The Saga of Gunnlaugur Snake's Tongue

With an Essay on the Structure and Translation of the Saga

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Preface

Late in the ninth century, Norse chieftains left Norway and the British Isles with their families, followers, and slaves to settle in Iceland where they claimed land and portioned it out to their followers and friends. One of the early events recorded in the twelfth-century Landnámabók (Book of Settlements), which records stories about the settlement, is an uprising of slaves against a chieftain. After they killed their master, the slaves took the livestock and women of the household to the Westman Islands. The chieftain’s brother hunted down the slaves and killed them. One does not have to believe the story or the source to believe that in spite of plentiful land, not everyone had a fair share of it. This is the important sociological, as opposed to historical, fact. There were slaves. Chieftains could appropriate land and give it to others. Not everyone had the same access to resources.

From early on, there were local assemblies. The general assembly (Alþingi) was founded in 930. Each chieftain was obliged to attend its annual meetings where law was made and changed. Cases were adjudicated according to intricate procedures, as Gunnlaugur’s saga illustrates.

During a period of chaos in the thirteenth century, Icelandic writers set down the Icelandic sagas. It is one of these, the saga of Gunnlaugur snake’s tongue, that we present here in our translation. We do not present it as an English or American text, but as an attempt to capture a medieval Icelandic text. The translation therefore is awkward and perhaps obscure in places with changing tenses, run-on sentences, and sentences ending in prepositions. We hope
that this will communicate to our readers something of the flavor of the period.

Readers should bear in mind that while the saga mainly involves chieftains and their families, these were a relatively small portion of the population. Most people were desperately poor and lived on what they could find at the margins of a precarious economy that depended on hunting, fishing, and husbandry of sheep and cattle for milk, meat, and wool.

Of the events reported in the saga, we can say but little. If they happened, it was well before the saga was written. Literary scholars argue about whether the saga was told before it was written, whether the people actually existed. We conclude that it does not matter.

The Icelandic language has some letters that English no longer uses, especially þ, ð (“thorn”) and ð, ð (“eth”). The first is like the th of the English thing or thought. The second is like the th of the English of this or that. We retain the Icelandic letters to preserve the sense of Icelandic-ness of the text.

To facilitate reading the saga and our analysis of it, we have prepared a diagram of the genealogical relationships that are important to the saga. To save room on a congested diagram, we have omitted the Icelandic endings of the names.

Though none of them bears responsibility for any shortcomings readers may find with this translation or analysis, a number of people have helped us in our studies of things Icelandic. They include Pórólfur Pórlandsson, Jóna Siggeirsdóttir, Anne Cotrell, Gísli Pálsson, Hjörleifur Jónsson, Ástráður Eysteinsson, and the people of the farms of Efræ-Sel and Uppsalir.

Some of the material on translation has appeared previously in *Translation Review* (1986, vol. 21–22) (Durrenberger and Durrenberger, 1986) and is used here with permission.
I

The Story

A chieftain named Þorsteinn is introduced through the genealogy of the Mýrar people, his family, descendants of Egill, Skalla-Grímrur's son, known to readers of his and other sagas. While repairing his hut at the assembly meeting place, Þorsteinn dreams that an eagle comes to the roof of his house and courts a white swan. Another eagle appears and courts her also. The two eagles fight until both die. Then a hawk appears and the swan flies away with him. A Norwegian skipper, who is staying with Þorsteinn, interprets the dream to signify that Þorsteinn's wife, Jófríður, will have a beautiful daughter and that two men will fall excessively in love with her, fight over her, and kill each other; then she will marry a third man. The skipper leaves. Disliking the interpretation, Þorsteinn tries to prevent it from coming true by instructing his wife to expose the expected child if it is a daughter. Jófríður objects to the order. While Þorsteinn is away, Jófríður sends the infant girl to her husband's sister to be raised and tells Þorsteinn she has exposed the child. Six years later, Þorsteinn admires a girl at his sister's house. His sister explains that Helga is his daughter, and he gratefully takes her home with him to Borg.

At this point Illugi of Hvítársigða is introduced by his genealogy. He has a son named Gunnlaugur, a poet. At the age of twelve, Gunnlaugur tries to leave on a trading expedition, but his father stops him. Angry, Gunnlaugur goes to stay with Þorsteinn, who teaches him law. Gunnlaugur and
Helga come to like each other a great deal. Gunnlaugur tries to betroth Helga to himself, but Þorsteinn will not allow the engagement. A third chieftain, Ónundur from Mosfell, is introduced with his son Hrafn.

Gunnlaugur goes north to help collect an inheritance. He is successful and wins his father’s respect. At eighteen, Gunnlaugur asks his father again if he can go abroad, and this time Illugi gives him traveling supplies. Using every means he can to coerce his father to help, Gunnlaugur persuades Þorsteinn to promise not to let Helga marry anyone else for three years. Gunnlaugur then travels to various courts, wins a duel with a notorious bandit in England, and receives handsome gifts from earls and kings in return for his poems.

In Sweden he meets another Icelandic poet, Hrafn, Ónundur’s son. Both want to present poems to the king, who lets Gunnlaugur recite first and Hrafn second. The king asks each to judge the other’s poem, and Gunnlaugur’s critique of Hrafn’s poem causes a falling out between the two. Hrafn leaves for Iceland with the vow to dishonor Gunnlaugur as much as Gunnlaugur tried to dishonor him. In Iceland, he tries to persuade Þorsteinn to let him marry Helga, but Þorsteinn holds to his promise to Gunnlaugur. The following summer, after the agreed upon term is up, Þorsteinn agrees to let Hrafn marry Helga if Gunnlaugur does not come back to interfere with the plan.

Gunnlaugur, delayed in his travels, manages to get back to Iceland as the term expires just before the wedding. Because he injures his foot while wrestling, he cannot travel to the wedding. Hrafn and Helga are married, though Helga is not happy about it. When Helga learns that Gunnlaugur has returned, she rejects Hrafn and returns home. When she meets Gunnlaugur at another wedding feast, he gives her a cloak that Æðalræður, the king of England, gave him. Afterwards she refuses to live with Hrafn.

Gunnlaugur challenges Hrafn to a duel at the Alping, but the outcome is inconclusive. The assembly passes a law to forbid dueling in Iceland, so Hrafn challenges Gunnlaugur to go out of the country to fight. The two go abroad. Gunnlaugur has some adventures in the Orkneys, but finally goes to Norway. Hrafn has already come and gone. Goaded by the king’s men, Gunnlaugur follows and finds Hrafn, and they duel. Gunnlaugur cuts Hrafn’s leg off, but Hrafn says he will continue fighting if Gunnlaugur will bring him a drink of water. Gunnlaugur, reassured by Hrafn’s promise not to take advantage of him, does so. Hrafn chops him in the head, explaining that he could not allow Gunnlaugur to have Helga. Gunnlaugur kills Hrafn and is carried to a nearby town where he dies after three days.

Gunnlaugur’s father and Hrafn’s father both dream about this event, and at the next meeting of the Alping, Illugi requests compensation from Ónundur, Hrafn’s father. He refuses. Illugi and Gunnlaugur’s brother, Hermundur, kill one of Ónundur’s relatives and chop off another’s feet in revenge. Ónundur asks for no compensation. Hermundur, on his own, spears Ónundur’s nephew, Hrafn, a skipper. No compensation was made for this killing either. Þorsteinn marries Helga to Þorkell, but she does not forget Gunnlaugur. Þorkell and Helga have many children. Helga gets sick, and dies in Þorkell’s arms after gazing once more at the cloak Gunnlaugur gave her.

This version of the story, while relating the main events of the saga, conveys nothing of its structure. Most of the structural elements are suppressed in favor of the sequential events. The major cultural content of this, and other Icelandic sagas, is their structural dimension. That is the dimension, omitted in the story, that we wish to explore.

There are several concepts of structure in studies of the sagas (Clove 1985). Andersson (1967) outlines a structure of events that occur in sagas (e.g., travels abroad, duels, and
enforcement with their courts, police, and armies, are known in the anthropological literature as states. This makes this period of Iceland’s history of special interest to the anthropological discussion of the development of political forms, because Iceland is one of the few documented examples of a stratified society without a state.

Gelsinger’s (1981) study of the economic history of Iceland shows that wealth began to concentrate about the year 1000. As wealth and land became more concentrated, the conflicts within this stratified society without state regulation became more acute until they culminated in the strife of the Sturlung period in the thirteenth century.

Iceland at this time was like other primitive societies—as those without states are typically known—and its cultural and conceptual systems were similar to those that anthropologists have studied in other parts of the contemporary world. It was similar to the feuding and aristocratic Lolo of China (Lin Yueh-hua 1961) and Kachin of highland Burma (Leach 1954), to name but two of the most striking ethnographic parallels. Lévi-Strauss (1966) calls such societies “cold” societies, distinguishing them from the “hot” societies that incorporate ideas of history into their self-concepts and ways of explanation. “Cold” societies, in contrast, have a conceptual order based on a notion of a timeless present. The present recapitulates the past; the future recapitulates the present. Everything is organized into a universalizing system of classification. Every person, place, thing, and event has a place in the system that Lévi-Strauss calls a “totemic operator.” Causality is related to position in the system. The logic of these systems is one of classification and analogy, not of linear time, analysis, and linear causality.

In totemic systems, witchcraft, magic, and oracles make sense. Each is a way of attaining a desired goal by manipulating things in terms of the logic of analogy and opposition
entailed in the system of classification. Among the Lisu of Northern Thailand, an all-embracing system of dual oppositions—up-down, male-female, soul-body, spirit-human—orders their understandings of reality. People make offerings to spirits to remedy their ills and check oracles to ascertain whether the spirits have accepted the offerings. They call lost and wandering souls, and shamans invoke spirits to ride them to ascertain the causes of events. This is not an irrational system, nor is it illogical. It simply follows a different logic, a totemic logic. When we want to cure a cold or go to the moon, we invoke the logic and practice of science. When Lisu or other totemic people wish to accomplish something, they think about it and act in terms of their totemic logics (Durrenberger 1980, 1989).

In totemic systems individuals are identified with families, families with genealogies and places. Genealogies therefore function as devices for classification rather than historical records. Social categories are identified with natural ones, often species of animals, or other items of the classification system. Systems of naming further classify individuals (Lévi-Strauss 1966).

