

Textuality and the Oral-Written Continuum in Old Norse culture

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Denne artikkelen drøfter med utgangspunkt i den norrøne kulturen nokre sentrale spørsmål i tilknytning til omgrepa 'textuality' og 'the oral-written continuum'. Dei første skriftelege tekster i Norden vart introduserte av Kyrkja, og Kyrkjias teksttolking vart introdusert saman med dei. Men førestillinga om at meininga i tekster måtte tolkast fram, hadde eksistert lenge før introduksjonen av skriftkulturen. Den vanskeleg tilgjengelege skaldediktinga hadde alltid kravt tolking. Også på fleire område ser vi ein klar kontinuitet mellom den munnlege og skriftelege kulturen. Edda- og skaldedikting hadde i prinsippet den same form på det munnlege som på det skriftelege stadiet, og om slik dikting vart komponert av ein skrivande forfattar, vil det vere så godt som umogeleg å skilje diktinga skapt i den munnlege tradisjonen frå den skapt av ein skrivande forfattar. Også genrane innanfor sagalitteraturen bygde i større eller mindre grad på munnleg tradisjon. Samanhengen mellom det munnlege og det skriftelege stadiet viser seg også i framføringa av skriftelege tekster. Det er indikasjonar i tekstene på at skriftelege tekster som bygde på munnleg tradisjon, vart fortalde, ikkje lesne. I mellomalderen fungerte nokre tekster som ei tolkingsramme for andre tekster. Bibelen var ei slik tekst, men også andre tekster kunne få ein slik funksjon. I vår tid er det eit spørsmål om vi klarer å sjå tolkingsrammene mellomalderetekster vart lesne innanfor og om vi klarer å få med oss den fulle meininga av det mellomalderforfattarane ville formidle.

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1 Introduction

In my discussion of textuality and the oral-written continuum I will take my examples from Old Norse texts and culture. In this culture there existed oral genres or oral art forms, orally derived literature, and written literature in both Old Norse and Latin. First of all, however, I would like to make a few brief comments on the terms 'text' and 'textuality'. The word 'text' goes back, as we know, to the Latin word *textus*. An original meaning of *textus* is 'web', but the word has several different meanings, 'continuity' being another of these, that is 'continuity of words' and 'words or thoughts in continuity'. In both these meanings, the word *textus* (text) can mean both an oral text and a written text. The word *textus* is also used with the meaning 'written text', 'document', and 'Gospel'. The modern meaning of 'text' in everyday speech as 'something written' is close to this last meaning of Latin *textus*.

The term 'textuality' is, in the English Oxford Dictionary, defined as: "the quality or use of language characteristic of written works as opposed to spoken usage". This meaning of the term 'textuality' corresponds closely with the term 'text' in the meaning of

‘something written’. Linguists could, for example, find this meaning of the term useful, as well as scholars within my own field, Old Norse philology, since philology (at least in the Scandinavian sense), is comprised of linguistics, literature and culture. Since this meaning of textuality corresponds with the most common meaning of ‘text’ in everyday language today, it is likely also the meaning that most easily comes to mind for most people. However, as we know, in literary criticism the term ‘textuality’ is mostly used in a way that corresponds with the meaning of the term ‘text’ as ‘words or thoughts in continuity’.

Both ‘text’ and ‘textuality’ have become buzzwords. This is a factor that has resulted in the term being used by scholars within more and more fields of research. I remember how confused I felt the first time I read an article written by an archaeologist who talked about his excavation field, post holes, and finds as his text; but after having thought about it, it struck me that this – for me at the time – unfamiliar use of the term ‘text’ helped me to see not only archaeology but also my own field of research in a wider context and in a new light.

