

Icelandic Sagas and the Narrative Tradition of Travelogue

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Introduction

This paper discusses the narrative representation of travel across various saga genres, such as *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur*, and *þættir*. On the one hand, the purpose is to illuminate certain characteristic narrative sequences that emerge from sagas in connection with depicting travel; on the other hand, the broader cultural meaning of corresponding themes will be brought to the fore in order to open up a traditional reality in which travel, and telling stories about travel, was considered an important convention.

To start with, a few comments should be provided concerning the joint application of different sagas. Despite their inherent generic differences, *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur* and *þættir* manifest themselves in a similar retrospective tradition in that they make the claim of representing significant events and actors of the past, and in that they apply a predominantly realistic approach to the subject matter. Furthermore, plot-wise they show that the unfolding conflicts have a similar individual and personalised anchorage. The motif of individual feuds, which is usually emphasised in the case of *Íslendingasögur*, has thus been highlighted in connection with *Heimskringla* (Bagge, 1991, 75). At the same time, even when the patterns of feuds themselves are made evident through the acting individuals, the sagas also emphasise the strong role of kinship which guides over the individuals' conduct – again visible both from *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur* (cf. Bagge, 1991, 112-17; Gurevich, 1992, 79-80).

It can be claimed that a comparable interplay between individuality and collectivity can also be illuminated in connection with the motif of travel – the focus lies upon travelling individuals and their initiatives, and yet it is evident that the journeys undertaken simultaneously carry connotations regarding collective cultural customs, which may even shed light on the historical core elements of narrative travelogues, transmitted from generation to generation.

Sagas as travelogues

Writing about travel forms one characteristic facet of the sagas' representation of the events of the past, and follows its own conventions.¹ On the one hand, in its purest form the travelogue in sagas emerges in terms of recounting exploration, adventure and conquest – with certain insights into the experiences gained abroad.² On the other hand, there occur numerous brief and incidental loggings of events that take a saga

¹ Some of the ideas presented in this paper have been introduced in Zilmer 2005a, 329-337, and 2005b.

² The sagas about the *Vinland* expeditions, such as *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grœnlendinga saga*, make up a perfect example, containing some information about the journey, the discovered regions and the adventurous encounters with natives.

character from one place to another without much additional information about the journey or the target region. It is in fact only exceptionally that we meet more detailed descriptions of the visited places; the usual practice is to concentrate upon the act of travelling in combination with constructing the routes followed by naming destinations reached and/or peoples encountered. In this light it may seem rather far-fetched to define sagas as travelogues. Naturally, no single saga can be reduced to functioning merely as an individual itinerary, but the extent to which travel-related themes figure in the overall material supports the view of travelling as a key element on many occasions.

References to travel can be interpreted in the light of both structural and thematic purposes (see e.g. Harris, 1972; Lönnroth, 1976, 68-76). Even the seemingly isolated and laconic references to travellers in some *Íslendingasögur* usually serve a particular narrative rationale, often introducing an actor of significant qualities (cf. also Meulengracht Sørensen, 1993, 224-26; Vésteinn Ólason, 1998, 78-79). But in addition to that there occur whole systematic sequences of travel – most notable in the context of the regular campaigns and expeditions of the Scandinavian kings as depicted in *konungasögur*, but also easily traceable in such *Íslendingasögur* that outline the saga characters' journeys during different stages of the narrative. Lönnroth (1976, 71) has, for example, identified four instances of what he calls 'the travel pattern' in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, with corresponding 'stock episodes' and 'stock characters'.

The recurring nature of travel episodes contributes to shaping a saga into a chain of related events or foci – the so-called travel schemata. Besides the main storyline being immersed with repetitive journeys, we observe how the motif of travel sometimes provides a joint frame around various saga characters; the saga may be introduced and also concluded by references to travellers. To name but one example – in the introductory chapter of *Hallfreðar saga* we learn about a certain Sokki, [...] *vikingr einn mikill ok illr viðreignar; hann fór víða með hernaði* (ÍF VIII, 135), as well as about two foster brothers, Óttarr and Ávaldi, who were accustomed to sailing between Norway and England. The saga ends with information about Þorvaldr going abroad, whereas Hallfreðr – the son of the deceased main character Hallfreðr, who in his time had travelled a lot – is said to have taken charge of the farm of Óttarsstaðir in Iceland.

