applied in Iceland, and many inter-textual relations may indeed be established between the different kinds of early Old Norse-Icelandic historiography and the kings' sagas. It seems, however, that seeking the origins of the material used in the kings' sagas is not the only way to pose the problem of their appearance, for even when considering the most general features, the kings' sagas are different from the kinds of historical writings that were being practised prior to their composition. Even in the rather restricted sense of an extended historical prose narrative in the vernacular telling of contemporary or legendary Norse kings, the kings' sagas differ from the historiographical prose literatures written in Iceland during the course of the century. This can be demonstrated simply by comparing two of the most general characteristics of the kings' sagas with the type of historiography that is usually thought to have influenced their emergence. Firstly, the kings' sagas are longer than the earliest historical writings, which are brief and fairly concise in their treatment of the historical content. Secondly, the kings' sagas are written in the vernacular with only a few exceptions: the early histories of Óláfr Tryggvason were originally written in Latin, but they were translated into the vernacular and have been preserved solely in this form.[17]

It has been suggested that we can detect one more influence on the kings' sagas besides the native and secular one mentioned above, namely a hagiographic influence from Europe that reflects the liturgical purposes of writing.[18] Thus, the oldest saints' lives, translated into Icelandic as the twelfth century progressed, are said to have served as models for the saga authors. Originally composed in Latin and full of supernatural elements and Latinate conventions, works such as the lives of Óláfr Tryggvason by Oddr Snorrason and Gunnlaugr Leifsson, for instance, are said to have adopted the narrative style and structure of medieval hagiography. It seems, however, that these kings' sagas have been given their hagiographic label largely because of a scholarly tradition of pointing out the legacy from the Latin Middle Ages on the basis of content, and not because these sagas take the same form as the various translations of saints' lives. It seems likely that some answers to the emergence of the long prose form could be found by studying how the general process of translation, transmission, and copying gave rise to a new original approach to the old subject matter. We know that a variety of foreign literature was being transformed into long prose accounts in the vernacular in the latter part of the twelfth century and prior to the composition of the first kings' sagas, but only few scholars have paid attention to the practice of translation as such and to the relationship between the production of translations and the development of domestic saga literature.[19]

At this point it seems reasonable to say that the inter-textual relations that have been identified between the kings' sagas and other kinds of twelfth-century historical and hagiographic writing are less interesting from a literary point of view than the distinctions between the various narrative forms of writing. For even when it can be shown that the kings'

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[17] Neither Oddr's nor Gunnlaugr's Latin texts has survived. We have no Icelandic version of Gunnlaugr's work either, though a quantity of material in later texts and a series of additions to *Óláfs saga ins mesta*, compiled early in the fourteenth century, are thought to come from it. Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* is preserved in two manuscripts, which contain rather different versions and in a small fragment of a third.

[18] Cf. Damsgaard Olsen 1965; Jónas Kristjánsson 1982, 1986 and 1988.

[19] As an exception, Stefanie Würth has addressed these issues in her book on the Old Icelandic translation and reception of Latin literature in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. See Würth 1998.

sagas display knowledge of past literatures or reveal the influence of other genres through quotation or the borrowing of motifs, there is no direct answer as to why their authors began to give new expression to the historical events. Neither is there any direct explanation as to why the long prose form, the saga, suddenly became the new appropriate media for the telling of kings' lives towards the end of the twelfth century. If we consider the development of Old Norse literature as far as it can be reconstructed, we will find that it first assumes its Old Norse characteristics relatively late. Literary skills, reading and writing, date from *c.* 1050, but we must proceed to about the year 1200 before we see a reasonably developed saga form. The considerable number of translations, which we know were made in Iceland during the course of the twelfth century, reveal a broad literary foundation and the Icelanders' ability to express themselves in their native language. Still, it was not until the turn of the century that Icelanders began to recreate their *own* past as literature, using the long prosimetric narrative form. At this point the Icelanders must have found a suitable form for turning Old Norse traditions into articulate saga literature, for at this point the sagas start appearing in rapid succession, starting with the first sagas about Norwegian kings and followed by sagas about distinctive characters of the Icelandic past.[20]

Whereas the philological arguments so far advanced for the position of the kings' sagas in the overall literary-historical development have been based on the many inter-textual borrowings that can be established between kings' sagas and other kinds of texts written prior to their composition, I would suggest that we take a look at the different kinds of historical writing as different narrative domains. I stress this point because a philological approach connects the kings' sagas to earlier kinds of writing as if one could talk of a continuous tradition of historical representation in twelfth-century Iceland, whereas a formal comparison of the different kinds of historical representation as different narrative domains points to a development characterised by discontinuity. One could also say that approaching the question of the literary-historical development in twelfth-century Iceland from a philological perspective solely would efface the generic borderline between the saga and other literary forms. The sudden and almost explosive interest in Old Norse traditions and the rapid transformation of these traditions into several kinds of articulate saga literature towards the turn of the twelfth century certainly indicates a radical change in the overall development of historical representation. In fact, not only the format changed at this point, but also the amount of information about the Norwegian kings grew as the Icelanders became temporally distanced from this information. One could argue that the early historians of twelfth-century Iceland were familiar with the more extended forms used in contemporary Europe at that time and that they could have adopted it instead of using the shorter form of historical representation. Still, if this was indeed so, why, then, did the authors of the kings' sagas not follow in these early historians' footsteps? No matter what dimensions we choose to assign to the early historians and no matter how many inter-textual connections we can establish between their works and the kings' sagas, they cannot explain why historians towards the end of the twelfth century suddenly began to write sagas. Recognising the emergence of the long prose form as a radical change in the overall literary-history development within medieval Icelandic literature, or recognising this event as being somewhat of 'an Icelandic miracle' as some scholars have rightfully called it,[21] seems to me to be the first step towards developing a new literary-historical account.