Gurevich (1969, 1971) describes aspects of the ancient Scandinavian totemic system and suggests that individuals were identified with families, families with particular places, and that social categories were systematically mapped onto natural phenomena such as landscapes. Each individual is part of a persisting system of relationships. Conceptually this system does not change, but as Lévi-Strauss argues, in spite of peoples' conceptions of reality, there may be real and significant changes. One area of change is demographic. Some social units may wax while others wane. Sometimes groups of Kaingáng Indians of Brazil come together and live in peace, but because of their feuds, whole lineages “have been destroyed and others, overcome by panic, have wandered away into the endless forests, never to be heard of again” (Henry 1964, 50). Such changes of balance call for a readjustment of conceptual systems, creating new categories and relationships among them as some clans become large and split, while others disappear.

In spite of adjustments of the conceptual system to changing realities, time is thought to be static, and the structure is thought to recapitulate itself over and over. There is no concept of linear historical causality in which events cause other events so that one can explain present realities in terms of cause and effect relationships among events. Instead, one understands present realities in terms of the characteristics of categories and their relations in the totemic system. In this sense, time in “cold” societies, is not historical. There is no history. People think of themselves as fitting into the totemic system in the same way as their near and remote ancestors did, relating to the land and to other social groups and individuals in the same way. They reinforce these connections not only in action and in the way they explain events to one another, but also in the stories they tell each other. Jules Henry (1964) reports of the Kaingáng that the complicated genealogies of people whose descendants are alive today agree. When the Kaingáng discuss killings of more than a century ago they seem to be fitting together the parts of an intricate puzzle that they know very well. Their interest in the history of their feuds has impressed the details on their minds. They remember everyone’s genealogy, as well as details of weather, conversation, and facial expression and, in addition, precise descriptions of wounds. They do not tell these stories to explain, justify, or validate killings or any other behavior, nor as examples, but as direct expression of the “obsession that drives them constantly to acts of violence” (Henry 1964, 126). This does not reflect what the modern age would call “historical realities” but local totemic conceptions.

There is no reason to suppose that settlement or com-
monwealth period Iceland was different from other such societies. Haraldur Finehair's conquest of Norway was used by the sagamen as an explanation for the settlement of Iceland and afterwards was accepted as historical fact. The people who wrote the sagas and said Haraldur's activities were causal some hundreds of years after the fact. We can never know whether the people who came to Iceland were fleeing Haraldur's tyranny, nor whether they justified or even thought about their actions in these terms. The concept of the freedom-seeking settlers had become established by the time the sagas were written. The settlement may be one of many events that were intended to maintain the system of social relationships and its associated totemic system as it had been in spite of undeniable changes. Other such events may have been the formalization of law and the formation of the Alping, the compromise about Christianity, and the writing of the sagas themselves.

From at least the year 1000 A.D., with the concentration of wealth and power, there were growing pressures on a social system based on stratification without state control. If early Icelanders had such a totemic system as we have outlined, then they would have tried to maintain a semblance of an unchanging system, an ideology of a changeless society. At the point when the changes are significant and undeniable, the need to articulate this ideology is the strongest.

Anthropologist Roger Keesing describes a contemporary society in just such a situation. In 1962 he set out to study the Kwaio who had achieved the reputation of being, "the most dangerous villains and darkest and wildest heathens" in the Soloman Islands (1978, 5). When he arrived, after a thirty mile trek across inhospitable mountains, the people welcomed him. These egalitarian people had to adapt themselves to a new political order with the coming of the British, and then the Americans in the Second World War. They experimented with new social forms that did not work as well as they had imagined. In the decade before Keesing arrived, many of their leaders hoped that "straightening out the custom" would improve their political position vis-à-vis the British and shore up their way of life. There were movements in the fifties and early sixties to strengthen custom and write it down. Kwaio enlisted ancestral aid through sacrifice. Keesing walked into this situation as the fulfillment of Kwaio prophecy.

Keesing tells the story of one Kwaio chieftain 'Elota, a story as full of artful maneuvering, feuding, complex strategy, feasts, weddings, resentments, killings, and honor as any Icelandic saga, but one set down from the words of living witnesses. Keesing has analyzed the world view, social organization, values, and history of this people. After several hundreds of years, will literary scholars debate whether the events happened, whether such a people existed, what aspects of his descriptions are literary devices rather than social conventions? The point is that the Kwaio were at the same historical moment in the 1960s as the Icelanders were in the thirteenth century—the confrontation of a divided society with the power of a state society, and, like the Icelanders, they were groping for a way to present the ethical, moral, legal, and social dimensions of their lives to themselves in a self-conscious way. It was the contrast with the new order that made the codification of custom significant and relevant.

In Iceland this was expressed through the medium of sagas. The sagas were totemic documents written in an effort to stitch the present to the past, to assert changelessness in the face of change. The Alping and the law provided means for keeping the social and physical opposition between feuding parties within acceptable limits as long as there was some equality in the distribution of power. These social aspects were reflections of the same
dualistic pattern. Opposition is an aspect of the coherence of a system, but beyond certain thresholds, it ceases to be a corrective force and begins to destroy the system itself, as happened during the Sturlung period as concentrations of power grew. Sagas are attempts to recreate the totemic structure and to make analogic relationships between the present thirteenth century excesses and the past of, at least conceived, balanced relationships. Four times the writer of Gunnlaugur’s saga makes explicit reference to the differences between the present time of writing and the past of the time of the events of the saga: (1) the exposing of children in heathen times; (2) the language in England being the same as Iceland; (3) the conversion to Christianity; (4) the anti-dueling law. The sagamen were as aware as the Kwaio of the differences between their present and their past.

From the beginning of the saga, we are given a picture of a strongly organized universe with everything in its place and a place for everything, and no human effort or emotion has any power to alter those facts of existence. This is what the saga is and what it is about: the structure of existence, the totemic structure of these people. From his first introduction until his death, Gunnlaugur is haughty, overly concerned with his honor, bragging about his stature and his father’s position. Gunnlaugur is the same at the age of twelve, eighteen, and when he dies. Þorsteinn dreams of what will be, it happens; Ónundur and Illugi dream of what has happened, the inevitable consequences happen, and we return to the beginning with the continuation of the recitation of Þorsteinn’s genealogy through Helga’s children. Simply, this saga says that in spite of all efforts, things turn out as usual, as they must, as they are. At every juncture, people attempt to change the future. Still, the end is the same as the beginning. We shall explore this structure, not the story or the characters.

Many have analyzed the use of dreams in Icelandic sagas as a narrative device to unify an otherwise incoherent story. We suggest, on the contrary, that dreams describe structure. Þorsteinn’s skepticism is common, and yet he, like others, acts on the interpretation of his dream. The logic is one of classification and analogy. In Þorsteinn’s dream the first eagle is black eyed and iron clawed. The second is not described. The swan is white, beautiful, and belongs to Þorsteinn. The two eagles kill each other, and a hawk flies away with the swan. After the Norwegian skipper interprets this dream, no further mention of it is made in the saga, but analogies keep it continually in front of the reader. Helga is described as fair, white, and beautiful, and as belonging to Þorsteinn and to Borg. Gunnlaugur is described as harsh and black eyed more than once. Hrafn, analogous to the second eagle, is not much described.

Curses, old sayings, oaths, and witchcraft have the same function in sagas—to reveal the reality of structural relationships. Witchcraft is no simple story-telling or folkloric element but an expression of the reality of the period, and of the type of society and ideology that existed at the time, just as it is a contemporary reality among Lisu (Durrenberger 1975, 1989). As in other similar societies, one may manipulate reality by magic, sorcery, witchcraft, and curses. Gunnlaugur’s oath to visit three earls and two kings has the same function as the dream—to indicate an important structural
relationship. Oaths establish or reinforce structural relationships, dreams reveal them, and sayings describe them.

Helga and Gunnlaugur form a pair, a structural unit in this saga. The saying “That which is got early stays long” states the inevitable structural relationship between them. At a wedding feast Helga could not keep her eyes off Gunnlaugur. The saying “A woman’s eyes cannot conceal love” reinforces the structural relationship. These sayings indicate that the events are not consequences of the volition of these individuals, what they feel, think, or know, but that the people are enmeshed in a larger system of relationships, in spite of anything they might wish. In Gunnlaugur’s saga, there is no free will. The action is set from the beginning. The system of relationships is the saga. The story exists only to illustrate the structure.

Suspense has no part in the story. One knows the end as one reads the beginning. The saga shows the inevitabilities of the peoples’ lives and characters. Personalities are not described in detail. A person is known by his or her actions and words, and that person’s characteristics form an immutable part of the saga’s structure.

Introductions of individuals, voyages, feasts, weddings, and betrothals are formulaic. They are all the same. Characters are not introduced without a train of ancestors. Weddings and feasts do not happen without descriptions of seating arrangements. Betrothals do not happen without announcements. Voyages happen in the course of a sentence with no storms or encounters. Just as genealogies describe people by classifying them, to classify an event is to describe and relate it, even though the classification may be as formulaic as a genealogical recitation. Events as well as people, places, and things enter the system of classification. An event is worthy of further description only insofar as it is different from others.

Events happen in pairs or triples (Madelung 1972). In fulfillment of his oath, Gunnlaugur visits three earls and two kings. Both he and Hrafn approach Þorstein twice to betroth Helga, with exactly the same results. Two weddings are described. The third, Helga’s second, is mentioned but not described. Two skippers figure in the saga, two dream incidents, and two incidents involving Gunnlaugur’s feet. Three families figure in the saga; Helga has significant relationships with three men—her two husbands and Gunnlaugur. Gunnlaugur’s family members take their revenge on three of Hrafn’s relatives, one a second Hrafn.

If the logic of the saga is not of historical time—one event causing another, as in modern concepts of history, story, and novel—but one of classification and analogy, we would expect pairs and triples, comparisons, contrasts, and the indication of similarity of classification by similarity of opposition. Things and events are organized in opposing pairs that enter into chains of analogies—Helga:swan::Þorsteinn:Borg::Gunnlaugur:black-eyed eagle::Illugi:Hvitár-siða::Hrafn:undescribed eagle:: Önundur:Mosfell. According to such a logic, there is unity in opposition. Two opposites make a pair. Helga and Gunnlaugur are one such pair. Opposition can be mediated by a third element, but mediation destroys the opposition and the pair. This is Hrafn’s structural role. It is no mystery, then, that things come in two and threes. That is a consequence of the structure of the saga and it is part of and reflects the kind of cultural artifact a saga is.