The last saga passage may also serve to illustrate the main distinctions drawn between various scenes of action – one's homestead and the outside world. While characterising sagas as travelogue it should, however, be kept in mind that travelling does not automatically indicate going abroad, but that there is even much local (inland) and regional traffic to consider, unfolding within the Icelandic/Scandinavian setting. That is to say, mobility can be traced on different levels and according to varying main arenas of action. From such a broad angle any depictions that focus on a saga character's trips outside his usual home-base belong within the travel schemata.

On the one hand, it is possible to claim that travels to foreign – and potentially more remote – destinations still differ in significant ways from the more routine trips within one's native setting. I have previously argued that in the context of *Íslendingasögur* 'travelling abroad signals accomplishments on a more distinguished level exactly for the reason that it takes place outside one's usual environment and

allows one to achieve something out of the ordinary' (Zilmer, 2005b, 75). However, when studying the imagery of travel across saga genres it can be shown that even the journeys within one region or country contribute to comparable concepts of manhood and status. In *konungasögur* travelling promotes the ruler's power extension schemes – his travels are the direct means of establishing or upholding control over a certain territory, as witnessed to by the statement in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* (ch. 41) where it is said that in his old days Haraldr was no longer able to travel around the country and *stjórna konungs málum* (ÍF XXVI, 146).

Furthermore, we can also identify parallel background motivation for regional and inter-regional travels; in both settings it is possible to distinguish between forced and voluntary (or more or less so) enterprises, and journeys similarly bring about success or end in disgrace and disaster. What would then be either the expected or the unexpected outcome of a journey is a feature of sagas' travelogue that deserves a closer look.

Conditions of travel as part of the narrative scheme

One remarkable feature concerning saga depictions of travel is the relative weight that may be given to characterising the travel conditions, usually in connection with sea voyages – and how this then fits into the narrative scheme. Normally we do not expect to find much corresponding information; when it comes to describing the process of travel the sagas mostly offer laconic summaries, as for example stated in ch. 117 of *Óláfs saga helga* about the trip of Ásbjörn who was sailing south in the summer: [...] *ok er ekki sagt frá ferð þeira, fyrr en þeir koma í Karmsund aptan dags ok logðu at við Ögvaldsnes* (ÍF XXVII, 195).³

Now and then we do, however, learn about how one prepared for the journey – arranging the ships in spring after the ice has broken up and the snow melted, looking for a crew; we may even be given the number of ships and men involved in a particular enterprise. Sometimes it is further told that once everything was set one could start the voyage with favourable winds. In contrast with that, on other occasions it is related that the men had to wait a while for suitable winds. When it comes to events during the trip the narrative may just as easily apply the motif of swift sailing, which takes one quickly and without any problems to the intended destination, as opposed to situations when one has to struggle with strong headwinds, or in the worst case survive very rough and stormy weather. From the point of view of narrative logic such patterns of good versus poor travel conditions are often in agreement with the outcome of the voyage or reflect previous success or bad luck. Even if such an obvious chain of events is not visible, the travel conditions contribute to providing a specific emphasis or twist to the story.

There occur scenes when everything goes well and weather conditions act in favour of the mission, as for example in ch. 43 of *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* when describing how Eiríkr headed east to the Viken area:

Eiríkr konungr fekk svá mikít hraðbyri, at hann sigldi dag ok nótt, ok fór engi njósn fyrir honum (ÍF XXVI, 149).

³ The references to the sagas of Norwegian kings indicate those found in *Heimskringla*.

After his quick journey of which no news went ahead he is said to have led a victorious battle and extended his power over the region. Similar depictions are included in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (ch. 47), with the king travelling northwards day and night (*náttfari ok dagfari*), and moving quickly thanks to a favourable breeze so that nobody became aware of who he was; and in *Óláfs saga helga* (ch. 109) where the king makes good progress and arrives at his destination sooner than anyone had thought.

The real nature of the scene naturally depends on whose perspective one follows. In ch. 22 of *Hákonar saga góða*, the sons of Eiríkr blóðøx are proceeding with a mighty force from Denmark, and are supported by favourable winds. Sailing north along the coast day and night, their approach is not spotted immediately, no beacons are kindled and thus no news goes ahead of their coming. All this information serves to underline that the odds are in this case in favour of King Hákon's enemies; in this manner a heroic climax is received, since Hákon still manages to win the battle.