The term textuality has probably become a buzzword to an even greater degree than text, and is today used by scholars from widely different fields of research. Scholars from these different fields ask different questions and are interested in different aspects of a text – whether they use ‘text’ in a narrow or broad meaning. This is of course a challenge when scholars from all these different fields try to cooperate and discuss their research projects with each other. Nevertheless, this is after all a minor problem, and we must remember that there is a reason why textuality became a buzzword. It did not happen only because scholars from many fields of research wanted to be trendy and up to date all of a sudden. It happened because many scholars, also scholars from other research fields than those in which this term was first used, found the term textuality useful, and the fact that scholars from widely different fields have textuality as a common ground and point of contact is useful for collaboration across different branches of research.

2 Old Norse Society and the Introduction of Written Culture

The Middle Ages was a period when textually oriented societies came into being, and therefore the Middle Ages is a very logical and good point of departure for the discussion of different aspects of textuality. Old Norse society had a strong oral culture and cultivated oral genres that were later on passed into writing. After the arrival of writing, Old Norse society developed a flourishing written culture in which both orally derived and imported and translated genres were cultivated. This culture therefore offers very

good examples of the oral written continuum, and of how the two cultures, oral and written, coexisted and influenced each other.¹

Long, written texts in the Latin alphabet came to the North as something new with Christian culture, but it is worth mentioning that people in Scandinavia were not unfamiliar with writing before the introduction of writing in the Latin alphabet. Indeed, writing in runes may have been rather widespread. Learning how to read and write runes was in principle the same as learning to read and write in the Latin alphabet. Knowledge of parchment, which also came with the Christian culture, may have meant more for the development of the written culture than the new alphabet, since there already existed a perfectly good alphabet in the Old Norse culture, but stone, wood, bone, and metal were not suitable media for the writing down of long texts. Therefore the transformation of society from an oral to a written culture could start only after Christianization. This transformation would, however, take a long time, and oral genres and art forms continued to live alongside each other and exert mutual influence. At the same time, runic literacy continued to exist as a parallel culture, mostly used for short messages carved on objects made of the same materials as before, but also occasionally written on parchment, and we find inscriptions both in Old Norse and Latin. Many people must have been literate in both alphabets.

The first written texts known in the North – if we leave runic inscriptions out of the picture – were imported texts in Latin needed by the Church. In this case, the writtenness, or textuality in the meaning “the quality or use of language characteristic of written works as opposed to oral usage”, is obvious. The textuality would also be obvious, but to a lesser degree, if a text in Latin, for example a legend of saints, was translated into Old Norse. Legends were often translated into colloquial and easy language, and were not only used by the Church, but also had a function as entertainment in more ‘worldly’ settings, at least later when written texts spread in society, and translated legends were called sagas. However, in the earliest period after Christianization, language characteristic of written works was closely associated with the Church and Christianity. Later on when oral genres like Eddic and skaldic poetry were put into a written form and orally derived genres came into being, the line between the characteristics of a written and an oral text became less clear.

¹ In the early phases of saga research, sagas were normally seen as created in oral tradition (see Andersson 1964; Mundal 1977). From early in the twentieth century, scholars belonging to the so-called Icelandic school took the lead in saga research; according to this school, sagas were the works of individual authors who perhaps to some degree had built on oral tradition. In the 1960s, the works of the American scholar Theodore M. Andersson aroused interest once again in oral tradition and how this tradition had contributed to the creation of written texts (see Andersson 1967). Different aspects of oral tradition in connection to saga literature is discussed in Gísli Sigurðsson 2004 [2002]. An overview of saga literature that also includes a discussion of the relationship between oral tradition and written sagas is found in Mundal 2013b. The scholar who, more than others, has underlined the importance of the continuation between the oral and the written culture is Ruth Finnegan. See for example Finnegan 1974; 1992; and 2005.

