

THE 'DECLINE OF REALISM' AND INEFFICACIOUS OLD NORSE
LITERARY GENRES AND SUB-GENRES
LA "DECLINACIÓN DEL REALISMO" Y LOS INEFICACES GÉNEROS Y
SUBGÉNEROS LITERARIOS NÓRDICOS ANTIGUOS

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Abstract: In this article, the authors review the traditional division of the sagas of Icelanders into early, classical and post-classical sagas, discuss some of the foundational principles of this tripartite (or occasionally quinquepartite) categorisation and ask whether they can still be considered valid even though the categories are still in use. Furthermore, they ask whether this categorisation is always in line with the likely dating of individual sagas, discussing a few instances of supposedly post-classical sagas that may in fact be older than often assumed, and of classical sagas that may actually be younger than many 'late' sagas. Particular attention is paid to *Finnboga saga* has been regarded as one of the six youngest sagas but actually exists in an old manuscript. The authors examine some of the arguments for regarding it as a 'young' saga and argue that none of the characteristics by which *Finnboga saga* has been dated are unique to supposedly post-classical sagas.

Keywords: Icelandic sagas, genre, dating, realism, nationalism, textual criticism.

Resumen: En este artículo los autores revisan la clasificación tradicional de las sagas islandesas en tempranas, clásicas y postclásicas, critican algunos de los criterios fundamentales de esta clasificación en tripartita (o a veces en cinco) y se preguntan si todavía son válidos, a pesar de que las categorías estén todavía en uso. Se preguntan también si dichas categorías coinciden con la presunta datación de cada saga, utilizando como ejemplo sagas, en principio, postclásicas que podrían ser más antiguas de lo que se cree y sagas clásicas que podrían ser más modernas que muchas sagas tardías. Se pone especial énfasis en *Finnboga saga*, que se

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considera una de las seis más modernas pero que de hecho se encuentra en un manuscrito antiguo. Los autores examinan algunos de los criterios que la clasifican de moderna y argumentan que ninguno de los que la categorizan como tal, es exclusivo de las sagas supuestamente post clásicas.

Palabras clave: Sagas de los islandeses, género, datación, realismo, nacionalismo, crítica textual.

The fall of the republic and the decline of taste

In 1958, the Viking Society for Northern Research published a 127-page booklet by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson titled *Dating the Icelandic Sagas*. In his editor's preface Gabriel Turville-Petre referred to the tract as "a pioneer work" and indeed it was at the time. It remains a most useful handbook about the medieval sagas of Icelanders (commonly referred to as the *Íslendingasögur* or the family sagas), if only for its careful review of the manuscripts of each saga and its list of "lost" sagas that are mentioned in medieval manuscripts but which have not been preserved (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1958).³ Einar Ólafur's mentor and colleague Sigurður Nordal had at that point recently published "Sagalitteraturen" (1953), another relatively short but influential essay, in which he traces the development of the sagas of Icelanders from the early, through the 'classical,' and to the late sagas through five stages (Sigurður Nordal, 1953).⁴ The sagas of Icelanders were here subcategorized into groups, where the first were clumsy but historical sagas, the second and third classical sagas, the fourth sagas that were originally historical but only exist in secondary and younger versions, and, finally, the six youngest and 'unhistorical' sagas.⁵

³ A later and slightly more extensive Icelandic version arrived a few years later: Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1965.

⁴ This, too, exists in a later and slightly longer Icelandic version: Sigurður Nordal, 1968.

⁵ The five categories have not necessarily fared well with later scholars although the impact of the categorisation is still with us: a few years later, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson made do with only three categories, pre-classical, classical and post-classical (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1962), and Vésteinn Ólason also advocates the three saga groups although he is less conservative when it comes to the number of 14th century sagas, e.g. dating *Grettis saga* to the 14th century (Vésteinn Ólason, 1993, p. 42) and calls it 'post-classical', thus allowing for a literary masterpiece among the late texts.

The two booklets crystallized the views pervading the *Íslensk fornrit* standard edition of the sagas of Icelanders, published in Reykjavík from 1933 to 1959 (the last volume appearing much later in 1991). Together these two short essays may be regarded as a definitive statement from a generation or two of saga scholars from the middle of the 20th century.⁶ While some later scholars polemicized against the various conclusions presented in these two essays,⁷ their fundamental premises and conclusions (for some of these are hard to separate) are still present in much of modern saga scholarship mainly because the dating and sub-genres of the sagas of Icelanders have not received an overhaul for the last six decades.⁸

In his essay, Einar Ólafur emphasizes using objective criteria to determine the age of the sagas, such as the ages of manuscripts, cultural references and linguistic evidence.⁹ However, at the end, he also includes short chapters about two types of evidence for dating that he also thinks are valuable. The first is the breaking of the illusion of reality by an author eager to insert himself into the narrative, a supposed hallmark of the ‘archaic sagas’. The second is ‘the decline of realism’ that he feels characterizes the later sagas of Icelanders, or the ‘post-classical’ sagas, some symptoms of which are elaborated by Einar Ólafur: “Before long character-drawing fades and all kinds of excesses develop. The interest in magic and supernatural happenings increases. Taste declines, as well as moderation, the balance between the

⁶ On the pre-history of saga dating, see e.g. Glauser, 2013.

⁷ The revolt began with Jónas Kristjánsson’s doctoral thesis about *Fóstbræðra saga* where he re-dated the saga, considered to be one of the earliest sagas, to the late 13th century (Jónas Kristjánsson 1972, pp. 292–310), and parts of the ‘method’ presented by Einar Ólafur came under heavy scrutiny from Bjarni Guðnason (1993, 176–253) who drew particular attention to the fact that many of the arguments for early dating could also be used as arguments for a late dating. Their focus was on the age of the supposedly oldest sagas and neither attempted a complete overhaul of dating methods. Another rebel was Theodore M. Andersson (see esp. 2006) but he too focused on the dating of the earliest sagas. Örnólfur Thorsson (1990) suggested a more dramatic reappraisal but the main contours of Sigurður Nordal’s scheme have thus survived to this day.

⁸ Vésteinn Ólason confirms the system in his article in *Íslensk bókmenntasaga* II (1993, pp. 42–43), estimating 16 pre-classical sagas, eight classical and 15 post-classical sagas. Without the condemnative tone of Einar Ólafur, he still reckons with a shift (“tímamót”) in saga writing around c. 1300, with more influence from the legendary sagas (see also Vésteinn Ólason, 1998, pp. 217–18). A recent review volume (Else Mundal, 2013), offers no dramatic re-dating of the late sagas and the pendulum seems to be swinging back to some of Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson’s conclusions, e.g. about the age of *Fóstbræðra saga*. Cf. Callow, 2017.

⁹ On the book’s influence and methods, see Torfi H. Tulinius, 2013. Torfi provides an illuminating re-evaluation of some parts of Einar Ólafur’s book without discussing the ‘decline of realism’ idea.



aristocratic and the popular, the harmony between them. Bad taste is more in evidence, and there is a predilection for the gross and vulgar. The fictitious element grows stronger and deteriorates at the same time" (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, 1958, pp. 125–126). If all these signs are present, this indicates that a saga is composed "after the fall of the Republic" in 1262–64,¹⁰ and the symptoms are, in Einar Ólafur's eyes, not only a matter of change in literary taste but manifestations of a wide-spread moral turpitude closely connected to the adoption of foreign rule.

Ever since, the 'decline of realism' theory has been foundational for established saga dating practices. The issue of saga dating has always also been an issue of categories, genres and sub-genres that need comprehensive re-evaluation. Sigurður Nordal concluded "Sagalitteraturen" by identifying the youngest group of sagas heavily influenced by the more fictitious saga genres such as the legendary sagas. The six sagas of the group were *Finnboga saga ramma*, *Þórðar saga hreðu*, *Kjalnesinga saga*, *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, *Víglundar saga* and *Króka-Refs saga*. He spent only a few words on each since, according to him, there were no particular doubts about their age or origins (Sigurður Nordal, 1953, p. 268).¹¹ Given that these sagas were identified as the latest and the furthest from the essence of the genre, the most 'post-classical' of all sagas, these sagas constitute an ideal locus to finally take up the issue of saga dating.¹²

¹⁰ In 1262–1264, the people of the four farthings of Iceland, rather than of the country in its entirety, swore allegiance to the King of Norway, ending three or four centuries of statelessness, a system that is sometimes referred to as the 'free state', the 'commonwealth' or 'the Republic'. These benign terms disguise what was in fact a plutocracy, a government run by wealthy magnates. As is obvious from Einar Ólafur's designation, this system was idealised for most of the 20th century and scholars of his generation were unwilling to admit that any sagas other than the supposedly inferior ones, could have been composed long after Iceland had a king, i.e. by people born under foreign rule.