Dreams, sayings, curses, witchcraft, and oaths are not narrative devices but reflections of a well-structured conception of reality that the sagas, Gunnlaugur’s as well as others, express. The dualistic structure of the saga does not appear strongly in our synopsis of the story but is a significant aspect of the saga quite apart from the events.
3  
Dualistic Structure

The saga describes people riding up to Gilsbakki and down to Borg. We might attribute this to the relative elevations of the places or to the idiosyncrasies of prepositional usage in Icelandic, if there were not a repetitious and elaborated dualistic structure that entails other elements as well. Illugi is “the black,” which may have been his appellation, and Þorsteinn has white hair, which may be a historical fact. It stretches credulity when Þorsteinn recognizes the fair complexion of his own Mýrar people in Helga when he first sees her. Þorsteinn is described as calm and equitable, while Illugi is described as harsh. Again these may be facts, but they surely fit into the system of oppositions. One wonders about the relevance of the observation that Gunnlaugur was “ugly nosed” if it is not to establish the opposition of the beauty of Helga and the other aspects of Mýrar people with his characteristics, including his father’s reputation for harshness, the location of his home, and his black eyes. Taken together, these points suggest the following oppositions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>high</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mountains</td>
<td>moor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black</td>
<td>white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>harsh</td>
<td>calm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ugly</td>
<td>beautiful</td>
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</table>

In Þorsteinn’s dream the first eagle “flies down from the mountains” and has black eyes. Þorsteinn reinforces the sense of opposition when he tells Gunnlaugur to “use his despotism with those in the mountains, but it comes to nothing out here in Mýrar.” Gunnlaugur’s haughtiness is stressed throughout the saga, as is Þorsteinn’s sense of balance. This reinforces the contrast with the beauty of Helga and the temper of Þorsteinn. During the poetry judging before the king, Hrafn says Gunnlaugur himself is like his poem, big-worded and un-beautiful. The structure of oppositions organizes the saga.

Hrafn is not part of this structure of opposition but is the third element, from a different area of the country, not described. When Gunnlaugur compares Hrafn to his poem in terms of both beauty and lack of the blustering boasting style of the poetic forms that Gunnlaugur uses, he establishes a formal identity of Hrafn with Þorsteinn and Helga. As in other such systems (Durrenberger 1977a, 1977b, 1978), there is a balance between two elements, one of each opposing category, for instance Helga and Gunnlaugur. But there is no such balance between two elements of the same category, for instance Helga and Hrafn. The mutual attraction of Gunnlaugur and Helga is not the story of unquenchable love in the modern sense, but a reflection of this structural logic. That Helga “could never get Gunnlaugur out of her mind, though he were dead,” does not so much describe her character as her structural position.

Gunnlaugur and Hrafn are both overbearing and competitive in the matter of their standings, both parody the concept of honor, and both destroy themselves. The saga is not, however, a warning with the moral that people who are
overbearing will destroy themselves. It is rather, like Porsteinn's dream, simply describing a pattern, a reality to accept. Like other realities, it is not lamentable, or especially tragic, but simply is.

A lot of discussion centers on whether Gunnlaugur and other saga characters were historically real individuals who lived at specific times and did and said the things attributed to them (Clover 1985; Durrenberger 1985). From the point of view of this analysis, the question does not arise. It makes no difference whether there was a white-haired Porsteinn, whether Helga was really the most beautiful woman in Iceland, whether Gunnlaugur was ugly nosed, whether Hrafn betrayed him in their last duel, or even whether any of the people existed. The description of the structure is the important aspect of the saga. That ratifies concepts of opposition and similarity salient in the world view of the time and thus contributes toward a definition of realities. Descriptions of events are never neutral. They are always filtered through the cultural structures of the people who make them. Today we place events into historical sequences and give them relative importance on the basis of their weight in our ideology of causality. Our interpretations create the "realities." The saga defines a totemic reality that is more real than any events or characters could have been, so the status of these events and people in our modern system of interpretation is irrelevant.

So far we have claimed, on general comparative and theoretical grounds, that the saga was one among other documents that encoded aspects of a totemic system at a time when the social and political system associated with it was undergoing dramatic changes. As a description of such a totemic system, the saga is well structured in terms of classification and analogy so that events are known before they happen, and linear time is not an organizing principle. Thus the saga is less a story than a description of a struc-

ture. One aspect of the structure is the analogies between events and dreams, oaths, and curses, and sayings. Another is its dualistic structure. The third aspect is the ordering of the events in the saga. That ordering also suggests a stitching together of time and a lack of a linear concept.
The Structure of Events

The structure of the events is as rigid as the structure of the genealogy. The contents of the events are not. Gunnlaugur and Hrafn could fight over any affront to their honors. Helga could become fond of Hrafn and reject Gunnlaugur with the same end result. But Gunnlaugur can no more choose his father than stop the inevitability of his end. Events enter into a system of categories, they are thinglike and can be exchanged and moved around giving the same result.

The story of the saga is the medium for the structure. The structure of the saga, a series of oppositions, mediations, and analogies, is void of content and could be used to tell any story, just as the same genealogical structure can organize the relational facts about any relatives. In the saga, events are classified and organized just as concretely as people are in genealogies. The story is told three times—once as a dream, once as an interpretation of that dream, and once as a series of events. A girl is born and grows up. Two men fight over her and kill each other. She marries a third man and dies in her turn.

Events tend to happen in pairs. We have mentioned the two skippers, the two events with Gunnlaugur’s foot, and others. In the saga there is at least a rough correspondence among these events. They tend to match each other in a mirror image: the first events are reflected in the last. The central event is the poetry competition in which Gunnlaugur’s pride is matched against Hrafn’s. We suggest a rough mirror imaging, rather than a precise one, because we recognize a certain flexibility of interpretation of what one can label as an “event.” For instance, after his father refuses to let Gunnlaugur go abroad at the age of twelve, Gunnlaugur leaves home, goes down to Porstein’s house at Borg, learns law from him, and meets Helga, all within the space of four sentences. Are these four events or one? Later, Porstein asks Gunnlaugur to ride to his horses with him and twice offers to give him the horses. Is this one event or three? While there may be no single unique ordering of events, the important point is not the details of the scheme but the principle. Different readers or auditors would perceive similar orderings; though they might diverge in details, all would share the mirror image structure.

In order to validate the idea that the events were ordered in mirror image, we borrowed a procedure from modern linguistics where a similar conceptual problem arises. The problem is what to identify as a “grammatical” sentence. The practice is to accept as grammatical and ungrammatical those sentences that no one disagrees about and to base the analysis on those, so that the description of the linguistic structure, the “grammar,” describes all grammatical sentences and no ungrammatical ones. Then, the status of debatable sentences is decided by whether they can be described by the grammar. If so, they are taken as grammatical, otherwise, not (Chomsky 1965).

The genealogical introduction of Porstein matches the end of the saga, the naming of Helga’s progeny (a continuation of the initial genealogical context) and her death. The second event, the arrival of a Norwegian skipper in Iceland, matches the penultimate event, the killing of Hrafn’s relative (also named Hrafn), an Icelandic skipper bound for foreign lands. Porstein’s dream toward the beginning of the saga matches with the dreams of Önundur and Illugi toward the end. Another pair is found in the events of
Gunnaugur’s foot. Yet another is the matching of meeting and friendship of Gunnaugur and Hrafn and their parting with Hrafn’s oath to “dishonor you no less than you tried to dishonor me here” on either side of the poetry competition. We think these similarities are too strong to be coincidences.

We examined the saga in detail and made a list of events and matched them on the basis of this concept of structuring. Some of the pairs have no striking relationship that we can see or imagine. Some have a relationship that we can imagine but that does not seem very strong, and others seem so obvious that it seems the saga must have been constructed with such a structure in mind. Examination of the following list of events will illustrate the point.

Each pair has three or four marks. The first category indicates what we take to be the strength of the relationship. “•” indicates that we think the relationship is strong. “**” indicates that we think the relationship is imaginable but questionable. No mark ( ) indicates that we could think of no relationship. In the second place (+) indicates the same thing, e.g., þing (assembly), foot, skipper, or same relationship, e.g., effective authority; while (−) indicates that the relationship is an opposition, a thing and its opposite, e.g., mature and immature. Some of these relationships are complex, involving both similarities and oppositions. They are marked with both (+) and (−). The next-to-last mark is the sequential number of the event from first to last. The last number is the number of the chapter in which the event occurs.

| (+)1.1 Introduction of Porsteinn (genealogical context) | 75.13 Helga’s progeny, death, and poem (genealogical context continues and completes). |
| (+)(−)2.2 Norwegian skipper arrives (beginning of first telling of “story”). | 74.13 Redress (end of last telling of “story”), Icelandic skipper killed (leaves). |
| (+)3.2 Porsteinn controls market (effective authority). | 73.13 Illugi takes revenge (killing and foot chopping), with no redress (effective authority). |
| (+)(−)4.2 Porsteinn goes to þing place to repair both walls (authority acknowledged by tenant). | 72.13 Illugi asks Ónundur for redress (repair) for Gunnaugur at Alþing (authority denied). |
| (+)5.2 Porsteinn’s dream and interpretation unfolds rest of saga (pattern established). | 71.13 Illugi and Ónundur dream (pattern confirmed). |
| (+)(−)6.3 Porsteinn orders Helga’s death (exposure), attempts to forestall prophecy (heathen). | 70.12 Gunnaugur dies, services of the priest. Prophecy confirmed (Christian). |
THE STRUCTURE OF EVENTS

(+)(-) 7.3 Helga born, beginning of dream fulfilment.
Jófríður disobeys (betrays).
H. saved and sent away: life.

(+)+8.3 Porsteinn visits Ólafur, finds Helga.

(+)+9.3 Porsteinn reminded of past order to expose Helga, forgives Jófríður and Porgerður.

(+)+10.3 Porsteinn takes Helga home to raise her (protection). P. wanted to kill her, now protects her.

(-)+11.4 Introduce Illugi, Gunnlaugur (genealogical pattern, haughtiness). G. described in unflattering terms.

(-)+12.4 Gunnlaugur at twelve yrs. tries to go away. G. immature and ineffective.