3 Textuality and Interpretation

The textuality of texts introduced by the Church would also be obvious in the sense that people knew that texts had a meaning that had to be uncovered through interpretation. If there was something an audience in the Middle Ages learned, after listening to the priests year after year, it was that texts had meaning and that interpretation was the key to unlock this meaning that sometimes was not openly expressed. Interpretation in the church context was, however, not left to the individual members of the congregation. The priests would interpret the text and in doing so, come between the text and the listener. Alternatively, the interpretation could, in some cases, be clearly expressed in the text itself. Either way, by listening to interpretations in the church, people in the Middle Ages, literate and illiterate alike, would be educated in text analysis and interpretation, and this knowledge could be used – and probably was used – when the churchgoer came back from church and listened to, or perhaps read if he were literate, other types of texts.²

The importance of interpretation to get to the meaning of a text did, however, not come as something new with the Church. In the Old Norse society there existed an oral genre, skaldic poetry, that was a very demanding art form, although the degree of difficulty within the genre could admittedly vary. Sometimes there was also a hidden or a double meaning in a skaldic stanza. Learning to understand this sort of poetry was of course a question of training and knowledge, but the art form was so difficult that the listener had to concentrate while listening. Active interpretation was part of the communication process when a skaldic stanza was performed, and sometimes the listeners would need more time to interpret, or decode, the text than the time it took to perform it orally.

A good example of this is found in a saga of Icelanders called *Gísla saga*. The hero of the saga, Gísli, has killed his own brother-in-law, the husband of his sister, to avenge another brother-in-law, the brother of his wife. He reveals this in a skaldic stanza. He probably knew that only few people would understand this stanza, and he felt sure that the people who did would be on his side. He miscalculated, however, the loyalty of his sister, the widow of the man he had killed. The saga says that she learned the stanza by heart, went home and worked out its meaning. Thereafter she told the brother of her dead husband, to whom she now was married, who the murderer was.³

People in the Middle Ages were probably much better trained to interpret texts than we usually think, and people in Old Norse culture, who in addition to the training they got

² To what degree interpretation of the Bible and holy texts influenced the writing and reading of saga literature is a matter of discussion. One attempt to read a Saga of Icelanders in the light of interpretations of holy texts is Torfi Tulinius' interpretation of *Egils saga*, *Skáldið í skrifinni: Snorri Sturluson og "Egils saga"* (Torfi H Tulinius 2004).

³ An analysis of this episode is found in Harris 1991. An introduction to Eddic and skaldic poetry is found in Mundal 2013a.

by listening to textual interpretation in the church, had for centuries cultivated an indigenuous oral genre that demanded active interpretation of texts from the listeners, and therefore had a very good basis for the interpretation of texts.

4 The Oral-Written Continuum

Written culture and written texts are often spoken of as ‘better’ or more advanced than oral culture and oral art forms. This is of course true in most ways, but in Old Norse culture there existed oral art forms, or oral genres, which demonstrate that an oral text and a written text can be identical or nearly identical.

We cannot, of course, know how oral speech sounded in Old Norse culture, but we can be pretty sure that speech then would have some of the same characteristics as speech today, for instance unfinished and interrupted sentences and a tendency to double some words and parts of a sentence, as opposed to a coherent, written text. However, oral art forms and all types of prepared spoken language, for example a well prepared speech, formulas used in connection with ceremonies and so on, would share some of their characteristics with written texts: coherent language, correct grammar, perhaps a choice of words different to those usually used in oral speech. The perception is that these oral texts are stable, meaning that they can be repeated more or less in the same form. They are not saved as a written text, but rather in people’s minds.

I have already mentioned skaldic poetry, one of the Old Norse art forms we know existed in preliterate times and one that continued to exist for centuries after the arrival of writing. The skalds had to follow many rules concerning the number of syllables in the line, stressed and unstressed, long and short, and there were also rules for alliteration and rhyme. All of these rules made it difficult to change the wording of the stanza without breaking the rules for the composition of skaldic poetry. The other type of poem that existed as an oral art form was Eddic poetry, poems about heroes and gods. These poems may have varied more than skaldic poetry from one performance to the next, but they too were relatively stable.⁴

Both skaldic and Eddic poetry were written down: skaldic poetry was normally included in sagas from the end of the 12th century onwards, in some cases several hundred years after they were composed orally, and Eddic poems were written down in collections of poems or added to other manuscripts, for example to handbooks of poetry, and in principle the first written text could be identical with the oral form the writer had heard from his informant.