On the other hand, unfavourable travel conditions fit into the scheme of problems. In *Kormáks saga* (ch. 19), Kormákr plans to travel to Iceland, but the Norwegian king tries to make him change his mind, considering all the problems the man would face. Nevertheless, Kormákr decides to leave; he and his men immediately run into trouble, and once out on the sea the weather conditions turn really bad:

Þeir láta í haf ok þola harða veðráttu, ok eitt sinn, er komit hafði mikit áfall, váru menn vátir (ÍF VIII, 271).

Typically hard weather conditions add colour to one's losses and suffering. In ch. 174 of *Óláfs saga helga*, Óláfr's complicated journey is depicted after he has lost his dominion – he manages to make only slow progress since it is winter, and he has to wait a long time for suitable winds. Similarly, in *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* (ch. 35) we hear of the troubles of Haraldr upon his encounter with Sveinn – the Norwegian king has to suffer contrary winds and mist, his ships are heavy and waterlogged, and so he hardly manages to get away from his Danish enemy.

In different situations the harsh sailing conditions can constitute part of the test the hero has to go through in order to demonstrate his excellence; in ch. 29 of *Óláfs saga helga* it is emphasised that the travellers had to compete with strong gales, but that thanks to the crew and the fortune of the king everything ended well: [...] *en með því at þeir höfðu liðkost góðan ok hamingju konungs, þá hlýddi vel!* (ÍF XXVII, 35).

Unfavourable winds also come into the picture as a means of making the journey deviate from its course (and lead to an alternative destination) or slow down, which brings about new developments in the story. In *Eiríks saga rauða* (ch. 5) we hear about Leifr's journey:

En er Leifr sigldi af Grœnlandi um sumarit, urðu þeir sähafa til Suðreyja. Þaðan byrjaði þeim seint, ok dvalðusk þeir þar lengi um sumarit (ÍF IV, 209).

During his more or less forced stay in the Hebrides, Leifr meets a woman who gets pregnant with his child. Along similar lines in ch. 22 of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, the unfortunate wind conditions and stormy seas make Óláfr leave the waters around Bornholm and sail south to Wendland; we learn from the saga that he stayed there for some time and got married.

Personalised travelogues and the voice of individuality

Another significant feature of travel depictions reveals itself in terms of personal travelogues – what we hear of in the sagas are a number of personalised travels, connected with named individuals. In fact, the destinations reached by these individual travellers may also be determined in terms of a person one is heading towards, or alternatively in combination with the target region – as illustrated by a typical saga statement from *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (ch. 89): *Fór Eiríkr jarl austr í Svíþjóð á fund Óláfs Sviakonungs ok fengu þeir þar góðar viðtökur* (ÍF XXVI, 337).

The dimension of personalised voyages is equally well-represented in both *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur* – in the latter also very much thanks to the inserted skaldic verse, where named skalds relate the accomplishments of their distinguished patrons. Both the prose and the accompanying poetic commentaries bring out an undertone of individuality in the sagas' representation of travel – even when the travels undertaken belong within the scheme of large-scale campaigns and expeditions, the main focus lies on named leaders and on their courageous battles against enemies, who may also often be individually identified. Such an individual approach is clear even when the battle depicted brings about the slaughter of hundreds or thousands of people – the deeds belong to individuals.

I have already pointed out above how references to travelling engagements serve to introduce and describe (new) saga figures. In its shortest form we meet special nicknames, such as Hrani inn víðförli in ch. 1 of *Ólafs saga helga*, or Sigtryggr snarfari and Hallvarðr harðfari in ch. 18 of *Egils saga*. Besides that there occur numerous more or less full commentaries that single out certain saga personalities as travellers. Through such depictions travelling emerges as a natural part of an individual's career; it is an activity that tests and develops the person's various skills and qualities, and even helps to determine one's identity. Similar narrative strategies that present travelling as a component of the 'saga personality' can be found from all genres under study. For example, *Egils saga* begins with information about Egill's grandfather Úlfr (Kveldúlf):

Úlfr var maðr svá mikill ok sterkr, at eigi váru hans jafningjar; en er hann var á unga aldri, lá hann í vikingu ok herjaði (ÍF II, 3).