¹¹ These are the same which Guðbrandur Vigfússon called "spurious sagas", (1878, lxii–lxiv). Guðbrandur operated within the mindset that the sagas of Icelanders are first and foremost historical sources.

¹² These 'ugly ducklings' of the saga genre have not been altogether ignored. Martin Arnold (2003) conducted a pioneering study of the sub-genre, using *Króka-Refs saga* as his main example, with *Hrafnkels saga* representing the classical sagas and *Fóstbræðra saga* a step towards post-classicism. Revolutionary in the attention it paid to neglected sagas and its acknowledgement of their worth, this study is an excellent polemic in the 'decline' debate but as will emerge from the present article, the present authors would like to present a different model. Daniel Sävborg (2012) has also studied the sub-genre and feels it is useful, but, much like the present authors, does not think the characteristics of the genre are a good

Among the questions that must be addressed, if some in a cursory fashion, are:

1. Are the 'post-classical' sagas really younger than the 'classical' sagas?
2. Was there a shift in saga writing around c. 1300?
3. Is the dating of all sagas of Icelanders to 1200–1350 sustainable?
4. Are the *Íslendingasögur* a useful literary category?
5. What is realism and how does it decline?

Some of these questions may sound Socratic and defy simple or straightforward answers, and yet must be kept in mind when individual cases are examined.

Given the definitive separation of the 'young sagas' from the others, it seems logical to look at the age of some of the supposedly 'classical' sagas. This will be followed by a closer examination of *Finnboga saga ramma* and the other '14th century sagas', a central category in the conflation of dating and literary merit evident in the developmental model advocated by Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson before the entire system of 'classical' and 'post-classical' sagas is taken under review.

That classical feeling

The 20th century Italian composer and musicologist Remo Giazotto infamously seems to have composed one of the currently best-known pieces of baroque music. However, he credited the piece to the Italian 18th century composer Tomaso Albinoni, making Albinoni a composer most famous for a work that he did not compose. Few who hear this piece of music today are likely to doubt its authenticity; it sounds baroque, even though it may have originated in the 1950s. It simply has that baroque feeling.

There are also similarly some sagas that a modern audience would not hesitate to deem 'classical'. Sigurður Nordal assigned all but one of them to his second and third group of sagas, which he argued were composed during the classical age of saga writing, much earlier than

dating premise. Neither critic, while opposing parts of the developmental model of Sigurður Nordal, wants to completely do away with the 'post-classical' sub-genre.

Bárðar saga and nowhere close to the ‘Norwegian age’ of Icelandic history, the mid-14th century. Every single one of these sagas is only attested to in manuscripts of the same age or younger than the *Bárðar saga* manuscript AM 564 a 4to. These are *Gísla saga* (earliest manuscript: c. 1400), *Vatnsdæla saga* (earliest manuscript: c. 1400), *Ljósvetninga saga* (earliest manuscript: c. 1400), *Hænsa-Þóris saga* (earliest manuscript: the 15th century), *Grettis saga* (earliest manuscript: c. 1480), and *Hrafnkels saga* (earliest manuscript: c. 1500). This late manuscript preservation puts into question these sagas’ 13th-century composition in which most scholars of the last seven decades have believed.

The historical veracity of a given saga is categorical to saga dating as practiced by Sigurður Nordal, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and their fellow *Íslenzk fornrit* editors Björn Karel Þórólfsson, Björn Sigfússon, Guðni Jónsson, and Jón Jóhannesson. The supposed 9th to 11th century reality or ‘history’ is always treated by the editors as if it were the primary text, with *Landnámabók* and the saga then providing variants of that reality. But, in addition, the preconceived idea of what a ‘classical’ saga should look like is used as a frame for how to regard the sagas. If the saga has a strong genealogical focus, if there is a clearly defined feud narrative at its center, if it is tragic, compelling and well-written, then the narrative is a classical saga. That means it must date from the ‘golden age’ of saga writing, between 1250 and 1300, even if its manuscript preservation is much younger. Consequently, age and genre become intertwined. The younger sagas do not fit into this mould if they have a protagonist who seems more like a cardboard character than a flawed or nuanced hero. Features of such a character’s story will include fights with monsters with nothing clear at stake, part and parcel of the supposed ‘immoderation’ of the ‘younger sagas’.¹³ If the saga, on the other hand, has noble characters in a conundrum, then it has the air of the aesthetics of the ‘free state’. In this model, the dating issue reveals itself to really be a genre issue in disguise. Atypical sagas are dated as

¹³ To quote Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (1962, 507): “det er som en nerve er beskadiget. De klassiske sagaers objektivitet er forsvundet, deres syntese af realisme og idealisme opløst i en skiften mellem vulgær realisme og blodløs romantik. Forståelsen af den gamle etik med dens hårde æreskrav og tragik forsvinder, og den følelsesløse gladiator bliver helten” (It is as if a nerve has been damaged. The objectivity of the classical sagas is vanished, and their synthesis of realism and idealism dissolved in motion between vulgar realism and anaemic romanticism. The insight into the old ethos with its strict demand for honour and tragedy is no longer there and the hero is a passionless gladiator).

young because they deviate from the ideal, whereas sagas that feel classical must belong to the 13th century even if they appear only in much younger manuscripts.

Gísla saga is, for example, generally regarded as one of the greatest sagas. It is more subtle than most sagas in its depiction of vengeance, guilt, complicated sibling relationships and the demands of honour. How could scholars such as Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson date it to any other period than the middle of the 13th century? The evidence for this is, however, slight. The mention of Gísli's spear Grásíða in *Íslendinga saga*, composed c. 1280, the mention of various of *Gísla saga* characters in *Landnámabók*, from the same period, and the author's knowledge of *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Droplaugarsona saga*, and possibly other 13th-century sagas have all been used to support this dating (see Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson in Anonymous, *Vestfirðinga sögur*, xxxix–xli. See also Lethbridge 2010; 2013). These all prove that Gísli and the main events of his life, such as the killing of Þorgrímr, were well-known in the 13th century, but what about the saga in its present form? There are no extant 13th-century manuscripts of it. When considered alongside *Eyrbyggja saga* where Vésteinn's killer's identity is clearly stated, the fact that it is concealed in *Gísla saga* could on the contrary well indicate some distance from the mid-13th-century tradition. The longer and supposedly younger version of the saga, where the identity of Vésteinn's killer is again revealed, is only attested in 18th-century manuscripts and could be from a different period than the other text witnesses to Vésteinn's murder, signaling a further change in taste. *Gísla saga* certainly has that 'classical' feeling, but in its present form it may be the work of a late 14th-century or even an early 15th-century literary genius rather than one from the Sturlung Age.

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson dated *Vatnsdæla saga* to the 13th century by conjecturing that the *Landnámabók* version of the same events was based on the saga, though possibly from a better version than the one that currently exists. He was nevertheless unwilling to posit two versions of the saga. Taking note of courtly influences and the text's clerical vocabulary led him to date it to 1270, i.e. as young as possible to still be used by *Landnámabók* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson in



Anonymous, *Vatnsdæla saga*, xxxiii–xxxviii, lii–lv).¹⁴ However, the saga's earliest text witness, now lost, was supposedly the late 14th-century Vatnshyrna. Thus, its preservation is actually similar to that of many of the 'youngest' sagas. The early dating rests on the idea that Sturla Þórðarson and the author of *Melabók* had actual copies of *Vatnsdæla saga* in its present form when relating the same events in their versions of *Landnámabók*, which is highly conjectural, given that *Landnáma* only relates the bare outlines of the saga's plot. We will return to the issue of *Landnáma* below. Without that, the saga could easily be dated to the 14th century, and does not even feel as 'classical' as *Gísla saga* according to the criteria mentioned above.