⁴ For more about variation in performance of Eddic poetry, see Mundal 2008. See also Harris 1983.

Skaldic poetry, and probably Eddic poetry too, was also composed by skalds with a pen in hand. We know for example that the saga author Snorri Sturluson, who was also a skald, composed poems for several Norwegian kings and earls, before his first arrival in Norway in 1218, and the poems must have been sent to Norway in written form. It is, however, very hard to decide on the basis of form and style which poems were composed orally and which were composed by a writing skald and had a written form from the very beginning. These genres, skaldic and Eddic, demonstrate that oral art forms could pass into writing without noticeable changes in content, form and style, and that writing skalds could continue to cultivate the same art form as in the oral culture without noticeable changes. The oral-written continuum is very strong when we are not able to distinguish an orally composed text from a text composed by a writing skald.

The orally derived Icelandic genres Sagas of Icelanders and *fornaldarsögur* (sagas about ancient times) built on oral tradition to a high degree, even though there may have been differences between the individual sagas. We do not know how close the oral art forms, that is, the oral storytelling, and the written sagas, were to each other. This has been one of the big questions in saga research. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, many scholars held the view that there existed oral sagas that could have been written down more or less as they were heard in oral tradition, especially if the oral sagas were short. Long sagas were to a greater extent created by writing authors. Later the common view was that there existed only oral tradition that the authors had collected and used to compose a saga. Since we have no direct access to oral tradition in the Middle Ages, it is impossible to know how big a difference there was between a written saga and the tradition the author used. The oral tradition may have had an artistic form when performed, and the author may to some extent have tried to imitate an oral style. Therefore the characteristics of the language and style of the oral tradition behind the saga literature and the characteristics of language and style in written saga texts may not have been very different, but are not impossible to distinguish between as in the case of skaldic and Eddic poetry.

5 Oral Performance of Written Texts, Reading or Telling

In the Middle Ages written texts were normally read aloud to an listening audience. That was also the case with the saga genres. The reading aloud of written texts created a text between the written and the oral, so to speak. This is also an aspect of the oral written continuum. Normally we think that written language and written texts had more prestige than oral art forms. Reading from a written text would to some degree reflect some of the characteristics of written language, and therefore we should expect that a performance with a reading voice would be preferred. However, an oral performance that reflected many of the characteristics of the written language by being read in a reading voice was not preferred in all cases.

We have in saga literature a few descriptions of readings from books, and in these descriptions an interesting difference appears between texts that were read and texts that were *told*, even though the performer in all cases had a book at hand.

A scene describing reading aloud from books is found at the end of *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, a saga about the Norwegian king Hákon Hákonarson (1217–1263). The king is laying ill in bed in The Orkneys where he died shortly before Christmas. While he was ill he had books read to him, first books in Latin, but listening to Latin was too much for the sick king, and the saga continues:

Lét hann þá lesa fyrir sér norrænubækur nætr ok daga, first heilagra manna sögur, ok er þær þraut lét hann lesa sér konungatal frá Hálfðani svarta ok síðan frá öllum Nóregskonungum, hverjum eftir annan. (*Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* II: 261)

He then had books in Norse read to him days and nights; first sagas about holy men, and when they were running short he had *Konungatal* [*Fagrskinna*] read from Hálfðan svarti and after that the sagas about all the kings of Norway, one after the other.⁵

What we should notice here is that to describe the oral performance of written Latin texts, legends of the Church, and Sagas of kings, the author uses the verb ‘read’ (Old Norse *lesa*).