69.12 Gunnlaugur kills Hrafn (dies).
Gunnlaugur fatally wounded.

68.12 Gunnlaugur looks for and finds Hrafn.

67.12 Gunnlaugur taunted, reminded of past vows.

66.12 Gunnlaugur goes to Eiríkur (protection).
Eiríkur wanted to kill G., now protects him.

65.12 Gunnlaugur raids from Orkneys (hardest of men). Gunnlaugur described in flattering terms.

64.12 Hrafn and Gunnlaugur go away. G. mature and effective.

(-)+13.4 Gunnlaugur goes to Porsteinn, invited.
Gunnlaugur, uninvited, challenges to duel (G. invites to stay).

14.4 Gunnlaugur learns law wisdom from Porsteinn.

15.4 G. meets, plays checkers with Helga (necessary step for pattern).

11.11 Change in law (another attempt to break the pattern).

16.4 Helga described (hair like beaten gold-money).
No such match as Helga.

17.4 Mock betrothal.

18.5 Genealogy given. Hrafn introduced, well liked.

63.11 Hrafn visits Gunnlaugur, uninvited, challenges to duel (G. invites to stay).

62.11 Helga and Gunnlaugur meet at river.


59.11 Gunnlaugur pretends to ride Hrafn down (mock fight).

58.11 Gunnlaugur gives cloak to Helga. She has no more to do with Hrafn. Hrafn disliked.
51.10 Gunna lagur reluctantly stays away from Helga’s wedding (Illugi fails to act on G.’s behalf).

54.11 Hrafn dreams of his own death, loses Helga’s approval. She says he betrayed her.

55.11 Helga and Hrafn estranged, return to Þorsteinn. Helga gets her way.

56.11 Gunna lagur is persuaded to go to wedding feast.

57.11 Wedding feast of Sveringur (Hrafn’s group) and Húngerður (Helga’s group).
Unhappy feast, no friendship or kinship between two factions.

58.10 Gunna lagur wrestles with king Eiríkur, boil on foot. Skúli, Helga’s brother saves him, Eiríkur’s curse.

59.10 Gunna lagur arrives in Iceland (or returns).

60.10 Halfdœn Þorsteinn 

61.10 Story of Hrafn taking money from Halfdœn.

62.10 Halfdœn warns Gunna lagur of Hrafn’s effectiveness (information).

63.10 Halfdœn tells Gunna lagur that Gunna lagur is considered less valiant than Hrafn.

64.10 Earl Eiríkur helps G. by taking him to Halfdœn’s ship. G. hears (is warned) of Hrafn and Helga wedding.

65.10 Gunna lagur’s money.

66.10 Gunna lagur’s information about viking (warns him), forbids to fight.

67.10 Gunna lagur challenges viking. Viking thought stronger than Gunna lagur.

68.10 G.’s poems praise Æðalráður. G. gets cloak.

69.10 G. says he betrayed her.

70.10 G. says he betrayed her.

71.10 G. says he betrayed her.

72.10 G. says he betrayed her.
40 THE STRUCTURE OF EVENTS

*(+)(-) 33.7 Gunnlaugur leaves England, makes verse vow to visit royalty.

*(+)(-) 34.8 G. visits Dublin, Orkneys, poems and presents (fulfills vow to visit royalty).

*(—) 35.8 Poem gets forgiveness of Eirkur, but Gunnlaugur doesn’t know it: in G.’s favor.

*(+)(-) 36.9 King Ólafur refuses to hear Gunnlaugur’s poem.

*(—) 37.9 G. and Hrafn become friends.

43.10 Gunnlaugur arrives in Norway at Eirkur’s court, talks of fulfilling vow to betrothed girl.

42.10 Gunnlaugur returns to England (fulfills vow to Adalrísar).

41.9 Hrafn gets Porsteinn to agree to marriage (G. doesn’t know it): not in G.’s favor.

40.9 Porsteinn refuses to discuss Hrafn’s proposal to marry Helga.

39.9 Hrafn swears to dishonor Gunnlaugur (end friendship).

8.9 Poetry competition

We conceive of the structure of the saga as a circle, with a horizontal and vertical axis, as the diagram illustrates. In this ordering, there are seventy-five events. The thirty-eighth, the poetry competition, is at the center of the events, it defines one end of a vertical axis of the story. The first and last events are genealogical descriptions that present the genealogical context and indicate its continuity. There are thirty-seven pairs of events. This would suggest that there should be a horizontal axis just between events eighteen and nineteen, at the center of the structure. Hrafn is introduced with his genealogy in event eighteen and Skapti in nineteen. The matching events are Gunnlaugur’s giving the cloak to Helga at the wedding feast, after which she has nothing to do with Hrafn, and the unhappy wedding feast of Svertingur and Húngerður. This axis defines the third and last genealogical introduction and the opposed disassociation of Helga from Hrafn.

Porsteinn’s genealogy

Hrafn’s genealogy

Helga and Hrafn estranged

poetry competition

Of the thirty-seven pairs of events, twenty-four are strongly related. Of those, eleven are similar pairs, six are oppositions, and seven can be both similar and opposite. In the group of eleven weaker associations are five similarities and five oppositions, with one event that can be regarded as both. That leaves the pair 14 and 62 and the pair 15 and 61 with no visible correspondence, but 14 and 61 and 15 and 62 produce two strong matchings: Gunnlaugur meets Helga (first time) and Gunnlaugur meets Helga (last time), and two incidents involving law. Given the tightness of the rest of the structure we hesitate to attribute this to accident, but we have no plausible explanation.

Some of the relationships are contrasts and others are similarities. The beginning and ending with genealogical context is consistent with the concept of classifying individuals in a totemic structure. The second pair of events contrasts a Norwegian skipper coming to Iceland with an Ice-
landic skipper leaving Iceland. While the Norwegian interprets Porsteinn’s dream, which describes the pattern of relationships of the saga, the Icelandic skipper, Hrafn, loses his life because of his kin relationship to Hrafn Ömundarson, because of his position in the classification system, which makes his death appropriate compensation for Gunnlaugur’s death. In the third event Porsteinn controls the market, effectively exercising his authority. This corresponds to Illugi’s taking vengeance for his son, Gunnlaugur, after Ömundur has refused to consider a settlement, but Ömundur takes no counteraction. Thus Illugi effectively exercises his authority. Porsteinn and his company go to the site of the local assembly to repair the booth. He asks a tenant to come and bring tools and work for him. The tenant complies without question, thus acknowledging Porsteinn’s authority. Illugi asks Ömundur for compensation with the words, “Hverju villu bæta mér son minn” [how do you want to compensate me for my son]. “Bæta” has the sense of repairing or restoration. Both actions occur at assembly places. But Ömundur refuses to acknowledge Illugi’s authority, so the events are also opposite. We have already mentioned the dreams. In the sixth pair Porsteinn intends for Helga to die, and Gunnlaugur dies. In the seventh pair Helga and Gunnlaugur both manage to survive.

The first eleven pairs, down to the introduction of Illugi and Gunnlaugur, form a unit. In the last eleven events Illugi, Gunnlaugur, or his brother Hermundur enter into an event similar to one of the first eleven events that involves Porsteinn, Helga, or Jófríður in a similar way. This reinforces the idea of a well-planned, dualistic structure in which Porsteinn’s family is structurally opposed to Illugi’s.

The next series of events suggests opposition, a pattern of one thing happening to Gunnlaugur and the opposite happening to Hrafn. In event thirteen Gunnlaugur goes to Porsteinn and is well received, and in its opposite, event sixty-three, Hrafn breaks into Illugi’s house to challenge Gunnlaugur to leave the country for their duel. Gunnlaugur’s mock betrothal to Helga matches Gunnlaugur’s threatening ride toward Hrafn at the wedding feast, a mock fight. The eighteenth event is the introduction of Hrafn and his family. This matches the meeting of Gunnlaugur with Helga at the wedding feast. Gunnlaugur gives her the cloak, and she has nothing to do with Hrafn after that. In the twenty-first event Gunnlaugur has his way in the case with the farmer regarding the horse, and the matching event is that Helga takes an aversion to Hrafn and has her way when they return to Porsteinn’s house. Gunnlaugur wins; Hrafn loses. In the twenty-second event Gunnlaugur gets his way when his father gives him permission and aid to go abroad. This matches Hrafn’s dream of his own death. Gunnlaugur wins; Hrafn loses. Porsteinn refuses to allow Gunnlaugur to betroth himself to Helga in the twenty-fourth event. This matches the wedding feast of Helga and Hrafn. Hrafn wins; Gunnlaugur loses.

In the next series of events, twenty-five through thirty-five, Gunnlaugur figures in both elements of the pairs. The thirty-fifth pair is like the second group because in the first event Gunnlaugur wins something, and in its twin Hrafn wins something. In the next pair Gunnlaugur meets with a refusal, and in its twin so does Hrafn. The last three events, thirty-seven through thirty-nine, form the “center” of the saga.

Conceiving the events of the saga in this way suggests some relationships that are not immediately obvious. One is the relationship between Helga and wealth. In verse 16 Gunnlaugur says that Helga’s parents sold her for money, which suggests a connection. The Viking Gunnlaugur duels in England admits that “sva skarðan hut sem margr hefir fyrir mér borir” [such short-shares as many have suffered from me], thus pointing out the relationship between taking something of value from someone and the possibility of a duel as a result. Gunnlaugur’s grounds for challenging Hrafn
to a duel at the Alping were “þú hefr fengit heitkonu minnar ok dregst til fjáandskapar við mik” [you have got my promised-wife and drawn yourself into hostility with me] suggesting a similar relationship between Gunnlaugur and his stolen money and Gunnlaugur and his stolen woman.

The event that stands opposite the duel is the sixteenth, in which Helga is described as having hair “svá mikít, at þat mátti hylja hana alla, ok svá fagr sem gull barit” [so much and as fair as beaten gold that it could hide all of her]. The first duel and the description of Helga’s hair both suggest the relationship between Helga and wealth. While the description of her hair as “like gold” may be nothing more than a convenient metaphor, we wonder why one of many others was not used—a sunshine metaphor, for instance—if the similarity were not important. The Viking’s taking the money from Gunnlaugur (the twenty-ninth event) matches the story of Hrafín taking money from Hallfreður (the forty-seventh event). Helga represents a kind of wealth that reflects a sociological reality—not surprising, when one recalls the way powerful families and individuals used marriage relationships in the politics of accumulation of power and wealth in the Sturlung period. Throughout the commonwealth, alliances were formed by marriage, and these marriages had economic consequences. Marriages were one of the social contexts for maneuvering.