Ljósvetninga saga, on the other hand, has variously been dated as old, young or classical, with Björn Sigfússon (in Anonymous, *Ljósvetninga saga*, xlii–xl) taking the middle ground and pronouncing it from c. 1250. It is first preserved, however, in an early 15th-century manuscript and its *terminus ante quem* is vague.¹⁵ The saga itself resembles sagas that date from the 13th century and many of the people and events depicted in this saga also figure in texts from that time. However, do these similarities give a clear indication of the saga's age? Given that these other 13th-century sagas might still have reverberated among the writing elite of Iceland for a while, such connections do not prove this saga could not have also originated in the late 14th or early 15th century. The saga may feel 'classical', but it might easily be somewhat younger than the texts with which it shares a close relationship.

Hænsa-Þóris saga is another saga that portrays characters known from other sagas and has, thus, been dated to the late 13th century. Its *terminus ante quem* has been established more or less using its relationship with *Landnámabók*, which supposedly relied on it as a source, the differences between the two texts indicating that Sturla Þórðarson used it in his version of *Landnámabók*, even though Sigurður Nordal also felt he detected influence from late 13th-century law codes (in Anonymous, *Borgfirðinga saga*, vii–xxxv; see also Maurer, 1871).¹⁶ The

¹⁴ Einar Ólafur does not mention paranormal events although the saga is replete with them.

¹⁵ The versions of *Ljósvetninga saga* have recently been studied by Yoav Tirosh (2019) who calls its dating, and in particular the nature of its relationship to *Njáls saga*, into question.

¹⁶ Even though the Sturlubók version of *Landnámabók* refer to the main events of the saga, there is no actual textual relationship, there are both factual consistencies and inconsistencies between the two texts.



saga is not preserved in any early manuscripts. Its first manuscript attestation, in a fragment, dates from the 15th century. It has, however, an extensive early modern preservation and this sudden and late surge in popularity may cast doubts on whether this saga is really that old. It is a highly moral tale with a clear message, much like *Hrafnkels saga*, and has none of the characteristics associated with 'the decay of realism'. Nevertheless, the early dating depends more or less on the idea that a comparison with *Landnámabók* is enough to determine a saga's age, which may be an ill-founded and hazardous assumption.

Grettis saga is only preserved in writing in the late 15th and the early 16th century, when five manuscripts containing the saga (AM 556 a 4to, AM 551 a 4to, DG 10 fol., AM 152 fol. and the slightly younger AM 571 4to) suddenly appear. Sigurður Nordal did not go as far as to group it as a classical saga, but rather in the group of sagas possibly revised after 1280, mournfully identifying it as the 'last classical saga' (Sigurður Nordal, 1953, p. 265). Many scholars have conceded that, in its present form, the saga might date from the early 14th century,¹⁷ although Sigurður Nordal cast it as a younger version of a saga originally composed by Sturla Þórðarson (d. 1284) himself (Sigurður Nordal, 1938), as he is referenced thrice in the saga (Anonymous, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, pp. 157, 226, 289). Örnólfur Thorsson (1994) challenged that dating, and, since the *terminus ante quem* is vague, the saga could be regarded as evidence that 'classical saga' traditions continued to flourish much later than previously assumed.

Hrafnkels saga, that neat feud saga that has attracted no mean amount of scholarly attention in the 20th century and to this day (see e.g. Sigurður Nordal, 1940; Óskar Halldórsson, 1976; Miller, 2017) has similarly been viewed as a 'classical saga' dating from the 13th century. Yet, it has a vague *terminus ante quem*, as its earliest manuscripts date to c. 1500.

¹⁷ Guðni Jónsson proposed the priest Haflíði Steinsson (1253–1319) as the author; he was born in the 'free state' but would have composed the saga early in the 14th century, which would explain influences from the new system and the references to Sturla Þórðarson as if he was dead (Anonymous, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, lxxviii–lxxxv). Such fairly random assignments of authorship were part and parcel of 20th-century saga scholarship and are still not obsolete. *Njáls saga* has e.g. been assigned to at least 20 different 13th-century Icelanders, in some cases under the influence of prophetic dreams, see Gunnar Guðmundsson, 2019, pp. 167–295.

After this it goes on to a rich afterlife in early modern manuscripts, much like *Hænsa-Þóris saga*. This preservation history led Stefán Karlsson to posit that it could have originated in the 14th rather than the 13th century (Stefán Karlsson 1994; see also Sverrir Tómasson 1994). One might go further still and ask why 15th-century authors could not also have possessed the ability to write good ‘classical sagas’? While *Hrafnkels saga* is elegant, it is unlike other sagas, ‘classical’ or otherwise. The fact that its singularity has never led to the label ‘post-classical’ among scholars may, more than anything else, illuminate how this label has been applied as a pejorative marker, invented to illustrate the supposed ‘decline of realism’ and the rise of poor taste.

Though the dating of each saga requires closer inspection, the surviving evidence suggests that there is scant support for the argument that the aforementioned ‘classical’ sagas are older than most of Sigurður Nordal’s ‘youngest sagas’. This idea becomes apparent once one has discarded the following five ideas, all integral to the developmental theories advocated by Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson: 1) that saga writing must have declined after the fall of the ‘free state’, 2) that less realism must mean a later saga, 3) that paranormal encounters characterize younger sagas, 4) that the appearance of characters from other sagas dated to the 13th century indicates the text must also be from that period, and, 5) that a resemblance to the four great 13th-century sagas, *Egils saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Njáls saga*, is useful to determine the age of a given saga.

Another issue is the aforementioned relationship with *Landnámabók* that will be dealt with now in brief before we turn to the ‘post-classical’ group of sagas that to this day remains the most important sub-category of sagas in the scholarly debate.

The younger version

A few sagas (such as *Fljótsdæla saga*, *Flóamanna saga*, *Þorskfirðinga saga*, *Svarfdæla saga* and *Hávarðar saga*) escaped being stigmatised as the very youngest sagas by Sigurður Nordal only by their main events featuring in Sturla Þórðarson’s version of *Landnámabók*, which he and

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson thought to be of primary importance in dating sagas (see e.g. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, 1958, pp. 87–94), and which has already been mentioned in connection with the dating of apparently ‘classical’ sagas. The theory was that there had existed 13th-century versions of these sagas, that would have resembled the ‘classical’ sagas more than the preserved versions (Sigurður Nordal, 1953, pp. 263–266).¹⁸ This whole category of sagas might be seen as little more than a valiant attempt by Sigurður Nordal to admit as few sagas as possible as 14th-century literature.

There are intrinsic problems with using *Landnámabók* to date sagas. One is that there are several versions of that text from the late 13th and early 14th century.¹⁹ A second and more serious issue is that, when using this comparative method, oral influence is discounted,²⁰ and *Landnáma* is hypothesized as using sagas, or sagas using *Landnáma*, based on very general issues such as the same historical facts being retold, usually in far less detail in *Landnámabók*. Furthermore, in some instances, the facts of a saga being retold in *Landnáma* have been taken as proof that the saga predated *Landnáma* whereas in other cases scholars hypothesized an older and vastly different version of a saga and saw the extant version as post-*Landnáma*. In addition, there remains the conundrum that the comparison of a lengthy saga and a far more succinct retelling that never resembles it in other than very general ways is unlikely to provide unassailable grounds to believe that the saga itself existed before the retelling. The unpleasant alternative is that only some general facts were known to the author of the abridged retelling,

¹⁸ He included *Grettis saga* in this category as he felt that the existing saga was not the original text composed by Sturla Þórðarson, but with the caveat that it was far superior to the other sagas of this group (Sigurður Nordal, 1953, p. 265).

¹⁹ The various versions of *Landnámabók* were discussed by Jón Jóhannesson, 1941 but his conclusions have been modified by Sveinbjörn Rafnsson (2001) who stresses the continuing development of the text during the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries.