Beyond merely recognising the peculiarity of this 'Icelandic miracle' lies of course the larger task of describing the literary characteristics of this event. How can the modal changes of this event be defined and how can we describe the characteristics of the new genre, if one

[20] See Bruhn 1995, pp. 243-45.

[21] See e.g. Torfi Tulinius 2002, p. 11.

can rightfully speak of any defining characteristics apart from the long prose form? It goes without saying that describing the hallmarks of the saga in its formative period will prove a difficult task in itself, not only because it would require a comparison of all those types of long prose narratives from the latter part of the twelfth century that could be called sagas, but also because it would take an approximate determination of the time of each saga's original composition based on thorough comparison of the extant manuscripts. However difficult it may seem, this task is essential if we wish to bring clarity to questions concerning genre and literary traditions within medieval Icelandic literature, that is, if we wish to find *comparable* narratives beyond the modern generic classifications and beyond concepts such as history, hagiography and fiction. If we want to write literary history in a 'literary' sense, that is, locating continuity and change in the mode of narration within medieval Icelandic literature, we must enable ourselves to decide which classifications have valid grounds in the literature of the past. Literary history in this sense becomes a matter of finding comparable forms within a wide corpus of texts and attempting to identify their foundations.

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Having drawn a generic line between early Icelandic literature and the saga, I will now make a speculative attempt to point to a possible change in the mode of narration that can be located within the saga genre. In doing so, I shall bring a few aspects of narratology into the discussion. Narrative discourse in both fictional and historical narratives have been dealt with quite extensively in the field of modern literary theory over the past quarter of a century and it seems to me that the study of Old Norse literature can benefit from some of the established insights and examinations, especially when the aim is to study the literary historical development of such texts as the sagas, as these are rooted in history and ought to be analysed in their historical context as historical narratives. Judging from the insights that the discipline of narratology has developed, all types of prose writing of medieval Iceland mentioned so far, whether they employ an imaginative or more realistic discourse, claim to be narratives of something that has happened; in other words, they claim to be historical. Being representations of past events *per se*, whether real or imagined, they all belong to the same category of discursive historical writing and as such they all become subject to judgements of truth and falsity.

The fact that we can define these various genres within early medieval Icelandic literature, including the sagas, as different types of *historical* narratives becomes particularly interesting if we take the insights of the American narratologist Dorrit Cohn into consideration.[22] According to Cohn, we need to be aware that history is a narrative discourse with rules different from those that govern fiction. One reason is that fiction is non-referential, whereas non-fiction is referential, that is, bound to the more or less reliably documented evidence of past events out of which the historian fashions his story. This is not to be understood to signify that fiction never refers to the real world outside the text, but that it *need* not refer to it. Meanwhile, the fact that fiction can be defined as non-referential allows us to discriminate between two kinds of narrative, according to whether it deals with real or imaginary events and persons. Only narratives of the first kind, which include historical works such as the kings' sagas, are subject to judgement of truth and falsity.[23] This does not mean that our analysis should be concerned with evaluating the sagas as actual historical source material; rather it should deal with the way history is presented in these texts so that they appear as truthful descriptions of the past. In this case narratology comes naturally into play because it possesses the conceptual tool of distinguishing between the two levels of

[22] The thesis that historical narrative is different from fictional narrative has found its most eloquent and influential protagonist in Dorrit Cohn. (see especially *The Distinction of Fiction* 1999).
[23] See Cohn 1999, especially pp. 15-37.

analysis commonly labelled *story* and *discourse*, signifying the events referred to by the text and the way these events are represented in the text, respectively. While *story* designates the narrated events abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together with the participants in these events, the events do not necessarily appear in chronological order at the level of *discourse*. At this level of analysis the characteristics of the participants are dispersed throughout, and all the items of the narrative content are filtered through a prism or a perspective. The story is, in other words, told by a narrating voice that controls what we see and how we see it.