In chapter 11, after Hrafín tells her his dream (the fiftieth event) Helga says, “Hafi þér illa svikit mik, ok mun Gunnlaugur út kominn” [You have you betrayed me evilly. And Gunnlaugur must have come out]. In their final duel, after Hrafín chops Gunnlaugur in the head, Gunnlaugur says, “Illá sveikuð mik nú” [Now you betrayed me evilly]. Corresponding to this event is the seventh—Jófríður’s refusal to expose Helga to die. While this is not presented as a betrayal, it is something for which Þórgerður later has to ask forgiveness. Opposite Hrafín’s and Helga’s estrangement is the shepherd’s illicit use of Gunnlaugur’s horse, which leads to the dispute with the farmer.

Along with this theme of betrayal is a much stronger and more noticeable one of haughty pride in position. Gunnlaugur continually makes reference to his standing and usually mentions his father’s as the claim for his. He compares his father’s accomplishments to those of Þorsteinn and Ónundur, Hrafín’s father. Gunnlaugur’s own accomplishments seem to be a string of sycophantic verses to vain royalty, killing a Viking, and raiding with the Earl of the Orkneys. He does not base his claim to recognition on these accomplishments, all things done abroad, but on his father’s standing in Iceland. Perhaps the themes of pretentious claims to high standing and betrayal are, with the theme of woman-as-wealth, reflections of the Sturlung period.

The structuring of Gunnlaugur’s saga is too thorough, too consistent, and too neat for it to be by chance. The dualistic oppositions of black and white, up and down, ugly and beautiful, and so on are echoed in the order of presentation of events in the saga. Þorsteinn and his family dominate the first events, and Ílugu and his family do similar things in the last ones. Helga and Gunnlaugur are clearly a pair, in the totemic logic of the unity of oppositions, but the saga is not about love, or arrogance and betrayal, but about structural relations, totemic reality.

Because the saga structures people and events does not mean that the people did not exist or that the events did not happen any more than the fact that today we structure events and people into historical claims of supposed causal relationships means that the people and events of our period do not exist. We claim that medieval Icelanders interpreted people and events differently. The way people see their existence may very well influence what they do and the realities of their lives.

This saga captures aspects of the political and social life
of the Sturlung period in the totemic matrix of classification and analogy of an earlier period. The sagaman recognizes differences between the contemporary Sturlung period and the past, and he points them out. It is these differences that are the reason for this saga's and others' existence. Since the differences were as notable as those that one sees when one lineage in a system becomes large and another small, similar experiments with the totemic system were undertaken in the form of sagas. They were attempts to stitch the present of the Sturlung period to a past that may or may not have existed, to make sense of the present in terms of the received cultural system, which was a product of a different kind of society, a society in which there was a fairly equal balance of power and wealth among a number of powerful families.

Like Þorsteinn's dream, the saga depicts a reality, one more real than history, one that precludes arguments about the color of Þorsteinn's hair or the existence of Helga. The arrangement of the saga speaks to the sagaman's sense of time. It begins with genealogical classification, moves in steps to the center, the poetry competition, the insistence of two prideful men to win the favor of a foreign king, and back, step by step to the beginning. To apply the categories of criticism that one uses for novels or other literature is inappropriate. There is no beginning-middle-end structure, but rather a beginning-center-beginning structure. There is no development of suspense or climax, though modern readers might be able to supply such devices from their experience of other literatures. The end is known at the beginning. If there is anything like a climax, it is not the final duel but the poetry competition in which no one wins.

Although it is possible to read Icelandic sagas as modern literature, they are an entirely different kind of cultural artifact. Taken in context, for what they are, they tell us much about the society and times that gave them birth.

5
Translation

We have approached the problems of translating the Icelandic sagas from the perspective of anthropology rather than literature or aesthetics. In anthropology, translation is used in the service of cultural description. One describes aspects of a cultural system and uses translations as illustrations or sources of information about cultural patterns. The first step of any cultural analysis is translation. Translations are embedded in a cultural analysis as illustration, example, or data. The sagas have not been translated in this tradition. Rather, the context of translation has been literary or historical.

Icelandic sagas provide the only relatively full self-account of a social and cultural form, which, while not unique, is quite significant to anthropological theory, a stratified society without a state. In Iceland this form persisted from the settlement in the ninth century to the year 1262 or 1264 when the chieftains swore allegiance to the Norwegian king.

The sagas are the main evidence of this period, which gives them their anthropological interest and indicates that something more than taste is at stake in their translation into English. It is the literary qualities of the sagas, their style of narration, their aesthetics, as much as the stories they tell, that convey the culture, the conceptual structure of the period.
There are three modes of saga translation: free use of archaisms to evoke a spirit of an earlier time, as those of Magnússon and Morris; free translation, which largely eschews archaisms as those of Magnusson and Pálsson, Jones, and Boucher; and close translation, which attempts to be neither self-consciously modern nor archaic, as Johnston's translation of Gísla saga. Some find that the Magnússon and Morris policy allows the original to show through, but it is largely inaccessible (Calder 1970; Swannell 1961; Maxwell 1961). The free translation policy makes texts accessible but obscures the originals (Johnston 1961, Eysteinsson n.d.). The third approach allows the original to show through while providing an accessible text (Johnston 1961).

The usual discussion of translation of the Icelandic sagas into English centers on the aesthetics of either the original documents or the translated versions. Some argue that one must sacrifice either a readable English text or a close approximation to the original. Others, like Eysteinsson (n.d.) and Johnston (1961) call for a translation policy that circumvents the widely admitted, if sometimes admired, difficulties with archaisms of the Magnússon and Morris policy, but avoids the homogenizing effect of the more modern translations exemplified by those of Magnusson and Pálsson in the Penguin Classics series. We pose questions about the relationship of style to cultural context and content. To highlight details of style, to foreground the differences that differences of translation style make, and to indicate the cultural content of the sagas, we compare various translations with each other and the original.

Johnston names two altertions of the Icelandic texts that modern translators often make: eliminating the shifting of tenses between the simple past and simple present, and the smoothing of series of coequal independent clauses into an independent clause with subordinate clauses. Wood (1965) also has discussed the importance of verb tenses. Eysteinsson points out that to maintain the flavor of the original, translators should respect the sentences, and sometimes even the words, as units related to the overall structure of the saga. If a saga narrative does not move from unique event to unique event, but from an event to a repetition of it, this repetitive feature should be maintained rather than suppressed in the translation. Arent (1964 xxv, xl) similarly mentions this feature. Eysteinsson objects to the loose translation of formulaic introductory sentences, especially those which suggest that a "tale" is being told. Rather, he points out, the saga pretend simply to be.

Eysteinsson argues convincingly that only a close translation can capture the structure of a saga; we wish to go one step further and suggest that only such a translation can convey the cultural information the sagas contain. Free translations distort the world view of the sagamen as well as their literary works. If it were only the stories that were important, then modern retellings would be more appropriate.

To indicate that the sagas convey cultural information by their style we compare translations of Gunnlaugur's saga with the text of the Íslensk Forrít edition (Nordal and Jónsson 1938, vol. 3) upon which most were based and suggest that the shifting tenses, the formulaic openings, details of word choice, and the lack of subordinate clauses, all features that are distorted or obliterated in free translations, indicate the totemic nature of the sagas.

Gunnlaugur's saga is an ideal case for this kind of study because it has been one of the most popular sagas in English. Fry (1980) lists seven translations, two of which are partial. The complete translations are those by Magnússon and Morris (first published in 1869), Robert Locke Bremner
(1906), Gwyn Jones (1961), Randolph Quirk (first published in 1953), M. H. Scargill (1950), and Margaret Schlauch (1928). The partial translations are those of Margaret Ashdown (1930) and W. C. Green (1908). In addition to these there is Alan Boucher’s 1983 translation. We compare the translations of Magnússon and Morris (1875), Scargill (1950), Quirk (1957), Jones (1961), and Boucher (1983).

6

Time Sense

This, like other sagas, begins and ends with genealogical information, fairly brief in this case, but information that is often thought irrelevant to the story and sometimes relegated to footnotes to avoid confronting modern readers with unfamiliar conventions (Magnusson and Pálsson 1969, 43). The genealogical openings and closings situate the characters in a classification system, for one is one’s family, and a person with no genealogy is a person with no place in the totemic system. The positioning of individuals at the beginning and end negates the sense of progressing time, brings the narration back to the beginning point. This is consistent with the interpretation of the sagas as time-denying artifacts, whose purpose is to stitch the realities of the thirteenth century to the cultural image of a changeless society.

The classification of events is more important than their sequence. Events are repetitive, predictable. Even if the characters try to influence future events, the results are inevitable. Óporsteinn orders his daughter to be killed in an attempt to forestall events he has dreamed. He fails. It is easy to see why some translators were tempted to insert the word fate in chapters 3 and 11 where no counterpart exists in the Icelandic text. Fate suggests external agency and a sequence of events that leads to a culminating event. In the saga, equal weight is given to each event and none is emphasized. There is no external agency. What happens to a person, what he or she does is immanent in the person, an
aspect of the person. A person is who he or she is by virtue of his or her position in the system of classification. Thus there is no sense of “character development.” Once we know a person’s characteristics, his or her place in the classification system, we know how that person will act. We can infer that Gunnlaugr’s characteristics are not unique by the fact that his mother’s father bears the same name and sobriquet. The genealogy shows that Gunnlaugr is one of a category of people that occurs in this family, just as both ugly and handsome people occur in Egill’s and Þorstein’s family, the Mýrar family. There is no suspense. Gunnlaugr at twelve is Gunnlaug at eighteen and Gunnlaug at death.

Events not relevant to the saga structure are left out. The saga collapses time in chapter 3: “Now passed six winters.” In chapter 5, “Gunnlaugr was sometimes at Borg and sometimes with Illugi for six winters.” Each but one of the sailings occurs in the span of a relatively short sentence.