In *Þorgils saga skarða*, a contemporary saga preserved in the manuscript Reykjarfjarðarbók of *Sturlunga saga*, there is a description of saga reading as entertainment in the evening. The chieftain Þorgils skarði is given the option to choose between two types of entertainment, sagas or dance (Old Norse *dans*, a sort of song-dance). He chose sagas. In this case the saga read is the legend about Archbishop Thomas Becket:

Var þá lesin sagan og allt þar til er unit var á erkibiskup í kirkjuni og höggin af honum krónan. Segja men at Þorgils hætti þá og mælti: “Það mundi vera allfagur dauði.” (*Sturlunga saga* II: 734)

Then the saga was read, and read up to the point when the archbishop was attacked in the church and the crown was knocked off him. People say that Þorgils then stopped and said: “That must have been the most beautiful death.”

As in the case of *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* a book seems to be read word for word. We also have, however, a description of saga entertainment where the performer is said to have a book, but where the author describes his performance with the verb *segja* (to tell), not *lesa* (to read). This text is *Sturlu þáttur*⁶ (a *þáttur* is a saga-like short text) preserved in the same manuscript of *Sturlunga saga* as *Þorgils saga skarða*. The author

⁵ The translations from Old Norse here and later are my own.

⁶ *Sturlu þáttur* is probably written around 1300, at a time when at least some sagas of the *fornaldarsaga* type had been written down. Whether the story about Sturla telling a saga with a book in hand is true is not important for the source value of the text. The important thing is that the author gives a realistic picture of how sagas of the *fornaldarsaga* type could be performed around 1300.

describes how the Icelander Sturla Þórdarson late one evening entertains the crew on the ship of King Magnús lagabœtir of Norway by telling a saga about a troll woman called *Huldar saga* which must have been a saga of the *fornaldarsaga* type: *Sagði hann þá Huldar sögu betur og fróðlegar en nokkur þeira hafði fyrr heyrt er þar voru* (*Sturlunga saga* II, p. 765) (He then told the saga about Huld better and with more details than anyone present had heard before), the author says. The next day the queen sends for Sturla and asks him to come to her and bring the troll woman saga with him. As the performance is described, the performer has a book at hand, but he is telling the story rather than reading (the verb used is *segja*).

An Epilogue in *Karlamagnús saga* also indicates that sagas, or sagas of certain types, were expected to be told even though the performer had a written text at hand. The verb used to describe the performance is again *segja* (to tell). The epilogue reads:

Og lýkr hér nú þessari frásögu með þeim formála. að Jésús Kristur signi þann, er skrifaði, og svá þann, er sagði, og alla þá, sem heyrðu og sjá og gaman vilja sér hér af fá. (*Karlamagnús saga og kapp hans* I: 157)

And here ends the narrative with the prayer that Jesus Christ must bless him who wrote, and also him who told, and all those who listened and saw and wished to be entertained from this.

There are too few descriptions of oral performance of written texts localised to milieus outside churches and convents to be able to draw firm conclusions. It seems, however, that Latin texts were read with a reading voice wherever Latin texts were performed. Legends of saints were serious texts, but they also seem to have been used as entertainment, and it is not unlikely that such texts could also be told with a telling voice if they were performed in a worldly context. But in the examples we have, one in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* and one describing reading from Archbishop Thomas' vita in *Þorgils saga skarða*, texts about saints are read.

King Hákon Hákonarson also had sagas of kings read to him. These sagas are partly orally derived, and there certainly existed in oral tradition many entertaining stories about kings. If we had more examples describing the performances of a king's saga on the basis of a written text, it would not be surprising if the verb 'to tell' was used to describe the performance of these sagas. However, parts of these sagas are so loaded with details that reading is the only option, and the single example we have uses the verb 'read'.

Sagas of Icelanders and *fornaldarsögur* were probably the two saga genres that were closest to the oral tradition on which they are built. We have several saga scenes describing oral storytelling in the oral culture, but not one single scene describing the performance of a written saga of Icelanders in a medieval text. The description of Sturla telling *Huldar saga* with a book at hand is the only description of an oral performance of a written *fornaldarsaga*, but the verb used is 'to tell', and I suppose this would be the

most obvious verb to choose to describe the performance of both sagas of Icelanders and *fornaldarsögur* on the basis of written texts. The example from *Karlamagnús saga* is interesting because this saga is not an orally derived Old Norse saga. *Karlamagnús saga* is a prose translation into Old Norse, mostly from Old French heroic poems (*chansons de geste*, about the French king Charles the Great). The style of the Old Norse translation is, however, rather close to the Old Norse genre *fornaldarsögur*, and it seems that the audience expected the same type of performance.