²⁰ Óskar Halldórsson (1976) argued that the differences between the *Hrafnkels saga* and the *Landnámabók* versions of the settlement of Hrafnkell (or Hallfreðr) could be explained by oral legends rather than the use of one text by the other. Gísli Sigurðsson (2002, pp. 129–247) has examined sagas of Icelanders from East Iceland extensively in the same light. See also Andersson, 2002, who suggests considerable ‘oral refinement’ of narratives before they were eventually written down.

which is one of the reasons why such a comparison has been given less credence by later scholars.²¹

Gull-Þóris saga, or *Þorskfirðinga saga*, is one saga that has been dated simultaneously as young and old. Its earliest manuscript witness is AM 561 4to, which has been dated to c. 1400. This might imply that the saga is itself late, but AM 561 4to is also the first extant text witness of *Ljósvetninga saga*, which Theodore Andersson dated as early as c. 1220, as well as *Reykdalea saga ok Víga-Skútu*, usually considered an early *Íslendingasaga* (Vésteinn Ólason, 2007a, p. 115; cf. Björn Sigfússon in Anonymous, *Ljósvetninga saga*, pp. xlii–l). Passages from *Landnámabók* have been taken to indicate that a version of *Gull-Þóris saga* existed much earlier than c. 1400 (See, e.g., Guðbrandur Vigfússon, 1878, p. lii). Kålund (in Anonymous, *Gull-Þóris saga eller Þorskfirðinga saga*, p. xxii) speculated that the saga must have existed in a more ‘realistic’ mode in its older version. Vésteinn Ólason saw *Gull-Þóris saga* as part of the natural evolution of the *Íslendingasögur*, and observed that “[t]he saga has crossed the boundaries to heroic myth and fairy tale while retaining significant generic indicators that pin it down as an *Íslendingasaga*. It is closer to folktale and myth than *Grettis saga*, although its fantastic elements are not as effectively integrated in the narrative” (Vésteinn Ólason, 2007b, p. 17).

But are these fantastic elements a good argument for a later dating? Phil Cardew (2004, pp. 20, 26) has argued that the generic treatment of the otherworldly is different between the scenes where the action takes place in Norway and where the action takes place in Iceland, especially in regard to Þórir’s transformation into a dragon at the end of the saga.²² While he is correct in pointing out that there is little subsequent reference to the gifts Þórir received after meeting his dead Viking ancestor in Norway, Cardew (2004, pp. 23, 26) sees the supernatural

²¹ Gísli Sigurðsson (2002, pp. 245–247) has concluded that the textual variation in the sagas from East Iceland are usually too great to indicate a clear relationship between the text and in no case does he find evidence of a clear relationship between a family saga and *Landnámabók* that could serve to aid dating (cf. Gísli Sigurðsson, 1994, 30–41). Perhaps, ironically, many of the same scholars, including Sigurður Nordal, that felt factual consistency between a saga and *Landnáma* could be seen as proof of a textual relationship also rejected historical discrepancies between *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla*, supposedly by the same author, as completely insignificant and easily explained by the author’s capriciousness (Sigurður Nordal in Anonymous, *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, lxxvii–lxxviii).

²² This is disputable, as he might be making too much of the phrase “þat hafa menn fyrir satt” [people say this it true (authors’ translation)] (*Þorskfirðinga saga* in Anonymous, *Harðar saga*, p. 226).

elements as indicating legendary saga aspects but as will be argued below, such elements are also present in the sagas of Icelanders from their very beginning.²³ The equation between the supernatural and the ‘post-classical’ has been prevalent in saga dating, but, as Þórhallur Vilmundarsson points out, when dating *Gull-Þóris saga*, the consideration of supernatural elements may have been overstated (in Anonymous, *Harðar saga*, p. cxiii). In addition, in a recent study Daniel Sävborg has shown that the most fantastic element in *Gull-Þóris saga*, the dragon motif, actually draws its inspiration from one of the oldest pieces of extant saga literature, *Jómsvíkinga saga* (Sävborg, 2014; see also Sävborg, 2012, pp. 43–45), rather than *fornaldarsögur* or the translated *riddarasögur*. This places a big question mark on the late dating of this saga and also on the ‘lateness’ of its use of supernatural themes. Another question is whether generic mutability should in general be linked to dating, an issue that will be returned to later in this article.

Atypical

The six sagas relegated to the 14th century by Sigurður Nordal were *Finnboga saga*, *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, *Þórðar saga hreðu*, *Kjalnesinga saga*, *Króka-Refs saga* and *Víglundar saga*.²⁴ All are interesting cases of separateness: regarded as deviations for being unlike better known sagas. According to Sigurður Nordal, they were influenced by the legendary sagas and the romances. They are, in his view, untraditional (*Finnboga saga*), ‘fictional’ (*Þórðar saga* and *Kjalnesinga saga*), ‘fantastical and half-mythical’ (*Bárðar saga*), a ‘love story’ (*Víglundar saga*) and ‘pure novel’ (*Króka-Refs saga*). Thus, Sigurður’s ideal union of history and fiction is not found in these sagas. However, while none of them is much like *Egils saga*, neither are they much like each other.

²³ For a debate of the use of paranormal in this saga’s ‘narrative worlds’, see Ceolin, 2020, pp. 353–56.

²⁴ While Sigurður Nordal’s premise was that only a few atypical sagas dated from the 14th century, later versions of the model were more flexible. Vésteinn Ólason dated 15 sagas of Icelanders to the 14th century (1993, 42) but nevertheless agreed with Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ólafur that the tumultuous 13th century resulted in the creation of a good majority of the sagas (his most recent statement can be found in Vésteinn Ólason, 2017).

Pórðar saga hreðu is preserved in the manuscript AM 564 a 4to ('Pseudo-Vatnshyrna') from the very end of the 14th century, along with five other 'post-classical sagas' and two other texts, as well as in other 15th century manuscripts.²⁵ The saga's manuscript preservation may be one of the reasons it is categorized as late. However, around 18 sagas of Icelanders nevertheless exist solely in manuscripts younger than AM 564. *Pórðar saga* is a much-maligned saga, seen as unhistorical and exaggerated, but its few defenders have observed that this may owe something to the saga being comic rather than tragic. Furthermore, it has been argued that the saga should be regarded primarily as a regional saga rather than a 'post-classical' saga, since it does include many details and names, including toponyms, that are more consistent with the literary form of history than fantasy, and it also includes indirect references to the events of the Sturlung Age (see Ward, 2016). Even though *Pórðar saga* differs from the most famous sagas, it is not unlike them in the same way as any other saga.

Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss is also preserved in 'Pseudo-Vatnshyrna', and in two other early 15th-century manuscripts. The rationale behind its 'post-classical' label include the fact that the protagonist and his family end up as paranormal entities, that the saga is not seen as a very creditable historical source and its bipartite structure, such that the saga is transformed midway into the story of Gestr Bárðarson (Sigurður Nordal, 1953, p. 269; Kuhn, 1968). While it is likely that *Bárðar saga* does indeed stem from the 14th century, and is thus younger than e.g. most of the kings' sagas with which it shares a structural affinity,²⁶ none of the aforementioned reasons seem adequate for seeing it as one of the very last sagas of Icelanders. *Bárðar saga* has many of the formal characteristics of history (Ármann Jakobsson, 1998), the bipartite structure is also well-known in sagas from the early 13th century, e.g. *Egils saga*, as well as 'classical' sagas such as *Ljósvetninga saga* and, as demonstrated above, the presence of the otherworldly is not in itself useful dating criteria. Thus, apart from its manuscript

²⁵ The saga exists in two version, both edited by Jóhannes Halldórsson in *Íslensk fornrit* 14. He dates the saga to the middle of the 14th century, owing to a reference to Bishop Egill Eyjólfsson (d. 1341) and this could well be accurate, though whether that makes *Pórðar saga* one of the youngest sagas or not is a matter of opinion.

²⁶ Mainly the Christianization episodes in *Flateyjarbók* and other manuscripts of the *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*.



preservation, there is nothing in itself to connect the saga to the 14th century, although it could fit in well there (Þórhallur Vilmundarson in Anonymous, *Harðar saga*, pp. ci–cvii). Furthermore, its tragic tone is not much like *Þórðar saga* (see esp. Ármann Jakobsson, 1998). Neither in themes nor structure does *Bárðar saga* resemble it.