The sagaman locates the saga in the past by contrasting past and present. Chapter 3 says it was the practice to expose children when people were heathen but not after the conversion to Christianity. One sentence in chapter 5 mentions that Christianity was introduced. In chapter 7 it is said that Norse was spoken in England at the time of the saga, but not at the time of the writing. In chapter 9 it is stated that at this specific time a law was made that ended the practice of dueling. It is the recognition of the differences between past and present that make it necessary to stitch the present to the past. Shifting tenses is one method of accomplishing this.

Johnston suggests that the frequent shifts of tense are only matters of narrative style. Narrative style is a means to accomplish a goal. One can determine what the style does and suggest why it was used. Tense changes change time. In our modern conception, time is not flexible. It is either now or not now. The narrative technique of changing tenses within the same or adjacent sentences makes time at once both present and past. While there is no apparent pattern to the tense shifts, and there is some variation in different manuscripts, this underlines the point that it is not specific classes of events that were of concern, but the two periods, past and present. Shifts of tense stitch time together at the level of the sentences. This would suggest a consistent principle of stitching time together in saga literature from their most general cultural function, to the time sense within the saga as a whole, to the time sense of individual sentences. This sense is lost by suppressing genealogical information and introducing consistency of tense in translations. Chapter 5 says:

Einhvern dag spurð Þorsteinn Gunnlaug, ef hann vildi ríða til hrossa með honum upp í Langavatnsdal. Gunnlaugr kvask þat vilja.

Nú ríða þeir tveir saman, þar til er þeir koma til selja Þorsteins, er heita á Pogilštisðöum, ok várur þar stóðrross. . . .

Magnisson and Morris: Now one day Thorstein asked Gunnlaug if he would ride to his horses with him up to Longwaterdale. Gunnlaug said he would. So they ride both together till they come to the mountain-dairies of Thorstein, called Thorgil-stead. There were stud-horses. . . .

Quirk: One day, Thorsteinia asked Gunnlaug if he would like to ride with him up to his horses in Langavatnsdal, and Gunnlaug said he would. They rode off together till they came to Thorstein’s pasture-sheds at a place called Thorgilsstadir where there was a stud of four chestnut horses belonging to Thorstein.

Boucher: One day Thorstein asked Gunnlaug whether he would ride with him to some horses that he had up in Langavatnsdal. Gunnlaug said he would. The two of them rode together until they came to Thorstein’s summer milking-sheds
at the place called Thorgilsstead, where there were four of the horses belonging to him.

Jones: One day Thorstein asked Gunnlaug whether he would like to ride with him to this horses in Langavatnsdal, and Gunnlaug said he would. So they rode off, the two of them together, till they came to those shielings of Thorstein's which are known as Thorgilsstadir, where there was a stud belonging to Thorstein. . . .

Scargill: One day Thorstein asked Gunnlaug if he would like to ride with him up to the horses in Langavatnsdale, and Gunnlaug agreed. So the two of them rode together until they reached the stables belonging to Thorstein which were called At Thorgilsstead.

Durrenberger and Durrenberger: One day Porsteinn asked Gunnlaugur, if he would ride to the horses with him up in Langavatnsdalir. Gunnlaug said he would. Now they ride two together until they come to Porsteinn's milking sheds, which are called Þorgilsstadir and a stud of horses were there. . . .

Comparison of Translations of Tense Changes
Example 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literal Translation:</th>
<th>past</th>
<th>past</th>
<th>present</th>
<th>present</th>
<th>present</th>
<th>past</th>
<th>past</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magnússon and Morris</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>present</td>
<td>present</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quirk</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boucher</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>present</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scargill</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The preceding table indicates that where there is a consistent translation policy, it distorts the time sense of the original. None of the translations is true to the text.

In the same chapter, after Porsteinn refuses to betroth Helga to Gunnlaugur, Gunnlaugur returns home to enlist his father's aid:

- Ok um morgininn ríðr Gunnlaugr upp á Gilsbakka ok bað fóður sinn ríða til kvámbæna með sér út til Borgar.

  Magnússon and Morris: . . . but next morning Gunnlaug rode up to Gilbank, and prayed his father to ride with him a-wooing out to Burg.

  Quirk: . . . and next morning Gunnlaug rode up to Gilsbakki and asked his father to ride with him out to Borg to make a proposal of marriage.

  Boucher: . . . and the next morning Gunnlaug rode up to Gilbank and asked his father to ride with him to Borg for a proposal of marriage.

  Jones: . . . and the next morning Gunnlaug rode up to Gilsbakki and asked his father to ride a-wooing with him down to Borg.

  Scargill: In the morning Gunnlaug rode off to Gilbank, and he asked his father to ride with him to a wooing out at Borg.

  Durrenberger and Durrenberger: And in the morning Gunnlaugur rides up to Gilsbakki and asked his father to ride with him to ask for a wife with him out at Borg.
Comparison of Translations of Tense Changes
Example II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literal Translation</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magnússon and Morris</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quirk</td>
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<td>past</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boucher</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scargill</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>past</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the translators have ignored the tense change that stitches together different times. “Gunnlaugur rides up to Gilsbakki.” Whatever time is for the reader, the time of Gunnlaugur’s riding is “now” and forever remains now. He rides “then” and he rides “now” at the time of reading. “Then” and “now” are unified. The present tense erases the passage of years or centuries between “riding” and “reading.” If one uses only one tense, it is not possible to make the contrast or unify “then” and “now.” Smoothing tense changes to agree with modern concepts of time, sequence, grammatical neatness, or intuitions about modern tense usage in English obscures this stylistic, structural, and cultural aspect of the saga.

Sometimes translators retain the tense change within the sentence because it fits with their intuitive grasp of English tense usage. Tense changes occur in some of the formulaic expressions (see chapter 4 of this work). At the end of chapter 2 we read that a Norwegian “went away in the summer and is now out of the saga.” The Norwegian did go away at the time of the saga and he is still away now, at the time of reading. This is the same contrast between time periods as in the above example. Retaining the tense usages, which show the intuitive time sense of the sagaman’s period, would communicate relevant cultural information to modern readers.
7

Equality of Emphasis

The free translations transform two independent clauses into a main and a subordinate one. The opening sentence of chapter 13 is: “Ok um sumarit, á Spiral tósendi spurták út hingat til Íslands, þá dreymsí Illugi svarta, ok var hann þá heima á Gilsbakka. . . .”

This is translated as follows:

Magnússon and Morris: Now this summer, before these tidings were brought out hither to Iceland, Illugi the Black, being at home at Gilsbank, dreamed a dream. . . .

Quirk: In the summer, before news of this was heard out here in Iceland, Illugi the Black had a dream while at home at Gilsbakki.

Boucher: During the summer, before news of these events had come to Iceland, Illugi the Black had a dream while he was at home at Gilsbank.

Jones: In the summer, before news of these events reached Iceland, Illugi the Black had a dream home at Gilsbakki.

Scargill: And in the summer, before this news was reported in Iceland, Illugi the Black had a dream whilst he was at home in Gilsbank.

Durrenberger and Durrenberger: And during the summer before this news was reported out here in Iceland Illugi the black dreamed and he was then home at Gilsbakki. . . .

The text tells us that Illugi dreamed and he was at home. Both are equally important, but in the translations, the fact of being at home is subordinated to the fact that Illugi dreamed. Throughout the saga, individuals are systematically identified with specific places. This goes beyond merely providing information as to where they were from and the names of their farms, but attributes specific important characteristics to people of different places.

In a totemic scheme, if a person is his family, the family is also a place. Here we see that individuals are not only identified with families, the only logic that would make sense of the revenge for Gunnlaugur’s death in chapter 13, but also that families, even by their physical characteristics, are identified with places.

People are identified with places in a system of relationships. The repetition of the oppositions between Helga and Gunnlaugur suggests that they are one pair. The fact that Hrafn does not enter this set of oppositions and is not described in terms of features that pertain to it suggests that he is the intrusive element. We suggest it is just as important that Illugi is at home at Gilsbakki when he dreams as that he dreamed at all; it is not incidental information or an elaboration on the fact that he dreamed.

In chapter 11, after verse 20, the text says, “Ok eptir þetta um lótt ríðu menn heim af þinginu, ok var Gunnlaugr heima á Gilsbakka.”

Magnússon and Morris: Now after these things were gone by men rode home from the Thing, and Gunnlaug dwelt at home at Gilsbank.

Quirk: After this incident, everyone rode back from the assembly, and Gunnlaug lived at home at Gilsbakki.
Boucher: Shortly after this happened, men rode from the thing. Gunnlaug was home at Gilsbank.

Jones: When this was over and done with, men rode homewards from the Assembly. Gunnlaug went on living at home at Gilsbakki.

Scargill: So after a course of time men rode away from the assembly. But now Gunnlaug was at home at Gilsbank.

Durrenberger and Durrenberger: And after that had happened people rode home from the assembly, and Gunnlaugur was home at Gilsbakki.

Here, the translators preserve the equality of importance between the facts that people dispersed from the Alping and that Gunnlaugur was at home, because next, Hrafn breaks into his home with his invitation to leave Iceland to duel. Hrafn's entry, with his band of men, would have been of less striking importance were Gunnlaugur anywhere else but home.

In chapter 10 we learn:

Ok í þann tíma var mikill herr danskra manna vestr þar, ok var sá bögðingi fyrir, er Hemingr hét, sonr Strúts-Haralds jarls ok bróðir Sigvalda jarls, ok helt hann þat ríki undir Knúts konung, er Svein konungr hálf ríka undir unni.

Magnússon and Morris: And at that time there was a great army of Danish men west there, whose chief was Heming, the son of Earl Strúts-Harald, and brother to Earl Sigvaldi, and he held for King Knut that land that Svein had won.

Quirk: Moreover, there was then in the British Isles a great army of Danes, under the command of a man called Heming, the son of Earl Strúts-Harald and the brother of Earl Sigvaldi. He was governing, under King Knút, the lands which King Svein had won earlier.

Jones: Moreover at this same time there was a big army of Danes out west there, whose leader was Heming, the son of Earl Strúts-Harald and brother of Earl Sigvaldi, and it was he who held for king Knut the realm which king Svein had won earlier.

Boucher: Furthermore there was a mighty army of Danes over there in the west, and it was commanded by one named Hemming, son of Earl Strúts-Harald and brother of Earl Sigvaldi, who held the dominion won by King Svein, under King Knut.