Even though we have very few examples to draw conclusions from, the examples that we have could indicate that the Old Norse listening audience had different expectations as to the performance of different genres, and that they would expect the written genres, which to a high degree were orally derived, to be performed in the same way as the oral tradition the written sagas built upon (for more on this see Mundal 2010).

There may have been practical reasons for telling a saga even though the performer had a book at hand. It was rather dark in medieval houses, and the handwriting, often with abbreviations, was in many cases not easy to read fluently. For a performer who knew the text well, it would be tempting to use the written saga only as a promptbook and to look into the book only now and then when needed. If he did not know the saga well, he may have had to read, at least partly. However, the main reason for telling a saga, not reading it, was most likely the expectations from the audience who preferred a performance that was closer to the saga telling in oral time than the reading from books. ‘Textuality’ in the meaning “language characteristic of written works” was not the first choice of this audience. They were used to saga telling, and saga reading had to compete with saga telling throughout the Middle Ages. The first sagas of Icelanders were written around 1200, the latest in the 14th century. The first *fornaldarsögur* were probably written around the middle of the 13th century, and the latest are in fact post-medieval. The youngest sagas were built on oral tradition, as well as the oldest – though not perhaps in all cases – that means that a lot of oral stories, which were not to be found in written texts, were in circulation long after the oldest written sagas came into being, and the oral tradition which was written down probably continued to live on as oral tradition as well. This strong parallel oral culture explains why the Old Norse audience wanted saga telling even when reading was an alternative – or rather: they wanted saga reading to sound like saga telling.

A text, oral or written, is also “words or thoughts in continuity”; in other words, it contains meaning. The preference for saga telling – instead of saga reading – may also have something to do with the different conditions for text interpretation for the two forms of saga performance, telling or reading, offered to the audience.

Silent reading, which of course also existed in the Middle Ages, would have the advantage for the reader that he or she could turn to a previous page and read a section

twice if something was difficult to understand. The reader who read aloud to a listening audience would have to concentrate and look into the book. If he looked up he would easily lose his thread and not find his way back to the right line when he looked at the book again. Telling the story, on the other hand, whether the performer had a book at hand or not (as long as he did not need to look into it very often), would give the teller the possibility to keep eye-contact with his audience, and he could see their reactions and adjust his performance accordingly. When he did not have to concentrate on reading, he could concentrate on how to use his voice, and he had his hands free and could make gestures. The audience could see the gestures and the performer's change of facial expressions and body language, and hear how he changed his voice. All this would help the audience to interpret the text and grasp the meaning of it – or the meaning the performer tried to transmit.

The oral culture existed as a parallel culture to the written long after the written culture had taken roots and started to grow in Old Norse society. As the few examples of written sagas being *told* show us, the oral culture was strong enough to compete with the written and to take over the performance of written texts. These examples demonstrate one side of the oral-written continuum rather clearly.

6 The Audience and the Creation of Meaning

The story-telling scene where a performer tells a story that he has learned from another storyteller to a listening audience also offers a good example of how meaning was created. The storyteller had learned the story from a previous storyteller, and what he transmitted, or tried to transmit, was of course his interpretation of the story. The listeners would also interpret what they heard, but how they interpreted what they heard would depend on many factors, for example, how well they knew the story beforehand and therefore perhaps had already decided how to interpret what they heard, perhaps they knew other stories about the same events, perhaps age or gender would colour their interpretation, and so on. If the saga-teller had 20 listeners, we would get 20 interpretations of the story, and the listeners would be 20 potential new saga-tellers who would transmit their own interpretation. The listeners' interpretation of a text in the creation of meaning in the oral culture is therefore essential.