The preservation of these three aforementioned ‘late sagas’ is actually not that late. *Kjalnesinga saga*, on the other hand, only shows up in the mid-15th century, in AM 471 4to, a manuscript that also contains *Króka-Refs saga*, *Þórðar saga hreðu*, three legendary sagas and a romance. Apart from this single vellum manuscript, *Kjalnesinga saga* exists only in paper manuscripts, although it is indicated it may have been in the now lost Vatnshyrna manuscript from the late 14th century. Helgi Guðmundsson (1967) explored the idea that *Kjalnesinga saga* could have been composed by Haukur Erlendsson (d. 1334). His arguments indicate that the saga was composed in the early 14th century but do not rule out it being younger.²⁷ The saga is full of traditional material, antiquarian interests and paranormal encounters. It does share motifs with *Finnboga saga*, *Bárðar saga* and even *Þórðar saga*, so possibly it can be seen as the archetypical ‘young saga’.

Króka-Refs saga, another saga from the manuscript AM 471 4to, as mentioned above, also exists in four other 15th-century manuscripts, accompanied by sagas ascribed to various other sub-genres. Since it was supposedly in Vatnshyrna, there is every reason to believe it is a 14th century saga. This narrative is, however, unlike any other. The protagonist, a ‘coalbiter’ named Refr (Fox), is on stage more or less throughout the saga, which takes place during the reign of King Haraldr *harðráði* in Norway (c. 1050). Its events are later than those in most of the other sagas of Icelanders, although Refr’s youth is dated to a century before, the age of King Hákon (c. 950). This slip probably sufficed for scholars to deem it unhistorical, exaggerated and thus young. The *Íslenzk fornrit* editor called it “að öllu leyti skáldskapur” [pure fiction] (Jóhannes Halldórsson in Anonymous, *Kjalnesinga saga*, p. xxxiv). The tone of the saga is nevertheless completely different from that of e.g. *Bárðar saga*. The story could be compared to trickster

²⁷A reference to Áрни Þorláksson (d. 1298) (Anonymous, *Kjalnesinga saga*, p. 43) might seem to imply a closeness to Áрни but the phrasing is such that it hardly pinpoints the age of the saga closer than the 14th century.

narratives, the early modern picaresque novel, or the popular fox stories of the 13th and 14th centuries.²⁸ As an adaptation of an international narrative type in a ‘saga age’ setting, *Króka-Refs saga* would seem to pay only lip service to the conventions of the sagas of Icelanders. Seeing it as a decline of the saga form may be an odd way to look at it, given that it could rather be interpreted in terms of generic difference.

Of the supposed late sagas, *Víglundar saga* has the youngest manuscript attestation, although some sagas considered older are only extant in even younger text witnesses. It is found in AM 551a 4to from about 1500 and two other 16th-century manuscripts. There is little reason to date the saga to earlier than the 15th century. In Guðbrandur Vigfússon’s mind, it was “pure fabrication ... when the very dregs of tradition had been used up” and “a feebly-told love story” (Guðbrandur Vigfússon, 1878, p. lxiii). Marianne Kalinke has argued that *Víglundar saga* fits well into the bridal-quest romance genre (Kalinke 1994), and, as in the case of *Króka-Refs saga*, it is thus illogical to see it as a failed saga or to use it to illustrate the “decline of realism” in the development of the sagas of Icelanders. Moreover, to group these two sagas with the four other ‘young sagas’ does not seem helpful as there are few compelling similarities between all six. When taken together, these six ‘young sagas’, as a group, do not share common features apart from the highly subjective trio: lack of historicity, exaggeration and immoderation. This makes them ‘atypical’ only according to a genre definition that places the best-known sagas in the middle and treats them, with little evidential support, as the most historical.

At least some of the so-called younger sagas do not fit well into this definition because they can be regarded as belonging to a different genre. Others fit better into the family saga genre but are still different from the best-known sagas. According to the ‘decline of realism’ principle, they are all deviations from a norm. The lack of sameness with other narratives becomes a form of sameness itself in the mind of critics, and this new sameness becomes the basis for dating these sagas. In fact, on closer inspection, there are no other principles that

²⁸ We differ here from Martin Arnold who, in his excellent analysis of the saga, felt it was “paradigmatic post-classical *Íslendingasögur*” that he sees a systematic reworking of the genre (Arnold 2003, pp. 181–232). See also Viktória Gyönki, 2017.

point to them being contemporary to each other. *Kjalnesinga saga* could easily be from the early 14th century, *Bárðar saga* and *Þórðar saga* from the middle, *Króka-Refs saga* from the very end, and *Víglundar saga* from the 15th century. This leaves *Finnboga saga* which warrants its own discussion, given that it survives in an older manuscript than most other sagas of Icelanders.

The misidentification of Finnbogi

Alone among the ‘latest of the late’ sagas of Sigurður Nordal, *Finnboga saga* is actually preserved in the early 14th century manuscript Möðruvallabók (AM 132 fol.) and among those sagas of Icelanders with the earliest attestation in a preserved manuscript.²⁹ It is somewhat confounding that a text from one of the oldest saga manuscripts should be regarded as one of the later sagas and interesting to cast an eye over the arguments for the saga’s late provenance.

Sigurður Nordal referred to the saga as ‘untraditional’ (Sigurður Nordal, 1953, p. 268), and this alone provided a reason for categorizing it as late according to the principle that the sagas began as history and then slowly developed into art without losing any of their historical value before eventually descending into fiction without historical merit.³⁰ According to the saga, the *goðorð* are regarded as territorial, which seems to suggest that the author is unfamiliar with the ‘free state’ system (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1958, p. 70). This, however, is a difficult criteria to use to date a saga later than to the end of the 13th century since the current era is

²⁹ The age of the oldest manuscripts of individual sagas of Icelanders is roughly as follows: from the 13th century we have the oldest manuscripts of *Egils saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, and *Brennu-Njáls saga*, from the 14th century *Bandamanna saga*, *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, *Droplaugarsona saga*, *Finnboga saga ramma*, *Fóstbræðra saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, *Hallfredar saga*, *Heiðarvíga saga*, *Kormáks saga*, *Víga-Glúms saga*, and *Ólkofra saga*, from the 15th century *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, *Flóamanna saga*, *Gísla saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Gull-Þóris saga*, *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, *Kjalnesinga saga*, *Ljósvetninga saga*, *Reykðæla saga*, *Svarfdæla saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Vápnfirðinga saga*, and *Þórðar saga hreðu*, from the 16th century *Hrafnkels saga*, and *Víglundar saga*, and from the 17th century *Fljótsdæla saga*, *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, *Hávarðar saga*, *Valla-Ljóts saga*, *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, and *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*.

³⁰ Icelandic saga scholars of the 20th century spent much effort determining which sources from the 13th and 14th centuries portrayed the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries more accurately and were reluctant to treat 9th and 10th century historical events as legendary. However, it now seems more fruitful to regard every single source as untrustworthy, i.e. equally tainted late versions of long gone events (on this discussion, see e.g. Ármann Jakobsson, 2015).



often quick to assert itself in historical writing. While Björn M. Ólsen (1937, pp. 343–344) argued convincingly that the author of *Finnboga saga* would have operated under a law other than *Grágás*, this is also true for *Njáls saga*, that is considered to have been written around 1275 (see, e.g., Einar Ól. Sveinsson in Anonymous, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, lxxvi–lxxx).