Scargill: And at that time there was a great host of Danes there in the west, and their chieftain was called Heming. He was the son of Earl Strúts-Harald and brother of Earl Sigvaldi, and he held from King Canute that land which King Svein had formerly won.

Durrenberger and Durrenberger: And at that time a great army of Danish people was there in the west and who was head of it was called Hemingur, son of Earl Strúts-Haraldur and brother of earl Sigvaldi, and he held that domain under king Knútur which king Sveinn had won before.

This example illustrates that subordinate clauses were available to the writer of the saga and were used to express relative importance of information. The important elements here are (a) a big army of Danes and (b) its head held the realm for king Knútur. Subordinated to these facts is the name of the head and that king Sveinn had won the kingdom. This information is less important. Hemingur is not mentioned further in the saga. Contrast this to the introduction of more major characters who are set into frameworks of genealogies and descriptions without the use of subordinate clauses.

Magnússon and Morris as well as Quirk and Scargill retain the subordinate clause "which king Sveinn had held before." Jones, like Magnússon and Morris, collapsed the facts that there was a chieftain and he was named Heming
into a modifying clause for “army.” Boucher converts the subordinate clauses “who was chieftain” and “who was called Heming” into an independent clause and transforms the noun “chieftain” into the verb “commanded.” He also converts “he held that domain” into a subordinate clause. This makes Heming the focal point of these facts in place of the holding of the domain. Scargill contracts two dependent clauses into one and turns the dependent clause dealing with the genealogy of Heming into an independent clause. This again places much more emphasis on Heming. Jones also shifts the emphasis to Heming. Where there are subordinate clauses their proper relationships have not survived the translations.

8

Formulaic Expressions

We find Eysteinsson’s observation that the sagas pretend simply to be quite significant. A totemic structure provides people with a representation of reality as it is, eternally ordered and structured with a place for everything and everything in its place. Sagas are not presented as stories, histories, or accounts, but simply are. People are in and go out of the saga. It is perhaps risky to base an analysis of metaphorical structures on prepositions, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) tend to do, but it is possible to see the saga as a “container” in which people are and out of which they are taken. It is significant to the unfolding of the structure of the saga that one know precisely who is in it and what their characteristics are. The openings and other formulaic phrases provide this information. A story is something someone tells, and there are ways to introduce a story: “One time there was an old man and old woman in their cottage” is a standard in Icelandic, and “Once upon a time” is standard in English.

The opening sentence of Gunnlaugur’s saga is: “Þorsteinn hét maðr; hann var Egilsson, Skalla-Gríms sonar; Kveld-Ulfss sonar hersis ór Nóregi; en Æsgerðr hét mōði Þorsteins ok var Bjarnardóttir.”

The translations give it as:

Magnússon and Morris: There was a man called Thorstein, the son of Egill, the son of Skallagrim, the son of Kveldulf the
Boucher: . . . and that summer he left, and is out of the story.
Scargill: . . . and the Norwegian went away in the summer
and is now out of the saga.

By the end of chapter 2 the “saga” has become a “story”
for all the translators except Scargill. “Out of,” is probably
close to “ōr,” but perhaps the significant thing is that he
“is” out of the saga. He is out just as abruptly as Porsteinn
is in. It is difficult to know just how best to translate such
formulaic passages, especially those that entail prepositions,
but it would seem important to preserve them as
closely as possible in translation and not soften their
abruptness, as Quirk does in this passage. Otherwise, the
concreteness of the saga-as-thing is softened. It is possible
to maintain some sense of its storelike reality in English.

One’s image of the saga, one’s concept of what kind of
“thing” it is, would influence such details of translations. If
one sees the saga as a definite structure to be described,
rather than a story that consists of a sequence of events,
then one would take a different posture. It is in this sense
that we suggest that beyond seeing the overall structure
of the saga, as Eysteinsson points out, it makes a difference
how one conceives the sagas themselves.

If a saga is a structure to be described, then people are
“in” it, but do not “come” into it. It makes sense to ask
what sort of a structure a saga would be, if it is not the
telling of events in sequential order to make a story. We
contend that it is a description of a part of a general totemic
structure in which individual people, places, and families
are related to one another by the logic of analogy and
classification.

A totemic literary tradition offers much greater creative
freedom than one might first imagine. Composing a saga in
terms of such concepts, one could create characters who
are the opposites of others, along one or several dimensions
of contrast. For example, one might speculate that in many
respects Gunnaugur is the opposite of Kjartan in Laxdæla
saga; that Hrafni is the opposite of Bolli; and that Helga is
the opposite of Guðrún. The sagaman or copyist must have
had some reason for mentioning the killing of Kjartan Óláfsson
and Laxdæla saga in chapter 5 besides giving later
scholars a debating point about the dating of his saga.
Halfreðr, the troublesome poet, figures in Gunnaugur’s
saga, and the parallels between Gunnaugur and Halfreðr
as told in his saga are too strong to be missed. The one
theme has many possible permutations: two men in love
with the same woman, one woman in love with two men,
two women in love with one man, one man in love with two
women. Within this set, one could systematically alter the
characteristics of each person and thus the events. The
totemic outlook, we suggest, was at the center of saga
writing as a literary tradition, and Njáll’s saga, written relatively late, with its artfully manipulated texture of opposi-
tions, is perhaps the epitome of the form.
9

Various Words

In addition to being matters of taste, the choice of particular English words in translations can affect the structural coherence of the saga. We have suggested the importance of seemingly small matters such as “up” and “down” for establishing a structure of oppositions and congruences within the text. If such details are not preserved consistently in the translation, this texture is lost. To return to the example we mentioned above, in the opening of chapter 4 we learn that Illugi lived up at Hvítársla (“úppi á Hvítársla”), which translators render as follows:

Magnússon and Morris: up in White-water-side

Quirk: in Hvítársla

Jones: in Hvitarscia

Boucher: up on Hvita Side

Scargill: up on the bank of the river called Hvítá.

Later in the same chapter, “Gunnlaug then rode away from there and arrived in the evening down at Borg (Gunnlaug reið þá í brett þaðan ok kom um kveldi ofan til Borgar), which translators render as:

Magnússon and Morris: Then Gunnlaug rode thence and came in the evening down to Borg. . . .

Quirk: Then Gunnlaug rode off and in the evening arrived down in Borg.

Jones: At this Gunnlaug rode off and arrived that evening down at Borg. . . .

Boucher: Gunnlaug then rode away and came that evening to Borg.

Scargill: Then Gunnlaug rode away, and in the evening he came down to Borg. . . .

Magnússon and Morris and Scargill are the only ones who preserve the opposition in their translations. The other three apparently have no consistent policy about such prepositions.

In chapter 5, after Gunnlaugur fails to convince Þórhall to promise Helga to him, appears the phrase, “And in the morning rides Gunnlaugur up to Gilsbakki. . . .” (“Ok um morgininn ríðar Gunnlaugr upp á Gilsbakki. . . .”), which most translators give as: “Gunnlaug rode up to” Gilsbakki. Scargill gives it as “rode off to Gilsbank.” A few lines later Illugi rides down (ofan) to Borg, which all but Boucher and Scargill preserve. After Gunnlaugur sprains his ankle in the wrestling match and returns to his father’s house, during Hrafn’s wedding feast, Gunnlaugur wants to ride down (ofan) to Borg. All the translators except Boucher preserve the sense, but he changes it to “ride on” to Borg. Without consistent preservation of the original contrast in the translation, a significant aspect of the texture of the saga is lost. Magnússon and Morris seem to be the only ones who consistently maintain the opposition, while Boucher all but obliterates it.

Word choice may also affect the sense of coherence of the saga, the way various parts are joined together, and, thus, also affect the texture of the saga. If the connections between parts are lost or blurred, then the coherence of the
saga is lost in translation. After Gunnlaugur and Hrafn have killed each other abroad, their fathers meet at the Alping and Illugi asks Önundur what compensation he is willing to pay. Önundur refuses to consider paying compensation. Illugi then says some ominous words (chapter 13): “Kenna skal på nökkur at skauti þinn frændi eða þinna ættmanna.” “Kenna at skauti,” as the footnote in the Fornrit edition points out, suggests “to be difficult,” which is derived from seaman’s language as it has to do with sails. Translators render the passage thus:

Magnússon and Morris: Then shall my wrath come home to some of thy kin. . . .

Quirk: Some of your kith and kin will suffer for it then . . .

Jones: Some of your kith and kin will rue the day then . . .

Boucher: Then one of your family or kin will suffer for it . . .

Scargill: Your kinsmen or your own family will have something to smart for.

After Porsteinn is placed in the saga, in the first chapter, a Norwegian helmsman, who has come to Iceland, is also in the saga. The event that happens just before Helga’s death at the end of the saga is Hermundur’s killing of an Iceland’s navigator, Hrafn’s relative and namesake, on his way to foreign lands. This incident seems too neat to be accidental, and the fact that the victim of vengeance is a seaman is emphasized in the text. To do justice to the literary tradition of the sagaman, it seems reasonable to preserve the nautical sense of the threatening words “kenna at skauti,” perhaps with a phrase such as “rough sailing,” to recall the connections between the second and penultimate events of the saga.

The use of kith, raises the point of archaisms in translation. Kith is not in the everyday vocabulary, and it means acquaintances, rather than kinsmen, and kith and kin means friends and relations. In connection with this event in the saga, it is significant that Illugi mentions kinsmen and family people, those whose deaths could count in vengeance for Gunnlaugur.

We mentioned earlier the temptation to use the word fate to communicate the strong sense of predetermination, impersonal inevitability, that permeates the saga. In chapter 3, after Þorgerður tells Porsteinn about Helga and asks his forgiveness, the saga says: “Porsteinn mælti: ‘Ekki kann ek ykkr at ásaka um þetta, ok veltr þangat sem vera vill, um flesta hluti, ok hafi þit vel yfir slétt vanhyggju mína.’” Translators give this as:

Magnússon and Morris: “I cannot blame you two for having done this; most things will fall as they are fated, and well have ye covered over my folly. . . .”

Quirk: “I can’t reproach you for this,” said Thorstein. “In most cases, events turn out as they must, and you’ve well made up for my lack of forethought.”

Jones: “It is not for me to reproach you for this,” said Thorstein. “For the most part things turn out as they are destined to, and you have certainly remedied my own lack of foresight.”

Boucher: Thorstein said, “I cannot blame you for this, and things will turn out as they must in most matters. You have done well to make good my lack of foresight.”