After the arrival of writing, the situation would be slightly different. The author of, for example, a saga of Icelanders, would collect traditions and put together a text that was his interpretation of what had happened in the past. From incoherent tradition he would create a coherent and meaningful story with chronology and causal connections. The later readers and listeners – whether the performer read the saga word for word or told the saga more freely – would of course come to their own interpretations as before, but the written text would be there as a stabilising factor that new readers and performers would go back to again and again. If a reader disagreed with the description of what had

happened in a certain saga, he could, however, make a new copy of the text and change the saga – if he felt strongly about it – and such things happened. It was in fact quite common in the Middle Ages that texts were reworked. Perhaps this acceptance of changing a written text in the Middle Ages and the production of a new version had something to do with the oral-written continuum and the coexistence with the oral culture and oral storytelling that was constantly on the move. People were used to changing texts.

7 Frames of Interpretation

Composing a text, oral or written, is an attempt to create meaning and coherence. In the Middle Ages it was also in many cases accepted and anticipated that a text should be interpreted or read in a certain light. This frame of interpretation was in some cases taken as a given and in other cases clearly expressed in the text. I have already mentioned religious texts that were read in the light of the Bible. To what degree it was anticipated that other more ‘worldly’ texts, for example a saga, should be read in the light of the Bible, is much more difficult to say. The genre to which a text belonged could also give a frame of reference that would influence the interpretation. Skaldic poems directed to kings, for example, would normally be praise poems, and the skalds’ intention was to secure a long afterlife for the king in people’s memory. The demanding skaldic stanzas would be interpreted in that light. This is, of course, not special to literature from the Middle Ages, but since similarities between texts within a genre often were greater than in modern times due to strict genre rules, this is more obvious in the Middle Ages than today.

A good example of translated texts that were probably meant to offer a new frame of interpretation in Old Norse culture are found in the so-called pseudohistorical works, *Veraldar saga* (History of the world), *Gyðinga saga* (History of the Jews), *Trójumanna saga* (the saga about the men from Troy), *Rómverja saga* (the saga about the people from Rome), *Alexanders saga* (the saga about Alexander the Great) and *Breta sögur* (Stories of the Britones) which were translated from Latin into Old Norse from late in the twelfth century onwards. *Veraldar saga*, written from a salvation history perspective, and *Gyðinga saga* both paint the backdrop for Christian history. The interest in and translation of these works shows that texts for translation were not chosen randomly. It was important to write the newly Christianized countries in the North into Christian history. The other sagas tell the story of great heroes of European history in the far past, and as happened in other places in Europe, people in the North connected to European history by tracing their ruling families back to the heroes of Troy. It is noteworthy that most of these works on Christian or European history are not merely translations, but compilations based on a large number of texts. This fact shows that the translators, or compilers, took ownership of the foreign material and included it in their own culture at the same time as they included themselves and their own culture in the wider European

and Christian context. These texts offer a frame of interpretation for contemporary and later texts written in Old Norse culture. They say something about how people in the North defined their new identity, as Christians and as Europeans, and the texts they produced should be interpreted in that light.

At the same time, we have Old Norse texts that clearly demand respect for the Icelandic past and identity. An Icelandic work called *Landnámabók* (Book of Settlement) was first written as early as in the 12th century. This original version has been lost, but the work is preserved in several later versions.⁷ In one of the late versions, *Þórðarbók*, written in the 17th century, there is an interesting passage which most likely originally was part of a prologue to *Landnámabók* in a much older version. *Þórðarbók* took over the prologue from a manuscript of the *Melabók* redaction from the late 13th century, and in *Melabók* it was probably copied from the lost version *Styrmisbók* written before 1245 when Styrmir died, in the same period when many Sagas of Icelanders were written:

Þat er margra manna mál, at þat sé óskyldr fróðleikr at rita landnám. En vér þykkjumsk heldr svara kunna útlendum mönnum, þá er þeir bregða oss því, at vér séim komnir af þrælum eða illmennum, ef vér vitum víst vórar kynferðir sannar, ... (*Landnámabók* 1968: 336, n.)