In *Þorvarðar þáttur krákunefs*, Þorvarðr is characterised as [...] *auðigr maðr ok drengur góðr. Hann fór milli landa ok mazk vel, þar sem hann kom* (ÍF VI, 371). The narrative of *Heimskringla* is filled with numerous such short but significant introductions. To name just two typical examples from *Óláfs saga helga*: in ch. 62 we hear about Eyvindr úrarhorn from eastern Agder, characterised in terms of his raids in different directions (west, east and south); it is also pointed out that he owned a good ship. In ch. 66 of the same saga another Agder man is presented – Guðleikr gerzki is outlined as a remarkable trader who travelled to many lands (the byname *gerzki*, in fact, reflects his strong ties with *Garðaríki*).

Travelling may also bring about changes in one's previous identity in terms of helping one climb a social ladder, gain wealth, and achieve greater recognition in others' eyes. Chapter 4 of *Haralds saga gráfeldar* introduces a certain Grjótgarr – young and not of that high a position, but then it is said that he spent time in the company of great men, participating in viking expeditions and acquiring wealth. In this

light it is natural that saga heroes desire to go travelling already at a relatively young age – they are eager to prove themselves. In *Heimskringla* we thus hear about the raids undertaken by Norwegian kings who were still in their teens, as one way of establishing themselves as strong leaders. Chapter 10 of *Hákonar saga góða* informs that as soon as the sons of Eiríkr blóðøx were old enough they went raiding. *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* (ch. 32) claims that Haraldr's son Eiríkr was only twelve when he got five warships from his father and started raiding. Similar is the information in ch. 4 of *Óláfs saga helga*: *Óláfr Haraldsson var þá tólf vetra gamall, er hann steig á herskip fyrsta sinn* (ÍF XXVII, 4); or as expressed in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*: *Ok er Gunnlaugr var tólf vetra gamall, það hann fjoður sinn fararefna, ok kvazk hann vilja fara útan ok sjá sið annarra manna* (ÍF III, 59). However, in the case of *Gunnlaugr*, his father Illugi finds him not yet well-suited to travelling, which signals that certain pre-qualifications also had to be present. The availability of material possessions is one aspect, but even more important are appropriate personal features that allow one to join the ranks of distinguished travellers.

Hreiðars þátr casts an interesting light on some of these required personality features. Hreiðarr wishes to go travelling but his brother Þórðr finds that he is not smart enough, and hence utters the opinion: *'Ekki þykki mér þér fallinn fgrin'* (ÍF X, 247). However, we learn that during his travels Hreiðarr makes progress, and: [...] *hefir hann gort sér at mestum hluta þau kynjalæti, er hann sló á sik inn fyrra hluta ævinnar* (ÍF III, 260).

These and other examples illuminate the manner in which travelling promotes personal development – even when the saga character in question is otherwise depicted in a somewhat negative light. The usual rationale behind one's urge to travel is of a pragmatic kind (such as wealth and status), but in addition to that the sagas underline the more abstract values in terms of which one can experience personal growth. That is to say, besides materialistic gain, emphasis can be placed upon the concept of honour and fame. The saga may even make the point that the latter is preferred over the idea of material wealth; as witnessed to by the advice given to Ógmundur by Glúmr in *Ógmundar þátr dytts*:

'[...] nú þœtti mér miklu skipta, at þú fengir heldr af fgrinni scemð ok mannvirðing en mikit fé, ef eigi er hvárstveggja kostur' (ÍF IX, 102).

Travel as a shared cultural custom

The way the motif of travel is incorporated into sagas also emphasises – besides the aspect of individual, personalised travelogues – the importance of regarding travelling as a collective experience; i.e. something that has to be preserved in tales, and thus belonging with the shared cultural tradition.

In their own manner the sagas offer an insight into the practice of telling stories about one's journeys. In fact, it is common to make a point about how travelling heroes are expected to share their experiences with others upon their return or while still on the road (even if we do not hear the exact descriptions). The sagas also cast light on various modes of preserving the tales of one's travels; the frequent quotations derived from skaldic praise poems make up an obvious case in themselves, but apart from that, the general art of storytelling gains attention. Saga literature contains

numerous examples that confirm the importance assigned to oral travel narratives as a means of passing on news and knowledge. Therefore, it is not merely travel that brings one renown, but also very much the process during which stories of a man's accomplishments turn into a collective possession.