Scargill: “I can’t reproach you two in this,” said Thorstein. “Fate goes as it will in most cases. But the pair of you have certainly remedied my lack of forethought.”

Durrenberger and Durrenberger: Porsteinn said: “I cannot accuse you of this, and it will turn out as it will be about most
things and you have well smoothed over my lack of forethought."

Three of the translators, Magnússon and Morris, Jones, and Scargill, introduce the concept of fate or destiny, which is not in the original. Another such example is at the end of chapter 11. Gunnlaugur and Hrafni agree to go overseas for their duel. All of the kinsmen think this bad but cannot stop them. The text continues, "... enda varð pat fram at koma, sem til dró."

Magnússon and Morris: ... and, after all, that must betide that drew towards.

Quirk: ... and after all, what fate had decreed could not be prevented.

Jones: ... and after all, what was fated must be.

Boucher: ... and that came about which had to be.

Scargill: And so things had to happen as they were fated.

Durrenberger and Durrenberger: ... since what was drawn toward had to come forward.

Again there is the problem of translating a tricky preposition or idiomatic expression. However one solves this problem, it is clear that the original, while suggesting a strong sense of predetermined, makes no mention of a concept of fate or destiny. Quirk, Jones, Scargill, and Magnússon and Morris insert the word fate. Jones uses fate once and destined once. Scargill uses fate in the two different instances. Magnússon and Morris and Quirk use the notion of fate one time, each in different cases. Boucher does not make this departure from the text.

Modern or Christian concepts of fate are quite different from the concept in the saga. Madelung (1972, 162) describes the idea well in relationship to Guðrún of Laxdæla saga: she argues that Guðrún's fate was not imposed on her but was an aspect of her that formed and shaped her life and finally recoiled upon her. Christian humility and contrition are as alien as medieval gallantry and pageantry and both run thin.

This fate is no external thing or force; it is, rather, of one's self, in one's self, an aspect of a person's being, part of one's place in the scheme of things, part of one's location in the totemic system, hence the genealogies, attention to location, and descriptions of characteristics. It is unalterable. Things turn out as they must. Things turn out as they will. But no one, no force, no thing, makes things turn out as they must or as they want them to, they just do. To translate this notion as fate where the text does not demand it, is to introduce an alien category into the saga, to project a Christian or modern concept onto the text, and hence alter the structure of the saga itself by suggesting agency, or an external force instead of the necessity of relationships, people, and events in the saga.

Other word choices are perhaps less connected with the texture and structure of the saga and are more matters of taste. The translation of the verb að hugga arises, since people do it to one another with some frequency. Magnússon and Morris like "to deal a blow," or "smite," or "hew" and sometimes "cut" or even "drive a sword into"; Quirk favors "strike," "cut," "to have, strike, or give a blow"; Jones prefers "strike," "deal, strike, or land a blow," or "cut"; Boucher uses "hack," "strike," "give or strike a blow," or "cut." Scargill uses "strike" consistently. The semantic range of the word indicates the use of a sharp implement with some degree of energy with the object of severing something—a rope, tree, or person. The current English verb that would answer to all of these senses is chop. We see no reason to use more than one equivalent,
whatever it may be. Those who favor arcaisms might prefer *hew,* but variation of vocabulary was not valued in the sagas. Repetition of words and phrases was not avoided, but favored, and we find that maintaining the original sense of repetition contributes to the translation, because it preserves the repetitive sense of the saga.

As a matter of taste, we find it interesting to preserve some of the word combinations that abound in the saga. True, some are better translated by single English words, but some can be preserved to indicate something of the flavor of the original. The following examples, we think, serve to maintain the meaning and to provide the reader with a kind of delight in discovering little used or unsuspected semantic connections in English: short-shares (for *skaraðan hlut*), un-beautiful (for *ðfagr*), big-worded (for *stórðr*), and sun’s-redening (for *sólarroð*). For contrast, we present some of the other translations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(chap. 7) Skarðan hlut</th>
<th>(chap. 9) ðfagr</th>
<th>(chap. 9) stórðr</th>
<th>(chap. 12) sólarroð</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MM:</td>
<td>little beauty</td>
<td>full of big words</td>
<td>sun-rise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(ruin, others have taken)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quirk</td>
<td>inegant</td>
<td>pompous</td>
<td>sunrise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(many have suffered)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones</td>
<td>far from elegant</td>
<td>full of big words</td>
<td>sunrise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(I have trimmed)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boucher</td>
<td>crude</td>
<td>high-sounding</td>
<td>sunrise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(other have had the worst dealings)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scargill</td>
<td>ugly</td>
<td>high-sounding</td>
<td>sunrise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(not a few have been wronged by me)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of these solutions substitute several words for the one original, exchange wordiness for succinctness. Some, however, such as those for *ðfagr,* detract from the structure of the saga by interfering with the system of oppositions that has been built into it. It should be remembered, here especially, that the woman involved is Helga in *fagra,* Helga the beautiful or fair. In his introduction (chap. 5) Hrafn is described as “most good-looking,” while Gunnlaugur, in his introduction (chap. 4), is “ugly-nosed” and “haughty.” This episode, in which each poet recalls the characteristics of the other by reference to the verses, deserves to be preserved in order not to lose the structure of contrasts—Helga and Hrafn are beautiful, Gunnlaugur is not. It parallels the initial contrast between Þorsteinn, Helga’s father, as “calm” and “moderate” and Íllugi, Gunnlaugur’s father, as “hard-tempered,” and the structure of oppositions in Þorsteinn’s initial dream, which is repeated throughout. When Hrafn refers to Gunnlaugur’s poem as “big-worded,” we are reminded of Gunnlaugur’s constant haughty boasting about his father and his position.

Word choice is not independent of the structure of the saga. If the structure is not preserved to maintain connections, contrasts, and repetitions that one finds in the original, the literary conventions of the sagaman are rendered invisible, and cultural information is lost.
10
Conclusions

We have not exhausted the issues surrounding this saga. Others that deserve detailed treatment from this study's point of view are the translation of personal and place names, titles that are social role labels such as "húðringi," "bóndi," and the treatment of poetry. We will say nothing of the latter, a complex topic that has received considerable attention. We find it impossible to translate the sound quality, meter, and semantic content of verses. All are intricately structured. We have simply tried to convey something of their semantic content as explained in the footnotes to the Forrit edition. It might be useful to consider the possibility that Icelandic personal and place names were descriptions rather than arbitrary names in the more usual sense of modern American English. This would be consistent with the concept of totemic structures we have outlined, but it deserves more detailed consideration than we can give it here.

We have dealt with four issues of translation style that others have pointed out, and we have suggested that more than aesthetics is at stake. In each case—the shifting tenses, the subordination of independent clauses, the handling of formulaic phrases, and word choice—important cultural information is lost by free translation and little of the literary tradition is preserved. The consequence is that the free translation is much more than a translation, it is a transformation of the saga into another kind of cultural artifact, an artifact of the nineteenth or twentieth century rather than the twelfth or thirteenth.

This analysis also suggests the reasons for the aesthetic problems. We can see the basis for the different aesthetic judgments. Those who appreciate the sagas as cultural documents rather than as thirteenth century literature have an aesthetic sense that demands the closest translation possible given the limitations of the English language to fit into the Icelandic mold. Johnston (1961) has pointed out abstractly, and shown in his translation of Gísla saga (1963), that these limits are not as great as one might imagine. One of the virtues of English is extreme plasticity. Saga translators can take advantage of this feature in order to preserve the structure of the sagas rather than to permute them into something else. Such a policy of translation would serve the human sciences and history better, and on the aesthetic side, we think that it would also make a more lively literature. If one's objective is to appreciate and understand cultural differences, then the differences must be preserved, perhaps even accentuated, rather than obliterated.

Speakers of modern English do not share the cultural outlook, values, time sense, sense of reality, or literary tradition of the Icelandic commonwealth or its sagamen. To transform the sagas into twentieth century pseudonovels is to deprive readers of the chance to confront the alien and to understand it. To deny that the sagas are alien, by transforming them into stories of killing and retribution, is to domesticate them to the peculiar tastes of the translators. Readers can never appreciate or understand cultural differences if translators insist they do not exist. Cultural differences can be faithfully represented. The cost is difference and perhaps some initial confusion for readers. At many points a reader may pause at a literal translation, confused by the unfamiliar. The foreign is always confusing until one begins to understand it. From the confrontation with con-
fusion come the questions about cultural differences, and one hopes, the motivation to comprehend them. If this were not possible, it would not be possible to entertain the idea of disciplines such as anthropology or comparative literature, which take as their task the comprehension and explanation of cultural differences.

Sagas are not novels. They present people, places, things, events, and the connections among them in a different way from novels. Therefore, issues and problems of their translation are different. Since so much of the spirit of the sagas is conveyed by the details of their structure, style, and texture, we conclude that the “spirit is the letter” and that the closest translation best captures their spirit.

We have relied on the Svart á Hvítu edition for most of our translation and Fornrit for the verses and excerpts cited in this essay.

The Saga of Gunnlaugur Snake’s Tongue

Chapter I

A man was called Þorsteinn. He was a son of Egill, Skallagrímur’s son, son of chieftain Kveld-Úlfur from Norway and Þorsteinn’s mother was called Æsgerdur and was Björn’s daughter.

Þorsteinn lived at Borg in Borgarfjörður. He was wealthy in possessions and a great aristocrat, a wise and calm man and a man of moderation about all things. He was not at all a heroic man for size or strength as Egill, his father, because it is said by learned men that Egill has been the greatest hero in Iceland and a duelist and the most deliberate of landowner’s sons, he was a learned man and big and the wisest of men. Þorsteinn was also the most powerful man and popular with all common people. Þorsteinn was a handsome man, white-haired and with best eyes of men.

Learned men say that many in the Mýrar [moor] people’s family, those who have come from Egill, have been most handsome people although many are different because some in their family are called the ugliest people that have been. In their family have also been many accomplished people about many things as was Kjartan Óláfur peacock’s son and Víga-Barði and Skúli Þorsteinn’s son. Some in their family were also great poets, Björn Hítælakappi, priest Einar Skúli’s son, Snorri Sturla’s son and many others.

Þorsteinn married Jófríður, daughter of Gunnarr HÍfur’s son. Gunnarr has been the best fighter and the most agile