People often say that writing about the Settlement is irrelevant learning, but we think we can better meet the criticism of foreigners when they accuse us of being descended from slaves or scoundrels, if we knew for certain the truth about our ancestry.

This statement offers a frame of interpretation not only for *Landnámabók* itself but for all texts about the settlement period, that is all the sagas of Icelanders, and in fact for all texts about the past in the regions where the Icelanders came from. The self-esteem and the self-concept of Sturla's statement, told readers and listeners to interpret the stories about the past as heroic. This strong tendency to read texts in the light of other texts is of course an aspect of Medieval intertextuality.

8 Time Distance and Loss of Meaning

Finally, I want to mention a problem concerning medieval textuality to which there is no good solution, but still it is important to ask the question: Are we able to understand texts from the Middle Ages? As much knowledge about the Middle Ages as possible would of course help a lot, but there is a long way back in time to the Middle Ages, and even though we have studied the Middle Ages for decades, the medieval culture is not our culture – we were not there. If we try to translate Medieval texts, we will find that some words are very hard to translate because what they stood for no longer exists, and

⁷ In addition to the original *Landnámabók*, we know of one lost version, the so-called *Styrmisbók* written by Styrmir Kárasón in the first part of the 13th century. The oldest preserved version is *Sturlubók* written by Sturla Þórðarson who died in 1284. *Melabók*, of which only a fragment is preserved, was written around 1300, or shortly after. *Hauksbók* was written early in the 14th century, and this text builds on *Sturlubók* and *Styrmisbók*. *Skarðsárþók* was written around 1630, and finally *Þórðarbók* was written around a generation later, building on *Melabók* and *Skarðsárþók*.

some meanings are hard to express because the author's – and his contemporaries' – way of thinking was different from our mode of thought. These are problems medievalists have to live with. The only thing we can do is to be aware of them.

However, the problem of the long interval of time between the readers or listeners and the time of composition of the text they read or heard did also exist in the Middle Ages. I have mentioned skaldic poetry. The oldest skaldic poetry we have preserved was composed in the 9th century, and from the following centuries we have quite a lot of this poetry. When such poetry was incorporated in written sagas from the end of the 12th century onwards, much of this poetry – if it was genuine – was already several hundred years old. Eddic poetry is difficult to date, but many of the Eddic poems date from heathen times. The tradition behind the sagas of Icelanders took form in a period when heathen culture and ideology slowly gave in to Christian ideas and a new world view, and the sagas were no doubt written by Christians. There are great differences between our time and the Middle Ages, but there are also great differences within the Middle Ages, as for example in the change of religion, and there is in fact a longer time interval between the time of composition of the oldest skaldic and Eddic poetry and the end of the Middle Ages than between the end of the Middle Ages and our time.

The fact that some Old Norse texts were transmitted orally for centuries, were orally derived, or existed in a long lasting oral-written continuum means that it is sometimes difficult to relate a text to a certain period of time. As already mentioned, medieval texts changed, although written texts less than oral texts, and they changed for several reasons; one reason may have been that people who copied texts tried to adapt them to changes in culture and society. When we ask whether we are able to understand texts from the past, it puts things in perspective to consider the great changes that took place in the Middle Ages, and when we feel that it is difficult to translate a text from the Middle Ages without changing its meaning, we must remember that texts adapted to new contexts in the Middle Ages, too.

It is unavoidable that meaning in medieval texts gets lost and that texts from distant cultures in time or space do not mean exactly the same to us as to the people for whom they were originally created, even though we try to learn as much as possible about their distant culture. This is a problem, but this is also a challenge. The satisfaction we feel when we all of a sudden understand a meaning that otherwise has sunk into the mists of time, makes it worthwhile being a medievalist.

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