Ever since its first appearance, the partition, to use Cohn's word, between *story* and *discourse* has functioned as the initiating and enabling characteristic of most major narratological studies, notwithstanding certain terminological and subdivisional variations.[24] In contrast to its centrality for fictional narratology, the story/discourse separation has, however, remained marginal at best in the analysis of historical narrative. One way of describing the essential reason why theorists of history have neglected the story/discourse model is not that it is inapplicable or irrelevant to their discipline, but rather that it is insufficient, because it blocks out the referential level of historical narrative. Scholars have become increasingly aware of the extent to which fiction and history overlap at the story level in that they all recognise that historical works can be just as artfully plotted as their novelistic counterparts. At this level, historical and fictional narratives are indistinguishable from one another. At the level of discourse, however, we can identify highly differentiated formal features that are connected to the referential and non-referential status of historical and fictional narratives. The fact is that the historian is bound to relate his story to the core of history, that is, to the oral or written sources in the present case, in order to convince his audience of the reliability of his narrative. His process of narration is highly constrained, whereas the novelist's relation to his sources is free, remains tacit, or, when mentioned, is assumed to be spurious. This is where historical and fictional discourses take on different forms that we may not fail to take into consideration.[25]

Building on these insights we can bring the sagas into the discussion again. If, as I would suggest, these texts are referential narratives, then the narrators posing as historians ought to be examined. How do these narrators make their stories convincing and truthful? How do they relate to their sources and what do they do in the absence of sources? One could also ask how the narrators set themselves apart from the language of the characters posing in the story. Most importantly, perhaps, are the questions of whether the sagas employ different kinds of discourses in order to be conceived as reliable renderings of past events, and whether there is a connection between the type of discourse they employ and the time of their initial composition. It is generally accepted that the presence of a narrator in the classical sagas, predominantly in the sagas of Icelanders, is carefully concealed in the pretence that the text is merely recording facts and events, and moreover, that the fiction of what is being said is a characteristic way of establishing objective history.[26] If we turn to the sagas of the formative period of saga writing, however, we would typically find a far less neutral approach to what is being told. One could point to a number of cases within the early kings' sagas where the narrators render the inner lives of their historical characters, or where our attention is drawn explicitly to the act of narration. In *Orkneyinga saga*, for example, the events are presented through an omniscient narrator who generally follows one group of characters but who also

[24] See for instance the divisional correspondence between the different narratologists: *fabula* vs. *sjuzet* (Russian Formalism), *histoire* vs. *récit* + *narration* (Genette), *functions* + *actions* vs. *narration* (Barthes), *story* vs. *discourse* (Chatman) and *fabula* vs. *story* + *text* (Bal). Cited in Cohn 1999, p. 111.

[25] See Cohn 1999, pp. 110-14.

[26] This has convincingly been shown by Meulengracht Sørensen in his 1993 study.

fills the audience in on what another group has been doing and even thinking when this is necessary. Although the actual narration remains consistently third person and seemingly impersonal, focalisation enables the narrator to introduce different perceptions of the events being told.[27] Another example can be found in *Sverris saga*. In the prologue the narrator asks his audience to trust his account and to accept it as a true rendering of what really happened. But a close reading of the story brings us to another level below that of straightforward chronicle. Here we find a narrator who insistently comments on his narrative and draws attention to its development, to its origins in complicated and divergent traditions, and even to his own control of the story through his ability to include and exclude. Even if this was not intended, the narrator of *Sverris saga* constantly draws attention to his own narration, thereby putting a subjective stamp on the historicity of his story.

Although these examples are meant to be introductory rather than conclusive I suspect that we will be able to find a slightly different narrative situation in the sagas composed in the formative period of saga-writing than the one found in sagas composed a few decades later in the classical age. Seeing how the presence of a narrator is carefully concealed in the sagas of the classical age, even in sagas dealing with a more 'fictional' subject matter, it may seem strange that we should find a more subjective approach to the past in sagas such as the kings' sagas which explicitly aim at rendering history. If, on the other hand, we take into consideration that the Icelanders did not begin to recreate their own past as *saga* literature until the end of the twelfth century, then we *should* in fact expect to find that the first texts written all bear the stamp of having been composed in a time when the saga form was still being developed. If in fact the Icelanders first had to learn how to write sagas before they could develop and exploit the form, then it can come as no surprise to find a less controlled attitude towards the act of narrating in the early material. My proposal is that a partial transformation of the past into saga literature was necessary before the Icelanders could recreate the past in the more consistent and objective way in what have been considered the classical works of the genre, the sagas of Icelanders. It may be that the narrative situation in the early sagas would typically reflect a general struggle with how to render the past, whereas the narrative situation in the sagas from the classical age would bear evidence of saga authors having found a solution to this problem. It goes without saying that only further studies along the lines presented here will allow us to determine the validity of this idea. Considered within a larger literary-historical framework, however, it does seem likely that during the formative period of saga writing, and not only within the formative period of the kings' sagas, we would find the co-existence of a number of divergent texts and a number of divergent forms, all in some way or another experimenting with how to recreate the past not only as literature in its textual sense, but as *saga* literature.

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[27] See Jesch 1992 and 1996 for a narratological study of *Orkneyinga saga*.

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