Björn M. Ólsen (1937, p. 343) argued that the language of *Finnboga saga* is indicative of a 14th-century taste and that some of the language was peculiar and folksy. That ‘folksy’ language indicates a younger age seems to be taken as given but it often is not. On the contrary, opposite arguments have been made in reference to *Morkinskinna’s* *Hreiðars þáttr* episode and its archaic, awkward language.³¹ According to the current dating system, a mere fifteen to thirty years would have passed between *Njáls saga’s* Skarphéðinn calling Hallgerðr a “púta” (Anonymous, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 228; see also Einar Ól. Sveinsson’s discussion in pp. lxxxii–lxxxiii) and *Finnboga saga’s* use of the word “krækill,” (*Finnboga saga* in Anonymous, *Kjalnesinga saga*, pp. 257 and 260). indicating no dramatic difference in the use of loanwords. Though Einar Ólafur Sveinsson argued that courtly influence indicated a younger provenance, this dating principle was undermined by Bjarni Einarsson just a few years later (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1958, p. 112).³² For example, the loanword “kurteisi” (from Fr. ‘courtoisie’) appears in an Icelandic text from c. 1200 (“Jarteinabók Þorláks biskups in forna,” in *Biskupa sögur II*, Ásdís Egilsdóttir (ed.), p. 114).³³

³¹ Though this was discounted by Anthony Faulkes (in Anonymous, *Two Icelandic Stories*, pp. 18–19), who would rather attribute the unique lexical features to the artistry of *Morkinskinna’s* composer, than to linguistic evidence for dating. See *Two Icelandic Stories*, ed. Anthony Faulkes.

³² Bjarni Einarsson argued that some of the oldest sagas of Icelanders, e.g. *Kormáks saga* and *Hallfreðar saga*, were influenced by courtly literature (see e.g. Bjarni Einarsson, 1961) which, if accepted, would have made Einar Ólafur’s criterion of courtly influence as a sign of young age a useless dating principle. Not surprisingly, Einar Ólafur reacted strongly against Bjarni’s theories, both refusing to admit his book as a doctoral thesis and polemicizing against it (without mentioning) in print saying that “nothing could be less like” *Kormáks saga* than *Tristan* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1966–1969, p. 59). Even though Bjarni may have made too much of the connection between European troubadours and the skalds of the skald sagas (see e.g. Andersson 1969; Bjarni Einarsson, 1971), it still seems slightly simplistic to expect less courtly influence in Iceland in the 13th than in the 14th century.

³³ This text is believed to be composed around 1200 and it is preserved in the manuscript AM 645 4to, older than any manuscripts containing sagas of Icelanders. See also Ármann Jakobsson (2014) on the courtly influence on early 13th century kings’ sagas.



A saga that shows verbal correspondences and has been used to date *Finnboga saga* is *Gunnlaugs saga*, which Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson dated to 1270–1280, based on its connection with other texts (Anonymous, *Borgfirðinga saga*, p. lx). Since the days of Björn M. Ólsen, *Gunnlaugs saga* has been seen as a source for *Finnboga saga* (Björn M. Ólsen, 1937, p. 340).³⁴ This confidence is backed up by tenuous arguments that pertain to the rationale behind the exposure of children in both sagas. In *Gunnlaugs saga*, the protagonist's love interest Helga is exposed at birth due to her father's ominous dream, and in *Finnboga saga*, the protagonist is exposed at birth since his father is displeased with his daughter's unwanted marriage. Exposing one's child as punishment for an unwanted marriage of another child seems like a less logical narrative decision than exposing them based on a prophetic dream.³⁵ Yet, the act of exposure in *Finnboga saga* is a narratologically necessary step in a series of events that leads the protagonist to be recognized by his powerful kinsman Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði and, following him, his father Ásbjörn. The fact that *Finnboga saga* makes Þorgeirr – the pagan lawspeaker who allowed child exposure practice to persist into post-conversion Iceland – the one who convinces a father to recognize his abortively exposed child could be seen as ironic and humorous; this is a use of Þorgeirr not unlike that seen in *Njáls saga*, where the narrative compares his son Þorkell and Njáll's son Skarphéðinn by stressing the eating of a mare's ass and the characters' father-son struggles, which both correspond with the prohibitions decreed by Þorgeirr himself at the moment of Iceland's Christianization.³⁶ When a relationship between two sagas is apparent, such as that between *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Finnboga saga*, it is

³⁴ Jóhannes Halldórsson states that “Gunnlaugs saga er vafalaust eldri en Finnboga saga,” [*Gunnlaugs saga* is surely older than *Finnboga saga*] in Anonymous, *Kjalnesinga saga*, p. lxvi.

³⁵ Though is exposing one's child ever logical in modern eyes? This exposure of children based on prophetic dreams is a common folktale motif, worth considering in the discussion ahead, cf. Þorkell Geitisson's demand that a child be exposed in *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, (in Anonymous, *Harðar saga*, 348).

³⁶ See also *Ljósvetninga saga* chapters 1–4 (both redactions), where Þorgeirr finds himself battling his sons due to his allegiance with Guðmundr inn ríki and Hákon jarl, famous for his own act of infanticide.

not easy to determine which saga is donor and which is recipient.³⁷ It is also unclear why the allegedly better and more logical text needs to be the older one.

A comparison between *Finnboga saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga* stresses that there is more in common between these two texts than there are significant differences. From the perspective of narrative structure, both *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Finnboga saga* have a beginning typical for the *Íslendingasögur*. *Vatnsdæla saga* recounts the Norwegian origins of the Vatnsdælir and their progenitor Þorsteinn; *Finnboga saga*, on the other hand, starts the narrative in Iceland, with Finnbogi's father Ásbjörn. *Vatnsdæla saga* is quite literally a family saga, giving its attention to several generations of the Vatnsdælir chieftains, with no central feud or climax (Andersson, 1967, p. 221), and beginning its narrative with a long description of the family members' exploits in Norway. *Finnboga saga*, on the other hand, is focused on one individual: Finnbogi hinn rammi, and rather than telling the tale of a specific district, the narrative follows him around the various districts he resides in after a years' long expedition to Norway.

Both of these narrative structures are not unlike other sagas of Icelanders; the significant focus on the exploits in Norway before the settlement in Iceland of *Vatnsdæla saga* is comparable with *Egils saga*,³⁸ *Grettis saga*, or *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, to name only three examples. The saga's strong focus on generational district politics parallels a similar focus found in *Ljósvetninga saga*, *Reykðæla saga*, and *Heiðarvígá saga*. *Finnboga saga*'s strong focus on a single hero with exploits in Norway as well as Iceland is comparable to *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa*,³⁹ and its episodic nature is not unlike the structure of *Egils saga*, *Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*.⁴⁰ Both *Finnboga saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga* share the element of one man taking on the social role of another, exemplified in the adoption of the dead man's name. In the beginning of *Vatnsdæla saga*'s Þorsteinn Ketilsson kills Jökull and assumes his social position. He marries

³⁷ On the issue of determining which saga is influenced by which, it must be noted that using more or less the same premises and same data, Bjarni Guðnason (1993, 176–253) overturned the previous arguments that *Heiðarvígá saga* had influenced both *Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*.

³⁸ And, in part, the allegiance with king Haraldr hárfagri, see Ármann Jakobsson, 1999.

³⁹ As well as, for example, *Egils saga* and *Grettis saga*, though both include long sequences in Norway prior to the settlement of Iceland.