The apparent enthusiasm surrounding travel-related dialogues may be illustrated by looking at a passage from *Egils saga*, which describes a scene unfolding between Einarr and Egill. The former has just returned from his voyage and Egill is curious about the news from abroad; the interest in travelling is mutual and provides for good communication between the two:

Egill spurði Einar mjök austan tíðenda ok at vinum sínum, svá ok at þeim, er hann þóttisk víta, at óvinir hans váru; hann spurði ok mjök eptir stórmenni. Einarr spurði ok í móti Egil at þeim tíðendum, er fyrr höfðu gorzk um ferðir Egils ok stórvirki hans, en þat tal þótti Agli gott, ok røttisk af vel (ÍF II, 268).

A similar fascination with travel stories shines through in a comment provided by *Vatnsdæla saga*, where one man initiates exactly this subject, which the other person is known to take pleasure in: [...] *hann vildi jafnan ræða um viking sína ok herferðir* (ÍF VIII, 48).

As was demonstrated above through the commentaries concerning individual travellers, there is usually strong admiration connected to travel stories – one brings to the fore the wide knowledge and experience of these men, which is also the reason why people want to listen to them. This is for example pointed out in ch. 87 of *Knýtlinga saga* about the saga character Viðgautr: *Kunni hann frá morgu að segja, því at hann var vitr maðr ok hafði víða farit* (ÍF XXXV, 245). It is emphasised that he could tell others a lot about what they wanted to know; and later in the saga we also learn that Viðgautr knew many different languages.

However, it is not always in terms of high appreciation that a traveller and his ventures become known – now and then the sagas tell of journeys that are on everybody's lips due to the fact that they were a failure, and the men basically ended up as laughing stocks for others. One such scene occurs in ch. 117 of *Óláfs saga helga*, with a story about a certain Ásbjörn who had his cargo and even the good sails of the ship taken from him.

From a broader perspective sagas provide witness to the fact that travel stories do not merely fulfil entertaining purposes, but can also be considered a necessary convention that has to be followed by any respectable person – those who do not live up to such a cultural norm may meet with disapproval. That is obvious especially in the context of talking about the more remote and adventurous travel destinations, as expressed in *Grœnlendinga saga* (ch. 3), where the character Bjarni is criticised for his limited information on the lands he has visited:

Sagði Bjarni frá ferðum sínum, er hann hafði lund sét, ok þótti monnum hann verit hafa óforvitinn, er hann hafði ekki at segja af þeim lundum, ok fekk hann af því nokkut ámæli' (ÍF IV, 248).

The more customary journeys also provide a worthy and expected topic since the events that occur while one is travelling always have news value in the world of sagas – of this we also find several examples.

Travel stories and news from other regions also carry a motivating role, attracting and inspiring men to engage in travelling (see e.g. ch. 8 of *Eiríks saga rauða* and ch. 7 of *Grænlandinga saga*). The sagas further point out that such news tend to spread widely and quickly and to encourage long-lasting discussions, with many stories being told about the same events; this is demonstrated by formulations such as *ok er Óláfs for allfræg* in *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 21 (ÍF V, 59) or *ok er mikil saga frá honum sögð* in *Grettis saga*, ch. 62 (ÍF VII, 205). In this manner the sagas themselves show us how the narrative tradition of travelogue turns into collective and traditional lore.

Conclusions

In the narrative created by the sagas, accounts of travel – be they either imaginary or real – constitute a characteristic pattern of action. Travel is mapped in terms of cognitive journeys undertaken by various individuals to different destinations. The motif of travel helps to construct specific narrative sequences, but in addition to that the impressive extent to which the activity as such is depicted in the sources casts light on traditional understandings. The narrative tradition of travelogue that emerges from the sagas belongs with the process of passing on the interpretations of certain cultural realities from one generation (situation) to another. The individual scenes depicted form whole chains of events, and the recurring patterns provide witness to the collective importance given to travel in the context of depicting the past.

Within this tradition the elements of original and potentially factual accounts as well as mere fantasy drawn from (oral) storytelling and written composition can be assumed to blend together; we encounter a mixture that is both historically and fictionally motivated and which builds as much upon preserved knowledge as on the narrative interpretation of these events. As demonstrated above, the sagas themselves offer insight into the central meaning of the activity of travelling and the manner in which these experiences were transmitted – before any stories were put down in writing there must have naturally existed oral tales about the voyages of the past.

In this light it is fitting to end this paper with a comment preserved from *Grænlandinga saga*, ch. 8:

Ok hefir Karlsefni gørst sagt allra manna atburði um farar þessar allar, er nú er nõkkut orði á komit (ÍF IV, 269).

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