⁴⁰ *Morkinskinna* is famously episodic (Ármann Jakobsson (2014, pp. 71–135)) and indeed the interlace form is well-known in the medieval sagas from the 13th century (Carol Clover, 1982).

his sister and promises to name one of his descendants after him. Finnbogi enters his eponymous saga as Urðarköttr, the unwanted child of the Eyjafjörður chieftain Ásbjörn, who is raised by peasants. The later name Finnbogi is adopted from a Norwegian he saves in a shipwreck, whose last dying wish is that Urðarköttr assumes his name and possessions. Furthermore, after killing the jarl's man Álfr, Finnbogi eventually assumes his social role as the jarl's follower and marries Álfr's daughter. *Vatnsdæla saga's* Jökull Ingimundarson is *Finnboga saga's* main antagonist, constantly trying to avenge an insult to his honor by killing many of Finnbogi's loved ones and dependents in attempts to get at him. Nothing about *Finnboga saga* stands out to make it significantly different than *Vatnsdæla saga*. *Finnboga saga's* style is not atypical but rather shows keen awareness of the saga style.⁴¹ It can be granted that *Finnboga saga* may seem less earnest and more distant in tone than some of the aforementioned sagas; or possibly less psychologically subtle, although it could also be argued that it simply presents its insights differently (See e.g. Merkelbach, forthcoming).⁴²

Finnboga saga's treatment of the paranormal does not stand out either. Few would disagree, for example, that *Egils saga* is one of the earliest sagas; yet, this is a saga concerning a grandfather who is possibly a werewolf, whose uncle is a half-troll and brother-in-law a berserker, a father who is perhaps also a shapeshifter and is said to be more thurse than human, and, finally, a son who dispatches his enemy by throat-biting and whose nemesis is a queen that once appears in swallow form (Anonymous, *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, pp. 3–4, 63, 69, 101, 183 and 210; Ármann Jakobsson, 2011). *Eyrbyggja saga* is another early saga that nevertheless has several compelling narratives of haunting and a main character that ends up demonically possessing a bull (Anonymous, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 93–95, 137–52 and 169–76; Ármann Jakobsson, 2005; Kanerva, 2011). Another 13th-century saga, *Laxdæla saga*, features a protagonist, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, who once encounters a ghost in a church, while her grand-

⁴¹ See e.g. Tirosh 2019, 184–99, who doubts the validity of grouping sagas into the 'classical' and 'post-classical' categories. Arnold (2003, 181–232) also noted this in relation to *Króka-Refs saga*.

⁴² In a symbolic narrative, such as folktales and some adventurous tales, the psychology of individuals will manifest itself mainly in the overt events and thus the protagonists may seem less 'real' as the conflicts within them are all externalised. This is recognised in late 20th century folktale interpretation (e.g. Holbek, 1987).

daughter is visited by a sybil in her dream. Guðrún loses a husband through sorcery and herself has prophetic dreams (Anonymous, *Laxdæla saga*, pp. 87–91, 99–100, 222–24; Ármann Jakobsson, 2017, 85–91 and 109–11). And possibly the most classical of all sagas, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, has two main characters composing poetry after their death, another whose uncle is a witch and a protagonist that seemingly has magic powers (Anonymous, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, pp. 37–38, 113, 193, 255, and 336–37; Ármann Jakobsson 2017, pp. 106–7 and 120–28; McTurk, 1990). In short, otherworldly features are neither an innovation nor an aberration but rather an integral part of the sagas from the outset.⁴³ There may be a difference in mode: less sense of wonder and possibly a more nonchalant attitude towards the occult in certain texts, according to Sigurður Nordal (1953, p. 261) a hallmark of the younger sagas, but is this a useful dating principle?⁴⁴

Does *Finnboga saga*'s use of folklore indicate that it is somehow different than 'classical' sagas of Icelanders? The basis of this argument is somewhat vague. The term 'folktale' is used as a frequent shorthand in Old Norse studies, but is rarely defined (cf. Chesnutt, 1993; John Lindow, 1978; 2018). Liestøl, for example, on the one hand talks about how, "in their general character," the sagas of Icelanders "resemble folk-tales or romances," and on the other hand about how "there are remarkably few traces of ordinary migratory legends or migratory anecdotes in the Icelandic family sagas." (Liestøl, 1930, pp. 63 and 169).⁴⁵ By these migratory legends and anecdotes he refers to stories such as the one found in *Ljósvetninga saga*, where Guðmundr hits his foster-father with the butt of the axe to swap away a fly. This story may be

⁴³ There is an ongoing debate concerning how to use such terms as 'realistic' and 'fantastic' in saga research, see e.g. Lönnroth, 1999; Clunies Ross, 2002; Vésteinn Ólason, 2007c; Torfi H. Tulinius, 2011. Our own stance would be to avoid defining realism as adherence to a post-medieval scientific worldview, while agreeing that there is a 'reality effect' in the sagas.

⁴⁴ Daniel Sävborg (2018) has examined this issue more carefully using Max Lüthi's distinction between one-dimensional and two-dimensional narrative; seeing indications of a more 'one-dimensional' attitude both in legendary sagas and several sagas of Icelanders, including 'post-classical' sagas but also sagas believed to be 'classical'. His conclusion is that the attitude has more to do with genealogy than the Lüthian distinction between *Sage* and *Märchen*.

⁴⁵ He says further of folktales in the context of *fornaldarsögur*'s influence on the *Íslendingasögur*: "their influence on the family sagas was not so great, and they certainly did not serve in any way as a model. On the other hand we can see that features and situations in the folk-tales were running in the mind of the saga-teller or saga-writer while he shaped his account of certain incidents," (Liestøl, 1930, p. 166).



connected with the international folktale about the bear who hurts or kills his human companion while trying to swat away a fly (see Tirosh 2019, 54 ft. 11, 57–58, and 64 ft. 74). The scholarly consensus has been that *Ljósvetninga saga* probably existed in some written form by the middle of the 13th century. Yet, the fact that a folktale motif was incorporated into it did not influence the general discussion surrounding this saga's dating,⁴⁶ or its status as a classical saga. Thus, the incorporation of migratory tales is not useful evidence for a saga's age. Foundling narratives, for example, are certainly present in the Old Norse literature of the 13th century,⁴⁷ e.g. in such kings' sagas as *Sverris saga*, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, and are not particular to later sagas (e.g. Ármann Jakobsson, 2004). Similarly, several of the early-dated *þættir* have been argued as examples of international folktales. Joseph Harris has shown an influence of one such tale on *Heimskringla's* description of the Battle of the Niså, as well as on *Þorsteins þáttur austfirðings* and *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka* (Joseph Harris, 2008).⁴⁸ Regardless of the dating of *Þorsteins þáttur*, *Heimskringla* and *Auðunar þáttur* assuredly hail from the 13th century and the same goes for *Hreiðars þáttur*, which has been discussed in connection with AT 326, 'The Boy Who Wanted to Learn Fear' (Lindow, 1978, pp. 173–177). Using the appearance of folktale motifs for the promotion of a younger date for a text such as *Finnboga saga*, thus, seems unfruitful.

Færeyinga saga's use of folktale motifs and types is another case in point, since this saga is considered to be quite early, certainly earlier than *Finnboga saga*. The similarities between *Færeyinga saga* and other *Íslendingasögur* make it clear that these texts were operating within the same generic framework (Ólafur Halldórsson in Anonymous, *Færeyinga saga*, pp. clxx–cxiv). Both the story of *Finnbogi* and that of *Færeyinga saga's* Sigmundur and his cousin Þórir

⁴⁶ Hallvard Magerøy (1957, pp. 47–49), for example, uses this as more evidence for the superiority of the A-redaction. Some exceptions to this do exist, however, such as Eugene Mogk's (1904, p. 762 and n. 1) assertion that the foster-father scene is different from the "Romantischer Einfluss" that is entirely missing from the saga.

⁴⁷ Foundling narratives, stories about a hero abandoned as a child who has to fend for himself, are famously more prominent in literature than reality (see e.g. John Boswell, 1988, pp. 6–7.) and yet still draw from this same reality and present in various historical works, including Icelandic kings' sagas, and are thus not a 14th century novelty.

⁴⁸ Harris misses an opportunity to show how the beginning of *Sneglu-Halla þáttur* plays on this motif, since the *þáttur's* first scene has the protagonist insult the king, whose identity is unclear in the *Morkinskinna* account. On *Auðunar þáttur* and folktales see also Lindow, 1978, pp. 155–158.



seem to be borrowing from folktales like AT 567A ‘The Magic Bird-Heart and the Separated Brothers’. The path of *Færeyinga saga*’s two cousins Sigmundr and Þórir has clear similarities to a folktale narrative. After their fathers’ murderer Práendr pays Hrafn money to have the children as slaves, the latter frees them and gives them Práendr’s money. This could be a variation of AT 567A’s ‘Spared by the Man Charged with Executing Them,’ which in turn is much like when *Finnboga saga*’s Syrpa saves Urðarköttr’s life despite knowing him to have been intentionally exposed. When, in *Færeyinga saga*, Sigmundr and Þórir wander off from their savior they become stranded and wet on a mountain. They eventually find their way into a house, where they are taken in by two women who take care of them. When the master of the house arrives, he sniffs the air and recognizes that there are guests, and his wife convinces him to let them stay. This sniffing of the air, as Liestøl points out, is very much like folktale motif G84, ‘Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum. Cannibal Returning Home Smells Human Flesh and Makes Exclamation’ (Liestøl 1930, p. 168).⁴⁹ That both *Finnbogi* and Sigmundr have an encounter with a bear that they kill and then set up to look alive at first sight seems like a variation of K2321 ‘Corpse Set Up to Frighten People’ (Boberg, 1966, p. 186).⁵⁰ Since *Færeyinga saga* is commonly dated to the early 13th century (see Schmidt, 2016, pp. 275–276, n. 7; Tirosh 2017, p. 163), this would make it an example of an early saga that makes heavy use of folktale motifs.

The subject matter of *Finnboga saga* is not a feud or a complicated familial relationship or a power struggle between magnates but an adventurous foundling narrative about a hero who is never overwhelmed by any challenge. This may be why Sigurður Nordal characterizes the saga as “meget æventyrlig” (Sigurður Nordal, 1953, p. 268), and consequently ill-fitting to his idea of an ideal union between history and fiction, and to an ideal based on *Egils saga*.⁵¹ Therein may lie the heart of the matter. There may be a different lesson to be drawn from the

⁴⁹ Another example of this is Þórisdálr in *Grettis saga*. When Úlfr/Þorkell later tells his tale we learn that he, together with a group of 12 men and his kidnapped wife, lived in a forest until they were attacked by the kidnapped woman’s father. See Anne Irene Riisøy, 2014, pp. 101–102, 105–107, 110–111 for the connection between the Scandinavian outlaw and the forest. On a keen sense of smell as a paranormal marker see also Christopher Crocker (forthcoming).

⁵⁰ Ólafur Halldórsson suggests a literary connection between these texts, with *Finnboga saga*’s account influenced by *Færeyinga saga* (in Anonymous, *Færeyinga saga*, p. clxxxiv).

⁵¹ He stated that *Egils saga* is characterised by the “harmoniske forening af historisk og digterisk behandling af emnet” (1953, p. 243).

distinctness of *Finnboga saga*, that this is not necessarily due to a turn in the sagas of Icelanders from well-crafted historical realism to immoderation and bad taste, but to the fact that the sagas of Icelanders are not an actual genre with clear conventions and rules.⁵² Perhaps it is more likely that different types of sagas were written throughout the lengthy period of saga composition, and this, rather than age, could be used to account for some of the differences between *Finnboga saga* and other sagas found in *Möðruvallabók*.⁵³

Saga sub-genres and the national narrative

To return to the questions posed at the beginning of this article, the *Íslendingasögur* may not be a very useful literary category, and perhaps even less useful is their subdivision into early, classical, and late sagas.⁵⁴ Not only are the 'post-classical' sagas not necessarily all from the same period, it may also be misleading to think of them as a sub-genre or a self-contained category of sagas. It can also be argued that there is no compelling reason to believe that the writing of sagas paused or came to a sudden halt in the latter part of the 14th century; on the contrary, it is quite possible that more than one major saga, and some minor ones, were composed during the 15th century. In fact, in light of all the doubts that can be raised about the age of individual sagas previously seen as either 'classical' or 'post-classical', one might suggest an alternative model of literary history in which there are neither classical nor post-classical sagas. There is no need to argue that all sagas are equally fine works of art, but what seems to be emerging as a possibility is that fine sagas were composed both early and late,

⁵² The genre debate, for a long while stuck in traditional and facile saga sub-genres, was opened up a while ago by Elizabeth Ashman Rowe (1993), whose revisions demonstrate the necessity to break out of categorical boundaries, while retaining at least some of the categories. Another important study is Guðrún Nordal's (2007) attempt to do away with the three groups and re-group them not based on their supposed age (though a 14th century dating figures as a marker of one of the groups). On Old Norse prose genres in general, see Bampi 2017.

⁵³ See some of the criticisms of Sävborg (2012), who dates some 'atypical' sagas to the 13th century, thus older than some 'classical' sagas.

⁵⁴ Sävborg (2012, p. 53) advanced similar criticism to the dating premises of Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Sigurður Nordal, and their successors, but would still like to retain the 'post-classical' sagas as a group under a new heading ('not classical') whereas the present authors would have strong reservations about that.



from the first half of the 13th century to the late 15th century, with *Egils saga*, *Laxdæla saga* and *Njáls saga* surviving as early examples of sagas of high artistic merit, but *Gísla saga*, *Grettis saga* and *Hrafnkels saga* as possibly late examples meeting the similar standards. At the same time, sagas with less subtle heroes that perform exaggerated feats may have been composed throughout the same *longue durée* of saga composition and not just near its close. This perhaps provides a clear answer to the final question posed above: no, there is scant evidence for any 'decline of realism'.

The modern reception of the sagas of Icelanders has always been in thrall to its reception in the early 17th century when they were presented, by Arngrímur Jónsson 'the learned' and others, as important sources for the historical past. The classification of the sagas into sub-genres, including kings' sagas, legendary sagas, contemporary sagas and sagas of Icelanders, was determined mostly by their perceived historical value rather than style, aesthetics or any other formal characteristics.⁵⁵ However, such categorisation based merely on temporal or spatial setting is not common in literary criticism or else critics might group Neal Stephenson's *Quicksilver* with Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* given that both novels take place in France and England in the 17th century.

The dating of the sagas of Icelanders was never actually about dating but about genre, i.e. the need to maintain post-medieval categories that were not invented to understand the sagas as literary texts but rather grouped them according to which country and which period they were supposed to depict. As Cardew (2014) has argued, the so-called 'post-classical' sagas of Icelanders got a raw deal from this categorization, seen as they were as a degeneration of the form. Thus, for example, *Víglundar saga* was seen as a failed *Njála* rather than a successful bridal-quest romance.

⁵⁵ There have been interesting recent attempts to use the chronotope concept of Mikhail Bakhtin to localize the sagas more generically in time and space, e.g. Carl Phepstead, 2009; Lena Rohrbach, 2017. Keeping in mind that the sagas are works of history, this emphasis of time and space might be useful and the continuation of this might lead to a survival of the sagas of Icelanders as a kind of literature within that framework.

The idea of saga realism was adumbrated during a period in which literary realism had been the dominant mode for decades, and thus realism was seen as the highest praise for a medieval text. But the sagas, even the most supposedly ‘realistic’ among them, are not realistic in any modern sense of the term. They do not reject the paranormal nor do they attempt to illuminate average lives or current social issues. They, on the contrary, are depictions of a legendary past where many things are possible. They are only realistic in the sense that they are compelling narratives (thus producing a ‘reality effect’) and that their characters seem at best to be so real that one must believe in them while reading. The same, of course, applies to well written literary characters in general, whether the genre is fantasy, romance or realism.⁵⁶

The following five dating principles, which have been taken for granted for too long, are in fact not helpful at all: clumsiness, unhistoricity, immoderation, the great shift in saga composition of the 14th century, and declining realism. In all likelihood, many or even most of the best sagas were composed by royal subjects of Norway. The premise that only in the ‘commonwealth period’ could great works of art be produced has been a flawed premise for saga dating to this day. The time has come to let it go, not only the premise itself but also the various small edifices erected directly or indirectly on it.

What could be constructed in lieu of this tripartite genre system of the archaic, classical and post-classical? Possibly a system in which sagas are not grouped together merely based on the periods and places they depict or divided into sub-categories based on imagined historical value or lack of aesthetic value but based more on their own inner logic and aesthetics. The sagas must also be dated more conservatively based on surviving material evidence, unblinded by the mist created by the ‘decline of realism’ theory.

⁵⁶ As Ursula Le Guin has put it: “This weight of verifiable place-event-phenomenon-behavior makes the reader forget that he is reading a pure invention, a history that never took place anywhere but in that unlocalizable region, the author’s mind. In fact, while we read a novel, we are insane – bonkers. We believe in the existence of people who aren’t there, we hear their voices, we watch the battle of Borodino with them, we may even become Napoleon. Sanity returns (in most cases) when the book is closed” (2000, pp. xiii-xiv).

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